



WEEK IN ACTION!

Weekly News From Your Union ~ January 12, 2014 – January 16, 2015

VSEA Members Once Again Being Asked To Help Balance Vermont's Budget On Their Backs

Many VSEA members have already contacted the union, voicing their displeasure with yesterday's budget address by the State's top official. In the address, state employees are asked to produce \$5 million in savings, essentially out of thin air. Reacting to the request, VSEA Executive Director told *Seven Days*, "We think [the \$5 million ask is] an unfair tax just on state employees." He added that VSEA members would prefer a broader-based tax increase.

VSEA did issue an official statement today on yesterday's budget address, and members are urged to read the statement, which can be found by clicking here.

DOC Community High School Workers Lobby At State House

Even before the State officially proposed the "consolidation" of the DOC's Community High School (CHSVT) yesterday, VSEA members working at the CHSVT were already at the State House in Montpelier on January 13 lobbying legislators against cutting more money from the School's budget, which has already weathered a series of budget reductions in past years.

The DOC's CHSVT is unique and an example for the rest of the nation, providing a critical educational service to Vermont offenders. According to the School's website, its official mission is to "provide an accredited, coordinated and personalized education that assists students in their academic, social, and vocational successes."

In a July 2014, CHSVT State Advisory Board member George Cross issued a report requested by lawmakers on the current trends relating to the student population at the School. In his report, Cross stresses the School's potential to contribute substantially to Vermont's efforts to reduce recidivism, and he urges lawmakers "to properly fund" the CHSVT so it can maintain its accreditation. Cross ends his report with "the CHSVT is national model created by the Vermont Department of Corrections over a period of years which deserves the continuing support of the Vermont Legislature and the citizens of the Green Mountain state."

"VSEA appreciates these members taking time to come to the State House to help our legislative team make the case not to reduce the CHSVT's budget," VSEA President Shelley Martin told *WIA*. "Lawmakers tell me all the time that nothing is better than being able to hear directly from frontline state workers about the services they provide and the challenges confronting them daily. Like Mr. Cross, our CHSVT members believe strongly in the work they are doing and the service they are providing. VSEA wholeheartedly supports their efforts, and we too hope the CHSVT can continue its important work and continue to be a model for the rest of the nation."

A VSEA Facebook post about the CHSVT workers' lobbying efforts this week prompted a past CHSVT worker to reply:

“As a former instructor at the CHSVT, I can vouch for the absolute significance of continued funding for this school. When I was there, it was more than just reading writing, arithmetic and computer skills. They also learned nutritional skills as well as soft skills. Do we truly want people to succeed when they come out of jail or do we want them to languish in prison? As a human being, I want people to see that closing the school does nothing positive for our community. The Legislature must continue to fund the Community High School of Vermont.

Vermont’s Chief Justice Pens Letter To Legislators Opposing \$500,000 Budget Cut In FY2016

A January 16 *VTDigger* story, concerning the State’s FY2015 and FY2016 budget deficits, includes news of a proposed FY16 \$500,000 budget cut to the Judicial branch of government. Needless to say, VSEA’s Judicial Unit members are very worried about the cut and the possibility that the solution will once again be to impose furlough days on the workers. The last time the State subjected Judicial Unit workers to furlough days, it resulted in roughly a 4.25% pay cut for the workers.

Wasting no time, Vermont Supreme Court Justice Paul Reiber wrote a letter to the Senate and House Appropriations Committee Chairs, voicing his opposition to the cut.

Reiber wrote, in part:

The Supreme Court strongly opposes the proposed language (and associated \$500,000 reduction to the Judiciary’s FY16 budget). Having stated our opposition to the proposed language, the Judiciary recognizes that through structural changes that will require changes in existing law there may be opportunities for base budget reduction in some amount. The Judiciary is seeking to identify those opportunities, analyze them, and discuss them with justice system partners if indicated. To the extent that the Judiciary can identify structural changes that can be implemented consistent with the Judiciary’s constitutional responsibility and core mission and will replace general fund savings, it will inform the appropriations and judiciary committees of what can be saved and what legislation will be needed to make those savings. In addition, we are willing to participate in any process that will identify possible policy and statutory changes that will produce significant reductions in funding.

Addressing the Judiciary’s FY2015 savings, Reiber explains the adverse impact the Judiciary is suffering due to ongoing vacancy savings, writing:

We are managing the current reductions in FY15 by extraordinary vacancy savings, including savings from delayed filling of judicial vacancies. This level of vacancy savings does impair our ability to meet our constitutional responsibility to adjudicate cases in a timely manner, especially in light of the large increase in juvenile child protection filings. Extraordinary vacancy savings targets have led to deficits in the past. This method is not sustainable; nor is furloughs, the only alternative to produce that level of reductions.

Veteran Pens Commentary Urging Not To Cut Vets' Home Beds!

The following commentary by U.S Marine Corp. veteran Don Keelan appeared in the January 9 Bennington Banner. Keelan has shown up personally to VVH Board meetings to voice his displeasure with its recent vote to reduce the number of VVH beds from 171 to 130. VSEA members working at the VVH support Keelan's argument.

“The board of trustees of the Vermont Veterans' Home is comprised of 21 dedicated, committed and honest Vermonters, most of whom are themselves Veterans of the military.

On Dec. 17, 2014, the board voted to reduce the number of certified beds at the Home from 171 to 130 (there was one vote against the motion). The action they took was a huge mistake.

The month before, the board was given a report authored by Jeb Spaulding, who at the time was the Secretary of Administration (he left office on Dec. 31). The report, Review of the Vermont Veterans' Home in Response to 2014 Act 179, was prepared for the Joint Fiscal Committee of the Legislature.

The crux of the 20-page report was to find ways that would absolve the Legislature from having to use General Fund monies to subsidize the Home's \$20 million operating budget. In the recent past this would have amounted to \$1 to \$3 million, annually, to bridge the gap at the 130 year old state institution.

In part, the Home's budget woes stem from having an occupied bed census that has fallen 10 to 15 percent below what would have been break-even.

The Spaulding Report's recommendations were to look into using gambling snap-off tickets, renting excess space to commercial users and eliminating 41 certified beds.

The outcry over the idea of using gambling tickets was enough to remove this suggestion from further consideration. However, the justification given to the board to reduce the number of beds was bizarre.

The Home, not unlike hospitals and nursing homes has to pay an annual "bed tax." It amounts to approximately \$5,000 per certified bed. The Home's Fiscal-Year 2014 Budget had provided \$840,000 to meet this state tax obligation. Let's not lose sight of the fact that the Home is a state-owned institution.

The board was under severe pressure to reduce costs and by delisting the number of certified beds by 41 an annual savings of about \$200,000 could be realized — in addition to some minimal savings by not having to staff for the higher number of certified beds.

The tax, is one of the most convoluted, senseless and misapplied tax I've experienced. Why not move to have the tax vacated — not drop the number of beds?

However, where the board erred was not taking into consideration another state mandated report, "The Pulling Report" of Aug. 8, 2013.

This report was done in response to a number of issues that arose from the Home's operation that nearly caused the Home to lose its Medicare/Medicaid funding.

Deep inside the report was a detailed analysis of the future need for nursing home beds for Vermont veterans. The basis for the analysis was supported by empirical data (not found in the Spaulding Report).

The Pulling Report disclosed that by 2023, Vermont will need in excess of 700 beds to service its veteran population (excluding beds for spouses of veterans and Gold Star Mothers).

Mary Morrissey, Bennington's representative to the Legislature, recently made the following comment to the board: "Why are you acting so quickly: The Spaulding Report was sent to the Legislature which will not be meeting until next year"?

The board acted out of fear. Their concern was that somehow the Legislature would not come through with the additional funding and that is unfortunate. Fear extracted a huge price. Never has a state of Vermont institution, with so much potential to do well, for so many of its deserving citizens, been so marginalized.

Register Today To Attend VSEA's 2015 State House Day

An online form has been created for VSEA members to use to register to attend the union's 2015 State House Day, which is Tuesday, February 17.

At State House Day (formerly "Lobby Day"), VSEA members are afforded an opportunity to talk with legislators about the services you provide and the issues and challenges you and your colleagues face.

Register today and help make this VSEA's most successful State House Day ever. With Vermont facing a huge budget deficit, it's more important than ever to demonstrate VSEA members' collective power at the State House and remind lawmakers that we're not only state employees who provide services, we're also Vermont voters, and we care about the adverse impact service and personnel cuts have had—and will have—on the communities where we live.

New State Office Building Opens In St. Albans

State officials were in St. Albans on January 12 for a ribbon-cutting ceremony, officially opening a new state office building that will house nearly 140 AHS and DOL state workers. The workers are being relocated from the old state office building on Houghton Street, which was sold by the State to Mylan Technologies.

Some VSEA members continue to question the economic wisdom of giving up a State-owned building in favor of leasing space at a new building.

Delta Dental Publishes 2015 Supplemental Plan Guidelines!

Northeast Delta Dental has sent VSEA its 2015 Supplemental Plan guidelines for VSEA members. To read the 2015 guidelines, please [click here](#).

New Supplemental Plan enrollment forms will be mailed to members in April 2015 and the deadline to return them will be sometime in May 2015. *WIA* will let readers know the official mailing and deadline dates, once we learn them.

As in the past, if you already have coverage and would like to continue, you won't need to do anything. However, members who do not currently have supplemental coverage and want to sign up will need to fill out and return the enrollment and payroll deduction forms that will be mailed to you in April.

VSEA Members Wanted For Judicial Board!

VSEA President Shelley Martin asked *WIA* to include a solicitation to members who might be interested in serving on the union's Judicial Board. Martin notes that, historically, members who serve on this Board are not activists, stewards, officials or Council or Board of Trustees' members.

"In this rare case, the less involvement you have with VSEA, the better suited you are to serve in this role," explains Martin. "We need members who can be objective."

VSEA's Judicial Board is charged with ensuring elected and appointed union officials' compliance with Unit and Master Articles, Bylaws and adopted policies. The Judicial Board is also charged with ensuring that all Unit, Chapter, and VSEA elected and appointed officials and members shall act in a manner consistent with the purposes and policies of the VSEA, and with the goals and objectives of the union and its Units and Chapters, and not act in a way that is detrimental to the purposes of the VSEA as specified in Article 2 of these Articles of Association.

The Judicial Board consists of VSEA members, who are appointed by the VSEA President. If you would interested in submitting your name for consideration, please send your letter of interest to VSEA President Shelley Martin no later than Friday, January 30, 2015. The mailing address is 155 State Street, Montpelier, Vermont 05602.

New VSEA Member Representatives Needed For Non-Management Unit Sick Leave Bank Committee!

VSEA's Non-Management Unit (NMU) is actively recruiting members interested in serving on the Unit's Sick Leave Bank Committee.

The Sick Leave Bank, which awards additional sick leave to members who have serious and often life-threatening health issues, is dependent on state employees donating annual leave, personal leave or compensatory time to it.

This NMU committee operates in a labor/management setting, meaning VSEA and DHR representatives meet jointly. It convenes monthly to review and act on applications from members. It is crucial that VSEA have adequate representation on this committee.

If you are interested in serving on this committee, please send a letter of interest to Bob Stone, NMU Chair, VSEA, 155 State Street, Montpelier, Vt. 05602, or send an email to Bob at rstone@vsea.org.

Please include information about yourself (i.e. where you work, how long you've worked for the State, how long you've been a VSEA member) and your reasons for wanting to be on the committee. Members of the NMU Executive Committee will review letters of interest and appoint members to the committee.

VSEA President Begins Announcing Committee Appointments

VSEA President Shelley Martin is thanking all the VSEA members who recently submitted letters of interest to sit on a standing VSEA committee. Shelley reports that she is actively working to reappoint VSEA committee members, and she began sending emails this week to VSEA members selected to serve on various union committees, such as Benefits Advisory, Membership Recruitment, Bylaws, Special Events, Budget, etc,

“If you have been selected to serve on a VSEA committee, you should have received an email from me—or will soon—welcoming you to the committee,” explained Martin. “If you didn't reply to my initial committee solicitation but are still interested in serving on a committee, please send an email to vsea@vsea.org identifying the committees that interest you. Thank you again to every VSEA member who has volunteered already to serve on a committee. I really appreciate your activism.”

State Employee Wellness Program Kicks Off 2015 Incentive Campaign

WIA is pleased to share this information about the 2015 LiveWell Vermont State Employees' Wellness Program. The program's 2015 incentive campaign "One Life, Live it Well," encourages employees to complete the following wellness initiatives:

- Filling out a 2015 online personal health assessment, via the "LiveWell Vermont" portal: \$50/50 points;
- Completing one of four wellness challenges," which are administered by "LiveWell Vermont" staff during the 2015 incentive year: \$25/25 points;
- Finishing one workshop, via the portal, by November 1, 2015: \$25/25 points; and as a bonus
- Having an annual physical exam conducted between November 1, 2014, and November 1, 2015: \$50/50 points.

Completing these wellness initiatives qualifies active, permanent state employees covered under Blue Cross/Blue Shield for cash incentives up to \$150. Non-plan employees can earn points and qualify for wellness drawings, which are held on a quarterly basis and during challenges.

2015 Challenge Number One – New Year, New You!

Time period: January 19, 2015 – March 1, 2015

Join this six-week weight loss challenge to kick-start your 2015 wellness plan! Create a team or participate solo.

Upcoming Meetings/Events/Holidays:

January 20

OCS Committee Meeting
VSEA HQ
Montpelier
9:00 a.m.

January 20

Board of Trustees' Meeting
VSEA HQ
Montpelier
9:30 a.m.

January 21

Rutland Chapter Meeting
Three Tomatoes Restaurant
Rutland
Noon

January 21

Retirees' Chapter Recruitment Committee Meeting
VSEA HQ
Montpelier
1:30 p.m.

January 23

NMU Bargaining Team Meeting
VSEA HQ
Montpelier
9:30 a.m.