

# Reflections from a Freestanding Ethics Network

Cindy Bruzzese, MPA, MSB, HEC-C

Executive Director & Clinical Ethicist – Vermont Ethics Network

Clinical Ethicist – UVM Medical Center

Director – Statewide Task Force on Palliative Care

Co-Chair – Ethics Consultation Service, Academy of Aid in Dying Medicine

May 22, 2026 - [cbuzzese@vtethicsnetwork.org](mailto:cbuzzese@vtethicsnetwork.org)

# Objectives

Describe the core functions of the Vermont Ethics Network

Appreciate the value and challenges of maintaining a freestanding, non-profit health care ethics organization in Vermont.

- Founded in 1986 by a RWJ Grant, “Who Lives, Who Dies, Who Decides and Who Pays”
  - Taking Steps Booklet – practical guide to making medical decisions with DPOA-HC and Living Will forms (now AD forms)
  - Several grass roots projects - VTHealth Decisions and Journey’s End (1990); Vermont Voices (1997), Health Care Values Study Circles (2001, 2002)
  - Exclusive AD focus from 2005 - 2008
  - Annual operating budget in 2008 - \$85,000.00 (1.5 FTEs)
- Expanded beyond ADs to grow into our mission: to advance ethics in health care
  - Instrumental in passage of Vermont’s first PC & Pain Mgmt Legislation (2009)
  - Instituted statewide annual ethics and palliative care professional educational events/series (2010 - present)
  - Led passage of statutory framework and mandate for standardized portable medical orders (DNR/COLST) (2011)
  - Planning and implementation statewide ethics education and consultation program (2012 – present)
  - Initial informational and educational lead for MAID, upon passage of Act 39 (2013)
  - Annual operating budget – \$550,000.00 (3 FTEs)

## Vermont Ethics Network: Then and Now

## Current Core Functions

- Statewide and Regional Ethics Education & Consultation
  - Contracts with individual hospitals/health systems
  - Consultation for hospitals and non-hospital health care facilities/clinicians
  - General and specialized educational support and policy development
- Medical Decision-Making
  - Community, provider, facility education and policy support
    - Advance Directives, DNR/COLST orders, Guardianship, Surrogacy
  - Manage the Vermont Advance Directive Registry (VADR)
- Palliative Care & End-of-Life Education and Policy
  - Annual provider education
  - Annual report to Vermont Legislature & policy/statutory recommendations
  - Direct Statewide Palliative Care Task Force

# Value of a Freestanding Ethics Network

- Institutional independence, not “beholden” to members or a larger institution’s needs, policies, political leanings, etc.
- Able to focus on mission-driven work
- Seen and relied upon as a “neutral” ethics resource from all parties, trusted
  - Vermont policy-makers
  - Hospitals and non-hospital healthcare facilities/providers
  - State agencies, attorneys and VT Probate Judges
- Freedom to work statewide and beyond
- Affords opportunities to engage with a wide range of stakeholders - community members, health care facilities/providers, state agencies, legal community and policy-makers

# Challenges of a Freestanding Ethics Network

01

Funding and  
sustainability

02

Scope of work  
and  
infrastructure  
misalignment

03

Recruitment  
and retention

04

Burnout

