Photos by Stefan Hard

Unusually warm weather made Saturday feel like summer around the state.

Quinn Herber, above left, of Hydeville and Ayla Blyther of Poultney play with sand and water at Crystal Beach on Lake Bomoseen in Castleton. The temperature was in the mid-80s and the beach was the coolest place to be.

At right, Jonathan Amell, 5, of Northfield douses his head to cool off while at a baseball game.

The blossoms of the "June Pink" below will probably be gone before its namesake month arrives. Many flowering shrubs are about two weeks ahead of their normal blossoming period.

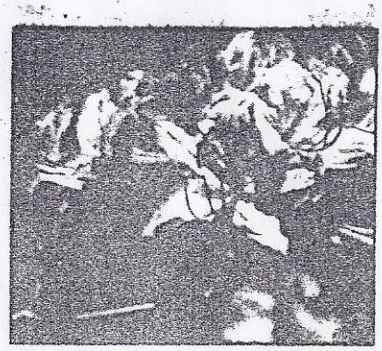

Photo by Albert J. Marro

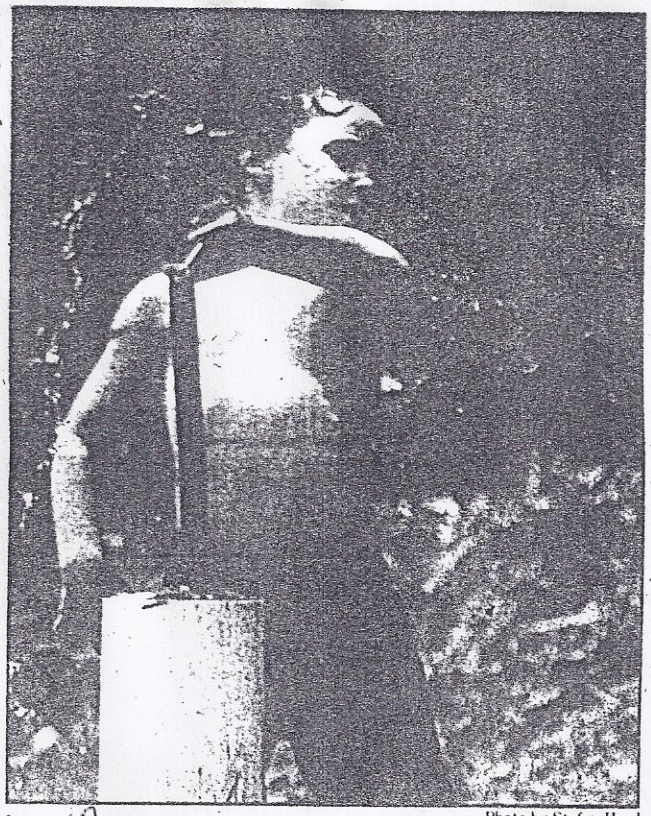

Photo by Stefan Hard

5/17/98 Rutland Herald

By KRISTIN BLOOMER
Staff Writer

A new law meant to improve mental health insurance coverage still has some kinks, but many have been smoothed out by the state's largest insurance provider, a new report states.

The Vermont Association for Mental Health's quarterly report, the first released since the Legislature passed the Mental Health Care and Substance Abuse Parity law last year, states that while BlueCross/BlueShield failed to implement the law seamlessly in the year's first quarter, [illegible] has made significant [illegible] direction."

That message was echoed by a state official responsible for implementing the new law, which was meant to assure

"I'd say that both BlueCross/BlueShield and Merit (its managed care administrator) have really stepped up to the plate."

Meg O'Donnell,
State health care administrator

that patients seeking mental health care get the same level of insurance benefits they would with primary care.

"I'd say that both BlueCross/BlueShield and Merit (its managed care administrator) have really stepped up to the plate," said Meg O'Donnell, director of quality assurance and assurance protection for the Division of Health Care Administration. "They acknowledged there were some rough periods and communication problems in getting the word out to customers and providers, but I applaud them, particularly BlueCross/BlueShield, for their efforts."

Under the new parity law, Blue Cross was able to offer customers the same benefits, deductibles, out-of-pocket maximums and co-payments for mental health care as for primary care. However, to cut down on the resulting increase in expenses, Blue Cross felt compelled to move some 30,000 Vermonters out of their regular indemnity plans and into managed care networks, company officials said. An indemnity plan allows customers to choose any provider in the state and visit that provider as many times as they want, up to a lifetime financial cap.

The move came as a surprise to many customers, who suddenly found their visits restricted to providers who were members of the network. Their concerns started a chain of complaints in January, after most customers had renewed their plan and became aware of the change.

Those complaints, some of which were filed formally with the Health Care Administration, also started a string of public meetings this spring. The meetings, attended by providers, customers, HCA officials and representatives of Blue Cross, are scheduled to continue this week in Rutland.

Several thousand more Vermonters, due to renew their Blue Cross plans in July, will also be moved from indemnity plans into managed care networks.

"We will be monitoring it," O'Donnell said of the next group. "I'm trusting that given what we've all gone through this will be a much smoother transi-

(See Insurance, Page 2)

Governor's Wife Cuts Ties With HMO

A Physician, She Cites Rates As Issue

Associated Press

SHELBURNE — Gov. Howard Dean's wife, a Shelburne physician, is ending her affiliation with Vermont's largest health maintenance organization.

Dr. Judith Steinberg told her patients in a letter that Community Health Plan/Kaiser Permanente has cut payments to her practice while raising rates to its insured.

The decision by Steinberg's group practice means several hundred patients in CHP's commercial and its "Access Plus" Medicaid plan will be obliged to either switch doctors or switch insurers.

The practice is the only CHP primary care provider in Shelburne.

CHP Vermont Director Bill Little says it was a provision in the state's consumer-protection law, a nationally recognized jewel in the crown of the health-reforming Dean administration, that led it to reduce some of its monthly payments to primary-care doctors.

But Little maintains that the cuts are far less than Steinberg told her patients in a recent letter.

In the letter, Steinberg wrote, "Last month there was an article in the Burlington Free Press indicating CHP is about to raise their premium charges to subscribers by 15 percent. At the same time CHP cut payments to me for my services 15 percent, retroactive to 1/1/98."

She went on to say that with her overhead costs rising, she must leave CHP effective Jan. 1, 1999.

Little said the practice has agreed to meet with representatives of the HMO next week and he was confident he could convince Steinberg and Dr. Theodore Fink to stay with CHP.

Steinberg declined to comment, either on her relationship with CHP or her participation in its Medicaid managed care program.

CHP serves about 30,000 of the 51,000 Medicaid clients who are in HMOs in Vermont.

Little says it is changing payments to practices by making adjustments in payments for women who visit the doctor more often.

The law, known as Rule 10, allows women to visit gynecologists without a referral from their primary doctors. It led CHP to reduce the monthly payments it makes to primary care doctors for taking care of female patients.

Couple Admits Painting Cats

Associated Press

BENNINGTON — The Bennington couple charged with animal cruelty for spray-painting cats that were hunting birds on [illegible] ing birds that had come to visit the Engleharts' bird feeder.

One of the cats, who belongs to the Engleharts' neighbors, had to be shaved [illegible]

Mediator To Intervene In Copley Nurses' Strike