

Voices
for Vermont's Children



Respectfully submitted to the House Committee on Human Services
By Amy Rose, Policy Director, Voices for Vermont's Children
February 8, 2024

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today. In preparation for our testimony, Voices has been in conversation with many of our partners - impacted people, service providers, youth - people we rely on to hold us accountable as we advocate for change. In doing this, we were reminded of how important the budget is. The budget is more than the numbers, graphs and charts that have been presented. It is a policy document. It speaks to our collective values. While there are many important policies that are currently before the Legislature that have minimal impacts on the budget ([registry & substantiation reform](#), [youth accessing their own records](#)), there are several large ones that will or will not move based on the budget that you received from the Governor, the revenue that we have as a state, and the decisions that will be made about how to best use those dollars.

It is worth noting that many of us are reacting to a budget that we have had very little time to digest. Voices has found the budgeting process before the official release to be one of the least transparent aspects of state government. The uncertainty that stems from that lack of transparency creates stress, and urgency - it limits our ability to respond thoughtfully and limits the people who have the opportunity to engage.

Voices appreciates this Committee and the many perspectives you invite in. Voices has included our broad policy agenda with this testimony. While there are specific policy proposals that we support, we know that there isn't a single policy that will meet all of the needs of the children, youth and families in Vermont. We strive to provide transparency in our decision making process. We are not going to spend a lot of time discussing housing, food security, child care, education, Raise the Age, harm reduction, tax policies, transitional services, or other very important topics today. We know that there will be other opportunities to weigh in on those policies and that you are listening to a range of voices, including many that are more directly engaged in some of that work. Voices is also aware that you have done your work on a comprehensive paid leave plan and therefore, we will save our testimony on that issue for the Senate. We do feel that it is important to acknowledge that the revenue portion of the budget is critical to having the capacity to support all of the expenses that are required. We are happy to contribute to and support conversations about income and wealth inequality - including ways in which those who have benefited from our current structures can be given additional opportunities to contribute to the infrastructure that we all depend on through taxation.

What is the role of the government?

There are many different perspectives on the role of government - ways that the government can guide, support, or provide barriers to well being. As one body responsible for the distribution of resources in an ethical way, it is helpful to be crystal clear about our collective and sometimes divergent values.

While we have yet to uncover many significant changes in the FY25 budget, we have heard consistent warnings about the limitations. Given the current moment and all that we are navigating, the “business as usual” approach to this budget is particularly alarming.

We can predict that housing will continue to provide complex challenges, that environmental events will continue to happen, that healthcare will continue to be costly, people will continue to need support, and that our kids will continue to need to be educated. If we dig into our scarcity narrative and take the approach that we can't afford to make shifts, then we can predict that these needs will be present each year going forward and the trauma that we are experiencing today will continue to develop and compound, leaving us with new challenges and emergencies to address. We know that persistent poverty is harmful to children - this budget continues to leave a significant funding gap in Reach Up and misses the opportunity to lessen the burdens of poverty.

Three examples of significant failings within the FY 25 budget:

Reach Up

Vermont's [current strategic plan](#) has four major categories. One of these categories is titled: Protecting the Vulnerable. It states “*We will protect the most vulnerable by providing services and benefits aimed at lifting more Vermonters out of poverty, ensuring the greatest degree of participation and independence, protecting children, and improving overall health and wellness of our communities.*” The first breakthrough indicator is “Percent of Population Living at or Below 200% FPL”.

Yet, Reach Up is once again significantly underfunded. Based on the Jan 29, 2024 report on unfunded budget pressures, the state's obligation for Reach Up is [\\$56.05 million](#). The Governor's budget maintains the 49.6% ratable reduction, reducing the appropriation for Reach Up by \$28.25 million this fiscal year. It appears as though this year's base appropriation is less than last year's. This is after the passage of [H.94 \(Act 49\)](#), which set the intent to eliminate the ratable reduction over the next five years.

Voices encourages this Committee to take more testimony on Reach Up, to take a meaningful step towards eliminating the ratable reduction this year, and to prioritize [H.93](#). The level funding of Reach Up directly harms families. Using a 2001 deflated cost of housing figure is in direct opposition to the goals of the program.

The income required to get a family of four at or below the 200% federal poverty threshold is \$61,800. Voices understands that Reach Up is not the only tool to get to that level of stability. However, we must ask - how does our current maximum stipend, which is \$12,000 a year, align with our values? As we talk of tough budget years, please center the impossible budget year we are burdening families with.

FSW's Data System/ Infrastructure

In a [recent webinar](#) (slides attached) hosted by Voices, Carlie Thibault of DCF acknowledged that DCF/FSD does not have a case management system, but instead, we have multiple data collection systems and data entry systems. Despite the Department clearly laying out where we are and where we need to be - Voices did not see any new dollars appropriated for a new system in the FY25 budget. Not only are we leaving federal funds on the table (Families First), we have identified errors, and will receive fines based on our current structure being out of

compliance. The carry forward identified in this year's budget presentation was from FY2021 and FY2022. It was noted that we will have a better sense of the full cost of implementation after the RFP goes out and responses are gathered. It is clear that the current carry over is insufficient. Voices is not confident that the state is committed to a system that meets the needs of children, youth, families, state employees and community providers. We fear that the approach laid out by the Administration will work towards compliance as the primary goal and miss opportunities for a portal based system. We consistently hear that we can reduce errors, increase communication, and build trust by having the infrastructure to support the work of FSD. We would like to see the budget reflect that aspiration.

The lack of investment in the infrastructure to draw down federal funds, spans beyond Families First Title IV-E funding. Voices is pleased to see the steps taken in S.109/H.154 (the doula bill) to access Medicaid dollars to provide services to Vermonters. Yet, we are missing other opportunities. As of October 2023, [25 states](#) have taken steps to expand their school Medicaid program to cover services outside of an Individualized Education Plan (IEP). The option has been available to states since 2014, when a longstanding Medicaid policy that limited the ability of school districts to seek Medicaid funding for student health services [was reversed](#). Creating capacity for additional mental health support within our communities should be prioritized. Overall, it appears that we are often unable to be responsive in a timely way to opportunities (the federal summer EBT program being another recent example) because of our outdated infrastructure.

Voices encourages this Committee and the Legislature to work with the Administration to ensure that the upcoming data system RFP process is transparent, that the needs of DCF employees, youth, families, and community providers are central to the decision making process - and that the full cost of a data system that prioritizes youth well being is funded going forward. Voices encourages the Legislature to work with the Administration to identify areas where we are not drawing down federal funding in support of the state's goals, and to understand and eliminate the barriers to do so.

Youth Voice

Voices has heard from many individuals who are concerned about the lack of youth voice in custody and visitation decisions made by Vermont's Judiciary. We have worked with DCF, the Judiciary, community providers, other advocates, and Legislators (especially Rep. Rey Garofano) to gain a better understanding of current practice, where there are gaps in policy and practice and how we compare to other states. There is much more to this policy priority than can be discussed here, but one of the themes that we have heard is that Vermont's systems are overwhelmed and unable to shift without additional resources. We believe that some of the concerns unearthed can be addressed through more education. If youth better understand their rights and the folks who support them and make decisions on their behalf better understand their experiences, we can make progress. However, our supervised visitation options, our guardian ad litem structure (which is not producing an abundance of trained volunteers), and youth representation options are all lacking.

Voices recommends that this Committee take up [H.714](#), the current funding structure for this bill is not through the FY25 budget. However, the policy within the bill that would strengthen youth voice across government is more important to Voices than the funding mechanism to get there.

Finally, as we all work to support well being - it is important to consider how well we listen to our children and youth and what words we choose when we speak about them. The research

around trauma and children is clear. The way to create ongoing safety is to create space to listen, space for healing, and space for understanding. At times, we need to put protective boundaries around our children. Voices encourages the Legislature to look critically at some of the emerging narratives about kids. As the Legislature engages in conversations about what to fund and what to support - secure facilities, whether it is okay to use deception or threats when seeking a confession from a child, when and how to use restraint and seclusion, new "tools" such as behavioral threat assessments (instead of needs assessments) - we ask you to pause and consider all the ways we label our youngest Vermonters as "the problem". A secure sense of belonging is critical for children and youth to flourish and develop skills that will carry them into adulthood. It's our job as a state to create a sense of belonging within and across systems, and to live our stated values with integrity.

The power of our advocacy lies in the degree to which we are able to hold and integrate the collective needs of children and families across Vermont. We therefore center the expertise and relationships cultivated by our partners alongside our own and encourage you to do the same in your budget considerations. When we take steps to dismantle disparities for the most impacted communities in our state, we raise the floor for everyone.