

Good afternoon,

Thank you, members of the committee, for taking the time to hear from me today. My name is Trissie Casanova, I am the chair of the DCF FSD Labor Management Committee. I have worked for DCF Family Services Division for the last 21 years in a variety of roles. For the first 13 years I worked as a Family Services Worker in the St. Albans District Office as a CPS worker, a JS worker, and lastly an investigator. Currently I am the Deputy Compact Administrator for ICPC/ICJ and the Human Trafficking Consultant.

The State of Vermont's High-End System of Care (HESOC) is in crisis and is in a State of Emergency and we are in need of immediate intervention. This intervention needs to include a building that is run by a program, not DCF staff, where kids can physically be placed that is safe for them, the community, and staff. The System of Care (SOC) includes placements at home with parents, kinship foster placements, foster care, therapeutic foster care, short term stabilization (programs such as Depot), residential treatment programs, psychiatric hospitalizations, and Secure Crisis Stabilization Program. This Secure Crisis Stabilization Program needs to be large enough to meet the need so that there is enough room for DOC youth, ICJ youth, and DCF. We need at 10 beds for this facility.

We need an intervention that includes a secure facility now. Earlier this month, we had two 14 youths who seriously assaulted another resident in one of our programs. Our staff along with law enforcement has been staffing one of those youth since then.

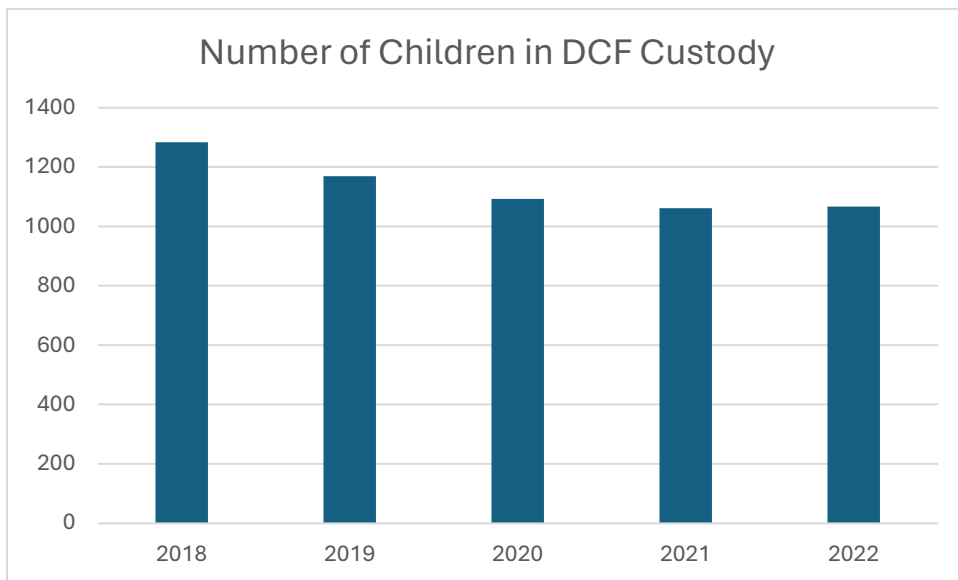
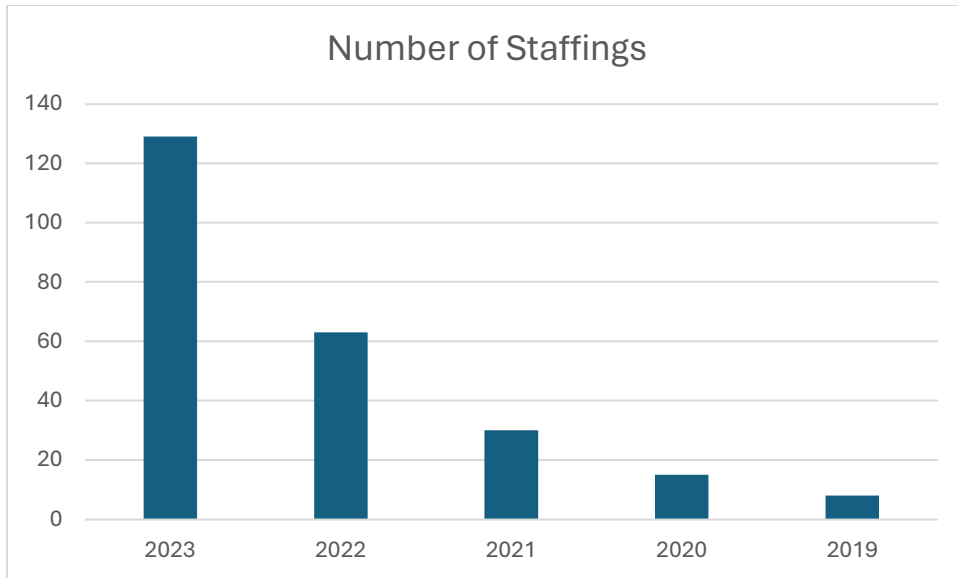
Our lack of secure facilities has had a ripple effect on our community; it has become a more common occurrence for youth to be charged with a Big 12 offense and subsequently incarcerated. In the last 6 months we have had numerous youth who have engaged in crimes that involved violence and the use of firearms. Due to a lack of secure placement and the risk they posed to our staff we have been releasing them back into communities; where the communities and the families they are with are potentially at risk of harm. Judges are making decisions to place children and youth with families that DCF would not be able to approve based on prior criminal histories, current allegations or abuse or neglect or holding them without bail because jail is the safest and the only option available to them. We are failing our kids, our staff, and our communities because of this systemwide failure.

In the last year we have seen a higher prevalence of gang activity amongst our youth where they are making videos talking about killing one another, we have seen in the news kids dying being shot either accidentally or as a result of homicide. We have been lucky there has not been more since we have no secure facilities to hold these youth while we assess their treatment needs.

Due to our lack of resources within our state we continue to resort to staffing these HESOC youth with DCF staff, contracted agencies, and law enforcement in a variety of settings. Staffing's kids use to be a practice that was a rare occurrence within our system and is now considered a regular occurrence. On December 19, 2023, Dept. Commissioner Radke sent a message to division staff with a call to action where she stated that DCF was on average staffing 5 youth/children per day. These 5 youth/children a day include justice involved children and other children who are in DCF custody as a result of child abuse or neglect.

Frequency-

- a. In 2023 there were a 129 staffing's that took place that were a minimum of 10 hours and usually overnight. This is a significant increase from prior years.
- b. Of that 129 staffing's, 11 of those were for kids who where either on ASD or had developmental delays because there are no community placements
- c. In 2022 there were 63 staffing's
- d. 2021, 30 staffing's
- e. 2020 15 staffing's and
- f. in 2019 we had 8 staffing's that were only for one night.
- g. 2018 and earlier we averaged 7-10 staffing's all year and they were usually only for one night. Most were waiting transport to Woodside, some were waiting admission to BBR.
- h. Some of which have required 3-1 staffing ratio's based on youth's risk and lack of LE options
- i. Ages range btw 6-17.5 years of age
- j. Many of these staffing's are with the support of law enforcement which is difficult to obtain during the summer months.
- k. Length of staffing's have been from 1 day to 3 weeks, these are 24 hour staffing on top of workers daytime workloads
- l. Behaviors- violent/aggressive behaviors, gang affiliation, sexualized behaviors, destruction of property, personal care needs, medications, mental health diagnoses, significant medical needs, kids who qualify for developmental services or who are in the autism spectrum, kids who need a high level of personal care to include toileting and hygiene.
- m. This increase in the number of staffing's is not as a result of an increase of the number of children in DCF custody. In fact, the number of kids in DCF custody continues to have a downward trend.



2- Impact

- a. on youth- rotating staff is bad for our kids, has a negative impact on our youth
- b. on staff- high turnover rate- we have on average losing 5 staff a month
- c. on community-
 - i. Our relationships with LEO & Community partners are fractured

3- Examples of youth we have been staffing

- a. 17 yr. old male. Probable cause found to charge with first-degree aggravated domestic assault by chasing a family member with a butter knife threatening to kill them.

- b. 14 yr. old male who identifies as part of a gang. Charges include reckless endangerment, grand larceny & stolen vehicle. Assaulted Depot staff, pushed, slapped, and punched in the face multiple times while another youth held staff.
- c. 15 yr. old male. Entered custody after incident with a firearm that resulted in a shooting. This youth was in possession of the handgun and after the shooting he hid the magazine from the gun in his room.
- d. 14. yr. old male. Car theft, physically aggressive to mother. Punched father in face.
- e. 16 yr. old male. attempted to take control of the vehicle of his provider and assaulted her and hit her car causing damage. A month ago, made threats to kill his family members with a hammer over the span of a few days.
- f. 16 yr. old male. Charged with Aggravated Assault, Simple Assault, disorderly conduct, & False Public alarms
- g. 13 yr. old male. Runs away, selling drugs, coerced a female peer into sexual acts, physical assault to mother and females.
- h. 11 yr. old male charged with arson, unlawful mischief, reckless endangerment.
- i. Female sliced a family relative with a box cutter and punched them in the head multiple times.
- j. Female Charged w/ Agg. Assault with a Deadly Weapon and Reckless Endangerment and bludgeoned father in the head with a pistol.
- k. Foster parents found bottles of gasoline and lighters in youth's room. Youth said that he wanted to make a Molotov cocktail to throw at his adoptive parents. He then damaged the state car that the FSW came in and smashed the windshield as the FSW began driving away.
- l. Youth, stabbed caregiver, caused two black eyes and threatened to kill family members.
- m. Charged with Aggravated Assault "tazed" three people with one being injured. assaultive behavior, sexual acting out.

While standing up a Secure Crisis Stabilization Program now is not going to solve all of our problems, it will reduce some of the pressure to our system. What we know is that there seems to be a rise in youth committing violent crimes, there has been a significant increase in the number of youth coming into Vermont for the purposes of drug dealing and who are gang involved from other states. We continue to see trends of youth being brought into VT by drug traffickers to have these youth run their drugs here in Vermont as it is well known that we do not have a secure place to hold kids. These situations could be considered labor trafficking situations.

The continued staffing of these youth is also making them worse and more difficult to place in other therapeutic settings.

The bottom line is that our system is in crisis our children/youth, our staff and our communities are at risk. Everyone has been saying that something bad is on the verge of happening and that we are on borrowed time. Bad things have already happened. Our staff are being assaulted, their cars being damaged, they are being threatened to be killed or assaulted. What else needs to happen,

before we are truly given a solution? We have been promised since the closure of Woodside that a new program was coming and to just hold on. We have been holding on for over 4 years now and we are in no better place than we were before. We need your help now before we experience another tragedy.