
**Report to
The Vermont Legislature**

**Resource and Workload Considerations in
Implementing Policy, Procedure and Practice Changes in
the Family Services Division**

**In Accordance with Act 60 Sec 22(c) of 2015: An act relating to improving
Vermont's system for protecting children from abuse and neglect**

Submitted to: Joint Legislative Child Protection Oversight Committee

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I. Summary of Act 60, Section 22(c)

In 2015, the Legislature passed Act 60 into law. This comprehensive legislation aimed to improve the State’s approach to preventing child abuse and neglect and protecting children from abuse. Section 22(c) of this Act directed the Commissioner of the Department for Children and Families to develop a plan to implement the following policies, procedures, and practices:

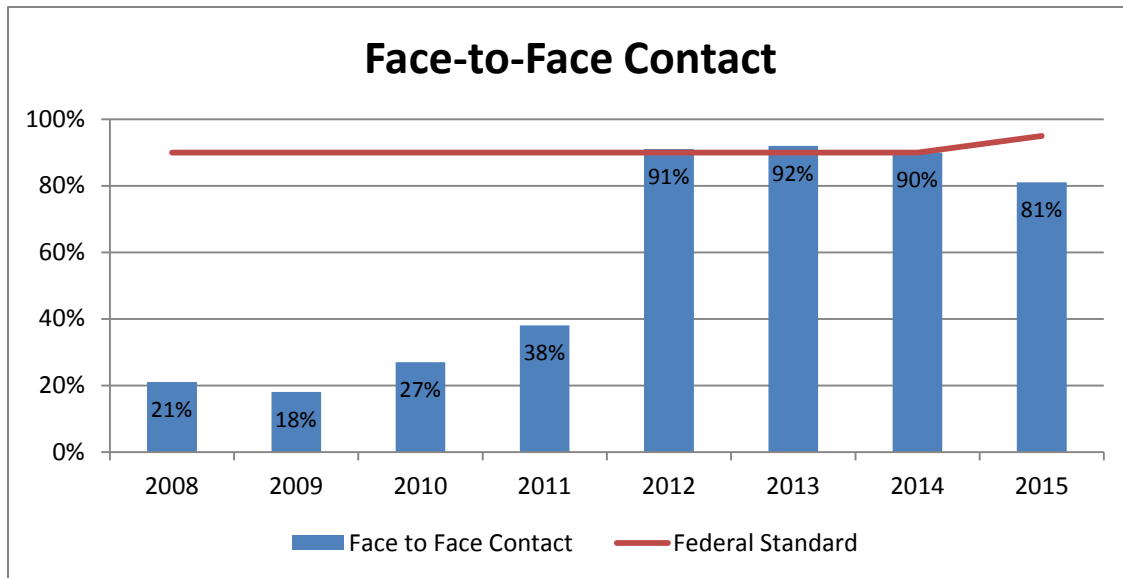
- (1) Increase the number of required face-to-face meetings between Family Services Division social workers and children;
- (2) Increase the number of required home visits and require unannounced home visits by Family Services Division social workers; and
- (3) Require that all persons living in a household or who will have child care responsibilities be assessed for criminal history and potential safety risks whenever a child who has been removed from a home is returned to that home.

Further, Act 60 requires the Commissioner to report to the Joint Legislative Child Protection Oversight Committee on or before September 30, 2015 on plans to implement these policies, procedures, and practices, including any additional resources necessary to complete implementation.

II. Face to Face Visits

The relationship between a social worker and a child/youth, his or her family and caretaker is central to assuring safety and achieving permanency. Social worker contact is the single most important way to promote and achieve positive outcomes for children and youth.

The federal standard for face-to-face contact between social workers and children and youth in custody has been, for a number of years, that 90% of children are seen once every month of the year. States that do not meet this standard face financial sanctions. Due to the concerted effort of staff and, most importantly, the addition of full-time social worker positions in FFY 2011 and 2012, monthly contact increased substantially over the past few years. In FFY 2014, FSD achieved a rate of monthly face-to-face contact of just over 90% — meeting the goal of 90% for the third year in a row.



However, the unprecedented number of accepted reports of abuse and neglect (5,847 in 2014, up from 5,135 in 2013) and the related increase in the number of children in custody (1,373 in September 2015, up from 1,156 in 2014) have resulted in extraordinary workload strain for social workers. This has led to lower rates of face-to-face contact. For FFY 2015, we are at 81%, a substantial drop from last year. FSD does not anticipate being in compliance with the federal standard in FFY 2015, which has been raised to 95%.

The rate of face-to face contact is likely substantially lower for children in family support cases who are not in DCF custody. We do not have data on the frequency of contacts or home visits with children in non-custody cases.

Increasing face-to-face visits from one to two per month would more than double the number of visits. This is not possible given the existing pressures and workload concerns. We will continue to support staff in these efforts to maintain in-person contact with children.

III. Required Home Visits and Unannounced Home Visits

Face-to-face visits for children in DCF custody were discussed in the previous section. Of the monthly contacts in FFY 2015 year to date, 42.75% of the contacts were in the child’s residence. The standard is that at least 50% of face-to-face contacts be in the child’s residence. These are the only “required home visits”, according to state and federal statute.

Unannounced visits play a role in child protection. The question of unannounced versus scheduled visits has been considered in the current Family Services Division (FSD) practice model. The type of case determines the appropriateness of an unannounced visit and the likelihood that it will achieve child safety without undermining parent engagement efforts. In child safety interventions, it is FSD policy to call to make an appointment for cases assigned to the assessment track. Cases in the investigation track (which include all accepted reports of sexual abuse and severe physical abuse) more often make use of unannounced visits.

For family support cases that are not court involved, unannounced visits are generally not indicated as the focus is trying to engage the family in a respectful, supportive way to assure child safety.

There are several practical concerns and resource considerations around requiring unannounced home visits. In our rural state, unannounced visits can take up many hours per week without any guarantee of seeing a child or family. With these types of visits, it is more likely that the caregiver will not be home; many of the children in custody are in protective services child care during the day, while parents are engaged in employment, substance abuse treatment, or job search activities. This will require the social worker to make repeated attempts to meet with the child and family, potentially requiring overtime if social workers are expected to conduct visits in the evenings or on weekends. These extra hours will also contribute to social worker fatigue and burnout, a serious concern given the rate of turnover for social workers. Although only 7% of social worker positions turned over during SFY 2014, we have seen an increased number of resignations recently, primarily driven by worker safety concerns.

Safety concerns also need to be considered for unannounced visits. These visits are more likely to escalate into a confrontation between the social worker and the caregiver, resulting in potential violence for the social worker and/or any children present. It is not feasible or appropriate to request a law enforcement escort to each unannounced visit; particularly as there is no guarantee that the child or caregiver will be at home. These concerns are heightened in the many instances where residences are located in remote areas without cell service.

FSD is focusing on increasing the number of visits that occur at a child's residence and in crafting a plan of services to support reunifications that will support child safety. Building a safety network that includes providers in Children's Integrated Services, Reach Up, substance abuse treatment, Parent Child Center programs, and other community partners will ensure that multiple providers are seeing the child in their natural environments and partnering to support child safety. FSD will ensure the child and family are visited in their home regularly by the social worker and the safety network, as indicated in the case plan. These visits will occur within two weeks of a conditional reunification and at least monthly thereafter.

IV. Assessment of Criminal History and Safety Risks

As required by Act 60, FSD has created a policy to ensure that criminal history and safety risks are considered by social workers when a child removed from a home is reunified to that same home. Policy 98 includes the following direction:

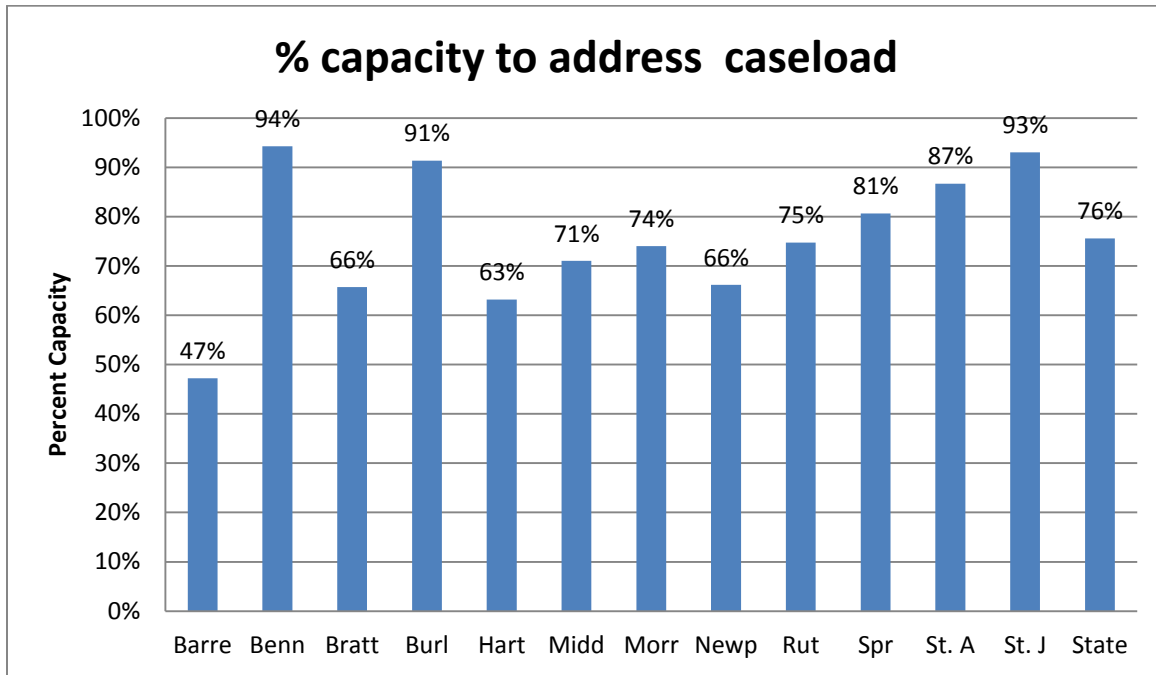
"The division shall ensure that all persons living in the household with the child or persons who will have child care responsibilities are assessed for criminal history and potential safety risks. The Vermont Child Protection Registry, SSMIS, DOC, and VCAS should be checked for each individual 16 years and older. If indicated, the division may also conduct background checks on household members younger than sixteen."

These procedures will support ongoing efforts to comprehensively assess safety concerns and use this information when a child is returned home. The new reunification policy will result in cases remaining open for longer periods of time. This is important to ensure the safety of children returning to the care of adults who previously abused or neglected them. However, it is also one more factor that contributing to workload pressures.

V. Conclusion

Currently, within the context of current resources, the Family Services Division is unable to develop and implement a plan to increase face-to-face contact, including announced or unannounced home visits. Statewide, we are at 76% capacity to do the work required to carry out our core mandate. The following chart is based on the definition of 100% capacity which includes all of the following:

- The district is fully staffed to conduct all child safety interventions (investigations and assessments)
- Caseloads for ongoing staff are at 15 families per social worker (vs. the 17.7 they are today);
- All positions are filled; and
- All staff have completed a six-month training period.



Unfortunately, given the impact of opiate use on child safety in our state, caseloads will likely continue to rise for a period of time. The total number of children in custody has risen sharply, from 965 in FY2010 to 1,373 in September 2015 (a 42% increase). Current caseload calculations are based on a family unit, rather than children. Based on data from the last two years, we project the following number of ongoing families and/or delinquent youth¹:

Case Type	Jan-14	Jul-14	Jan-15	Sep-15	1/1/2016 proj	7/1/2016 proj
Family Support Cases	396	428	454	453	453	453
Families with Children in Custody	776	812	873	942	1012	1082
Pre-adjudicated Delinquent Youth	59	53	41	35	40	40
Youth on Probation	149	145	124	112	100	100
Families with Children on Conditional Custody Orders	172	222	257	287	317	347
Total	1552	1660	1749	1829	1922	2022

Given the division's current capacity, we will continue to focus on essential duties and tasks, as defined in state and federal statute and regulation. During the past year, we have experimented with the use of temporary Human Services Aide positions in districts that have experienced a high level of vacancies coupled with difficulty in hiring Social Workers. Those districts have found that Human Services Aides can be immediately helpful in assisting with lower level duties that do not require the education and training of a Social Worker.

¹ These numbers do not count child safety interventions: investigations and assessments.