

Dear Committee Members

Thank you for the opportunity to share information and ideas with you as we all work toward strengthening our systems for children and families. As most of you know, I have been the interim District Director in Rutland now for a little over a month. My comments will focus on the work that is happening in that district.

You have heard a number of statistics from Commissioner Yacavone during his testimony. I want to speak to how that translates in the Rutland District. From Jan 1 2014 through June 30 2014, the Rutland Family Services District received 958 intakes; of those 320 were accepted for investigation. That is the third highest in the state for that period, behind Burlington and St. Albans. The trend for accepted reports for Rutland is increasing, with 57 and 59 reports accepted respectively in May and June of this year. This is a trend that we are keeping an eye on. A percentage of these cases will remain open for on-going work at the end of any investigation or assessment. Since I have been in the office we have opened approximately 25 new on-going family support cases. This is in addition to the 10 children that have come into custody during that same time frame. We have received support from Central Office around these workload issues; they have committed to assigning two of the recently authorized 17 social work positions to Rutland and have also given permission for us to hire a temporary social worker. The Child Safety Manger has also supported the Rutland district through both a physical presence in the office and availability for consultation.

This information is shared to provide you with a backdrop for the comments I am going to make specifically in regard to the Rutland Office. It is a busy place. This means that we need to be vigilant with our communications, both internal and external. This is an area that I have targeted for improvement. We must also ensure that workload issues do not get in the way of good outreach in the community. Family Services is sometimes criticized for being too isolated, too inwardly-focused, and for not seeing ourselves as part of the larger community that supports children and families. As District Director, I must address this culture, both directly with staff and through leading by example. Family Services should be seen as a resource for families under stress, should be involved in prevention as well as protection, and must partner with our community resources, especially foster parents, in order to make children and families strong and healthy.

Some of this work is done through systems and processes. Specific efforts that we have undertaken in that vein include the following:

- Creation of a spreadsheet to track appeal decisions;
- Creation of a transfer process from front-end investigations to on-going workers;
- Plan to review new/amended policies at staff meeting;
- Creation/implementation of a local staffing process prior to reunification;
- Creation of written guidelines for referrals to Children's Integrated Services and the Strengthening Families Demonstration Project;
- Creation of written guidelines regarding all Court alternative options, including Diversion, Eckerd, and schools;

- Creation and expectation of participation in opportunities for learning through training and consultation, both internal and external.

Other pieces of this work are done through community collaborations and outreach. Much of the work we do is about relationships. Strong and valued relationships lead to strong and valued communications. Examples of actions we have undertaken here include:

- Regular attendance by District Director at bi-monthly data mapping meetings at Rutland Police Department, in connection with Project VISION, a local coalition addressing substance abuse and quality of life issues in Rutland;
- Regular attendance, by District Director or supervisor, at Project VISION monthly meetings and subcommittee meetings;
- Resumption of attendance by District Director and Resource Coordinator at monthly Foster Parent Association meetings;
- Participation in formation of new Pediatric Referral Team in partnership with Blueprint Community Health Team;
- Continuation of facilitation of Multi-Disciplinary Team meeting for Rutland City Supervisory Union;
- Offer to WestRidge Treatment Center for informational sessions for patients regarding Family Services;
- Participation with local designated agency, Rutland Mental Health, regarding reinstatement of adolescent substance abuse treatment services;
- Regular attendance by District Director at Children's Integrated Services weekly meetings;
- Continued commitment to Family Supportive Housing project and Strengthening Families Demonstration Project;
- Outreach to post-permanence services through Easter Seals with an eye toward increased referrals;
- Offers to attend community partner staff trainings to discuss a variety of topics such as mandated reporting and general office processes.

As Interim District Director, I have also committed to the following:

- Review of all intakes (same day when I am in the office, next business day when I am not);
- Open door policy for staff, foster parents and community partners, in order to support and guide our work and communicate in a timely manner;
- Retain practice of consult time for workers bi-monthly following staff meeting to improve decision-making;
- Housing a Domestic Violence specialist in the Rutland office who will be available for consultation when dv issues are present;
- Outreach to other District Directors who received excellent feedback during the Child Protection public forums to learn from best practice statewide.

In Commissioner Yacavone's remarks he spoke about best-practice and evidence-informed practice as the foundations of our work. One of the great strengths of our system is that foundation. We have utilized research to influence practice and support our policies. We have implemented differential response and employed all of the approaches, like Family Time Coaching and Family Group Conferencing, that he referenced. All of this makes our system more responsive and reflexive. We have added and amended policy as we have received valid, tested information that supports such additions and changes. I am confident we will continue to do so. But one thing is constant, and that is that we are dealing with human beings, most of whom are stressed and vulnerable. Substance abuse is often a factor for our families; many have trauma histories. All of this can make behavior unpredictable.

I have worked for the State of Vermont for 34 years, in several different capacities; it is my opinion, and only my opinion, that Family Services social workers have the hardest job in state government. They are tasked with trying to make predictions, based on all the tools we have at our disposal, in situations that are inherently unpredictable. I am incredibly impressed by the social work staff, both statewide and in Rutland. They remain committed to children and families and are open to practice changes and training that will assist them in their mission of child safety. They are one of the greatest strengths of our system.

I believe my job in Rutland is to lead by example, to ensure child safety is our priority, to communicate clearly my expectations to staff regarding their responsibilities, to work collaboratively with our partners, and to support and demand excellent practice. While we will not always agree on how to get there, I hope we can agree that the conversation needs to happen, and hopefully not just in the wake of tragedy. We must welcome and solicit best thinking in our field and use consultation as it is available. Thank you for your time.

