

**Reach Up Work Group Report
Commissioner Dave Yacovone Testimony Outline
House Human Services Committee
7 January 2014**

I. Legislative Mandate

- a. 11 tasks in Act 50 intended to help legislature assess program effectiveness
- b. 20 members – advocates; program staff; partner organizations; experts in substance abuse, employment, child development, and child welfare; past program participants

II. Key Findings from the Work Group - Themes that undergirded discussion and decision making:

1. ***Impact of trauma and chronic poverty*** – impact on adult’s executive functioning and decision making
2. ***Need for more collaboration and integration with other programs and services*** – especially problematic re: long term and complex families when collaboration and integration is most needed
 - a. need to support parenting skill-building and have staffing capacity to work with the whole family
If we are to bend the curve for the children (56% of 2012 recipients were in RU as children)
3. ***IT challenges*** – antiquated database and case management information systems compound the challenges case managers face

III. Priorities

- a. More staffing is needed – especially related to substance abuse/mental health needs
 - i. 62% increase in caseload ratios between 2008 and 2013
 - ii. Adding to the complexity of caseload size is the churn – nearly 1/3 of cases have come on and off multiple times – esp. the 60+ month population – the processes to close and open cases adds substantially to the work load
 - iii. Broad program outcomes and participant accountability would be greatly enhanced with smaller caseload sizes
- b. Financial stability – including: increasing income disregard, changing asset test for eligibility, and financial empowerment activities
 - i. Several key strategies to mitigate the benefits cliff and help stabilize families emerged as priorities
 1. increasing the amount of income a RU participant can keep as they transition out of RU – currently keep first \$200 plus ¼ of remaining income;
 2. asset limits – currently at \$2,000 for liquid assets and \$4,000 for non-liquid – proposals emerged to increase assets and to entirely eliminate the test – allowing participants to accumulate more savings to help them absorb economically challenging times – may reduce churn
 3. Support was strong for adding resources to the program to help participants gain financial empowerment and literacy – e.g., credit restoration, banking, budgeting, asset development

- c. Prioritize education – count educational activities as work
 - i. Make obtaining a high school diploma a program priority regardless of the age of the participant – currently those over age 20 need to focus on employment unless they get an education deferment – 27% of long term recipients have not completed high school
 - 1. mother’s educational level is significant factor in children’s educational success – group identified a couple of different strategies toward this end
 - 2. stop clock for educational activities
 - 3. eliminate educational deferment; make hours spent on education programs (within certain parameters similar to PSE) count as work hours – recognize the feds will not count this
- d. Housing stability – housing instability precludes effective case work and goal attainment – RU income is not adequate to cover housing costs in most areas of the state; 44% of long term recipients have been homeless while receiving RU; 38% moved 2 or more times in last 24 months
 - i. Increase Vt Rental Subsidy program – 80% of recipients of VRSP vouchers are RU participants
 - ii. Another idea that emerged was to provide a housing subsidy to single parents on top of their grant and pay directly to landlord

IV. Resources and tools used to conduct the work

- a. **Data related to long term recipients:** Extensive survey tool created by internal advisory group - local staff manually reviewed **278 files of 60+ month program participants** – the cohort was a randomly selected group of long term recipients identified in central office and the lists were sent to each district for their completion during the first week of Sept. – manual review required as ACCESS system has limited information about this population – and accuracy of the data is questionable
- b. **Data related to all program participants:** lengthy survey created by internal advisory group, completed by **367 participants** from all 12 districts – number each district collected was proportional to their RU case load; participants that came into the office at the appointed week in Sept. were asked to complete either an electronic or paper survey
- c. **Nine former participants** interviewed to learn more about what helped them succeed
- d. **Fifty-five case managers** responded to a work group survey re: training and educational opportunities in their local districts
- e. **Twenty +/- team leaders** – this statewide group was led in discussion related to work group tasks during three of their monthly meetings over the summer – including questions related to: how well the program is achieving the purposes in statute; effectiveness of program sanctions, work requirements and deferments; and challenges in 60 month time limits re: community service placements
- f. **Expert consultation** – presentations and interviews were held with: Dr. LaDonna Pavetti of the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities; Melissa Bailey of Integrated Family Services and Karen Garbarino of Children’s Integrated Services; Marc Wennberg of St. Albans community justice center; Angus Chaney, AHS Housing Director, and Kathy Berk and Jen Hyslop of Vt. State Housing Authority; Charlie Biss of the Dept. of Mental Health; and Leslie Black-Plumeau and Rob McIntyre of Black-Plumeau Consulting
- g. **Reports and data consulted** – significant reports included two Black-Plumeau studies: 2008 Leavers Study and 2013 Long Term Welfare Dependence Report; caseload and long term recipient data