



**Vermont Child Poverty Council
Annual Progress Report
January 2014**

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I. Statutory Authority and Responsibilities of the Vermont Child Poverty Council

The Vermont Child Poverty Council (Council) was established by 2007 Acts and Resolves, No. 68. The Council’s mission is to examine child poverty in Vermont and to make recommendations to the Governor and General Assembly on methods of improving the financial stability and well-being of children.¹

The Council was created out of recognition by the General Assembly that Vermont faced a growing problem with regard to children living in poverty. Vermont has addressed the importance of individual responsibility through welfare reform, among other policies, but it has not fully addressed the societal structures and economic forces that create and perpetuate poverty. The Council’s task is, in part, to take a comprehensive look at these structural issues to determine what Vermont can do to alleviate the financial pressures on families and to create an environment in which families can succeed.

The Council comprises legislators, advocates, and other stakeholders. The enabling legislation requires that the Council include: “the following members or their designees: (A) the president pro tempore of the senate; (B) the speaker of the house of representatives; (C) the chair of the senate committee on health and welfare; (D) the chair of the house committee on human services; (E) the chair of the senate committee on education; (F) the chair of the house committee on education; (G) the commissioners of the departments for children and families; of health; of education; and of labor; and (H) one representative each from Voices for Vermont’s Children, the Vermont low income advocacy council, Vermont Legal Aid, and the Vermont superintendents’ association.”² The Council must report annually “on yearly progress toward benchmarks, updates to the plan, and recommendations for budgetary and policy changes in order to accomplish the goals of [Act 68].”³

II. Summary of Council Activities

The Council reconvened on September 20, 2013, for the first time since January 31, 2011. The Council held four meetings in 2013 during the General Assembly’s adjournment.

The Council reviewed the report that it released in 2009 entitled “Improving the Odds for Kids” (2009 report).⁴ The report contained a number of recommendations addressing children in poverty. The Council considered each recommendation in the 2009 report to identify which recommendations had been accomplished (or where progress had been made in general) and heard testimony from the pertinent agencies, departments, and stakeholders. The Council also discussed additional actions that should be pursued in the future to address unmet goals within the report’s recommendations.

¹ 2007 Acts and Resolves No. 68, Sec. 1.

² *Id.*

³ *Id.*

⁴ The 2009 report is available at <http://www.leg.state.vt.us/reports/2010ExternalReports/276128.pdf>.

The Council created subcommittees to address issues related to transportation, health and nutrition, housing and homelessness, workforce and education, and child care. The subcommittees considered the topics set forth in the 2009 report and made recommendations to achieve the goals of the Council. The subcommittees also identified potential partners that could be engaged to further the Council's work.

In October 2013, the Governor held an Early Childhood Summit, which several of the Council members attended. The Council invited the Director of Special Projects and Intergovernmental Affairs for the Governor to its following meetings, and will continue to collaborate with Governor Shumlin's Office on issues related to early childhood, with a particular focus on issues that are exacerbated by poverty.

The Council also considered pending legislation that is consistent with its charge, including H.270 and S.35, as discussed in the recommendations in this report. The Council hopes that its interest in and advocacy for these bills will culminate in their passage.

III. Council Recommendations

The Council, drawing on the work of its subcommittees and the testimony of witnesses, makes the recommendations below to the General Assembly and committees of jurisdiction.

A. Support H.270 (An act relating to providing access to publicly funded prekindergarten education)

The Council recognizes the importance of early education, and believes that every Vermont child should have access to quality prekindergarten education, regardless of his or her socioeconomic status. The Council plans to hold a press conference on January 9, 2014 to demonstrate its support for this policy and to urge the passage of H.270, an act relating to providing access to publicly funded prekindergarten education.

H.270 passed the House on May 1, 2013. The Council believes that drawing attention to this issue will ensure that the bill receives proper attention from the Senate and Governor. Education is one of the essential tools that the State can provide to lift children out of poverty. Educational opportunities provided during a crucial point in a child's development may enable the child to break the cycle of poverty.

B. Support S.35 (An act relating to establishing and regulating licensed dental practitioners)

The Subcommittee on Health and Nutrition recommends the passage of S.35. In addition to the subcommittee recommendations discussed in this report, the Council heard testimony on this topic and adopted the subcommittee's recommendation.

The purpose of S.35 is to create a mid-level oral health provider (called a dental practitioner) to increase access to dental care. Vermont lacks affordable dental care, despite a large and growing need for it. There is a lack of dentists in the State, and access to low-cost services is limited.

Vermont Technical College (VTC) has created a curriculum for becoming a dental practitioner. Currently at VTC, a person can earn a bachelor's degree and become a dental hygienist in three years. To become a dental practitioner, he or she would complete an additional year of training. Dental practitioners would work under a host dentist, and could perform dental procedures approved by the host dentist. The dentist would not have to be at the site where the dental practitioner is practicing, which would be useful to the federally qualified health centers and other places with limited access in the State.

C. End Child Homelessness

According to the Emergency Solutions Grants Vermont Annual Report for State Fiscal Year 2013, 4,285 unduplicated persons were sheltered during the 2013 fiscal year, of which 816 were under 18 years of age. The Council hopes to introduce a policy resolution with the stated aspiration of ending child and adolescent homelessness in Vermont. The policy resolution will urge the General Assembly and Governor to work to eradicate homelessness among youths in Vermont and to consider the impact of their policies on homeless and precariously housed families.

D. Create Payment Alternatives for Traffic Fines

The transportation subcommittee recommended that the Council address the traffic fine structure and its impact on Vermont families in poverty. In addition to the subcommittee recommendations discussed in this report, the Council at large heard testimony regarding this topic.

The Council understands that traffic fines can be a crushing debt for a parent struggling to make ends meet. In some cases, if a person cannot drive, he or she cannot get to work, or remains geographically limited in terms of finding better housing and resources. Recognizing that transportation issues are exacerbated in rural areas, the Council considered alternative payment ideas that would allow a person to be able to continue to use his or her car, and delay or repay his or her debt in an alternate manner.

Chief Hearing Officer Michael Pratt and Clerk of the Court Gabrielle Lapointe from the Judicial Bureau discussed the existing systems. Judge Pratt explained if a person requests a hearing regarding his or her violation, the officer has discretion to set the fine amount (within statutory minimum and maximum amounts). Individuals can also file motions to extend deadlines or change the amount due, though these motions are very labor and time intensive for the Judicial Bureau.

The Judicial Bureau created what it calls the "30/30 plan." The person can elect this arrangement, and as long as the person pays \$30 every 30 days (per judgment or ticket), his or her license can be reinstated. The 30/30 plan does not take into account personal circumstances.

The Council also heard testimony on the Diversion Program, which began last year. It allows the adjudicator to consider personal circumstances, but according to the Judicial Bureau, it is a burden on the clerks and officers as it is a labor intensive process.

Judge Pratt expressed support for the Council's idea of permitting a person to perform community service to pay off a fine, but noted that the costs to manage and coordinate a community service program may be expensive and overburdensome, as well as raise potential liability issues. If a system already existed to manage the community service, the Bureau could then credit the time worked. Court Diversion Director Willa Farrell testified that community service and education options were also available in the diversion program, but they were not heavily used, primarily due to the time commitment required.

Judge Pratt also appeared supportive of work licenses, or some type of license that would allow a person to drive to work or transport his or her children to school. However, he conjectured that the Department of Motor Vehicles and law enforcement may have concerns about that type of license, especially regarding enforcement and how to uphold the integrity of the system. He noted that other states have work license programs, so it may be feasible for Vermont.

Judge Pratt suggested that the Legislature create a waiver based on income, or the ability to adjust the waiver fine for people receiving public assistance. For example, the Legislature could set a reduction percentage, such as a provision that Reach Up recipients would only have to pay 25 percent of the fine amount.

E. Amend the Council's Charge

By law, the Council is permitted to "meet up to six times while the general assembly is not in session to perform its functions."⁵ Understanding that its members may not receive reimbursement for attending additional meetings, the Council nonetheless would like to remove the statutory constraint that limits meetings to the legislative adjournment. The Council would like to continue its work throughout the session, so that momentum gained in the summer and fall is not lost. Also, by holding meetings during the legislative session, the Council hopes to draw more attention to its work and invite others to participate in the conversation about poverty, its impact on Vermont children, and how the State can reduce the number of children living in poverty.

IV. Subcommittee Recommendations

Each subcommittee met independently to identify its highest priorities. It should be noted that not all of the suggestions listed in this section were discussed or adopted by the Council as a whole.

A. The Subcommittee on Housing and Homelessness recommends:

1. Providing full statutory funding for the Vermont Housing and Conservation Board (\$17.7 million based on the July official revenue forecast and included in the State budget this year).

⁵ 2007 Acts and Resolves No. 68, Sec. 1.

2. Increasing the Emergency Solutions Grant Program from \$800,000.00 to \$1.2 million (in the State budget this year) to reduce homelessness.
3. Expanding the Family Supportive Housing three-county demonstration program statewide (current funding level of \$400,000.00 is in the State budget this year).
4. Doubling the State's rental subsidy program.

B. The Subcommittee on Health and Nutrition recommends:

1. Improving child health and learning by expanding summer nutrition through two Hunger Free Vermont program proposals:

A. Expanding the Summer Meals Program: A proposal to provide State funds for competitive, one-time grants of \$500.00 to cover start-up costs for 16 new summer meal and enrichment sites in high-need Vermont communities, at a total cost of \$8,000.00. These new sites would help close the achievement gap, reduce summer weight gain, and improve nutrition for over 500 additional Vermont children who currently do not have access to summer meals or enrichment activities.

B. Expanding the Multigenerational Summer Programs: A proposal to provide State funds for one-time grants of \$1,400.00 to fund coordinators for new multigenerational summer meal sites located in 10 senior centers at a total cost of \$14,400.00. The coordinators would provide supervision and a half-day of enrichment activities for children who would otherwise lack summer meals and activities. This arrangement would leverage additional federal meal reimbursements that would help to stabilize financially senior congregate meal sites.

2. Supporting S.35, an act relating to establishing and regulating licensed dental practitioners.
3. Expanding the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) dental hygienist program by creating new dental hygiene positions.

C. The Subcommittee on Workforce and Education recommends:

1. Continuing to support community action agencies, such as the Family Place in Wilder, which provide supports including parenting training, day care, and early education.
2. Supporting early childhood educators, including supporting their collective bargaining rights.
3. Continuing free school meals.
4. Giving more families access to quality child care by increasing Child Care Financial Assistance to 50 percent of market rates. Over time, incremental increases should bring the program up to 75 percent of market rates. Rates should be indexed for inflation.

5. Enabling more child care providers to afford to care for younger children by increasing the infant and toddler differential rate.
6. Maintaining access to child care for working families by keeping eligibility guidelines in line with current federal poverty guidelines.
7. As proposed in legislation passed by the House, providing pre-kindergarten programming for all Vermont children, with equal access to State funding for all providers, including Head Start.
8. Exploring alternatives to school disciplinary policies that remove students from the classroom.
9. Continuing efforts to dissuade young people from inopportune parenthood.
10. Exploring the several pending proposals to address higher education costs (e.g., “Pay It Forward,” conditioned debt forgiveness, etc.).
11. Investing in jobs and asset development (including economic development initiatives), such as implementing Integrating Financial Empowerment, a program for Reach Up families that includes financial education, coaching, credit building and repair, matched savings tools and incentives, and access to mainstream banking into the Reach Up program through partnership with financial coaches at Vermont’s community action agencies.
12. Increasing existing micro-business and Individual Development Account programs funding.
13. Making work pay and helping to reduce the Department for Children and Families’ caseloads by eliminating asset tests and increasing earned income disregards in the Reach Up program. Create incentives that reward people for getting ahead.
14. Creating new jobs and building assets by investing in micro-business, matched savings, credit repair, and financial literacy programs.
15. Increasing the benefit amounts for Reach Up families.

D. The Subcommittee on Transportation recommends:

1. Placing Reach Up participants in community service to help pay off fines. (For example, credit the minimum wage amount for every hour served toward the balance of the individual’s unpaid fines amount owed.)
2. Allowing people to drive to and from work, medical appointments, and Reach Up appointments even if they have a suspended driver’s license for unpaid fines.
3. Continuing State efforts to increase the availability of public transportation, especially in rural areas. The State should work with localities to review existing public transportation systems and

explore potential changes to public services in order to increase the access of low-income parents to employment opportunities, child care, and other resources.

4. Expanding (and renewing funding for) existing Individual Development Account (IDA) programs to allow for savings related to car purchases, as well as to evaluate current programs that provide transportation-related assistance to low-income Vermonters.

E. The Subcommittee on Child Care recommends:

Passage of H.270, as discussed in this report.

2014 Report of the Vermont Child Poverty Council

Representative Tess Taylor, Chair

Senator Dick McCormack, Vice Chair

Appendix 1. 2007 Acts and Resolves, No. 68

NO. 68. AN ACT RELATING TO CHILD POVERTY IN VERMONT.

It is hereby enacted by the General Assembly of the State of Vermont:

Sec. 1. VERMONT CHILD POVERTY COUNCIL

(a) The Vermont child poverty council is created to examine child poverty in Vermont and to make recommendations to the governor and general assembly on methods of improving the financial stability and well-being of children. The council shall develop a ten-year plan to reduce the number of children living in poverty in the state by at least 50 percent.

(b)(1) The council shall consist of the following members or their designees:

- (A) the president pro tempore of the senate;
- (B) the speaker of the house of representatives;
- (C) the chair of the senate committee on health and welfare;
- (D) the chair of the house committee on human services;
- (E) the chair of the senate committee on education;
- (F) the chair of the house committee on education;
- (G) the commissioners of the departments for children and families; of health; of education; and of labor; and

(H) one representative each from Voices for Vermont's Children, the Vermont low income advocacy council, Vermont Legal Aid, and the Vermont superintendents' association.

(2) The council, at its first meeting, shall elect one of the legislative members as chair or two legislative members as cochairs. The legislative council and the joint fiscal office shall provide staff support to the council.

(3) The council shall meet up to six times while the general assembly is not in session to perform its functions under this section. In addition, during the 2007 legislative interim, the council shall hold 14 public hearings as required under subsection (d) of this section.

(c) The plan shall contain:

- (1) an identification and analysis of the occurrence of poverty in the state;
- (2) an analysis of the long-term effects of child poverty on children, their families, and their communities;
- (3) an analysis of costs of child poverty to municipalities and the state;
- (4) an inventory of state-wide public and private programs that address child poverty;
- (5) the percentage of the target population served by such programs and the current state funding levels, if any, for such programs;
- (6) an identification and analysis of any deficiencies or inefficiencies of such programs; and
- (7) procedures and priorities for implementing strategies and biannual benchmarks to achieve at least a 50 percent reduction in child poverty in the state by June 30, 2017. Such procedures, priorities, and benchmarks shall include improving or adequately funding:

(A) workforce training and placement to promote career progression, for parents of children living in poverty;

(B) educational opportunities, including higher education opportunities, and advancement for such parents and children, including, but not limited to, pre-literacy, literacy, and family literacy programs;

(C) affordable housing for such parents and children;

(D) early care and education programs for such children and their families;

(E) after-school programs and mentoring programs for such children and their families;

(F) affordable health care access for such parents and children, including access to mental health services and family planning;

(G) treatment programs and services, including substance abuse programs and services, for such parents and children;

(H) accessible childhood nutrition programs; and

(I) the Reach-Up program and other public benefit programs through the agency of human services serving low income families.

(d) In developing the working plan, the council shall first consult with experts, with parents of children living in poverty, and with providers of services to children and families living in poverty. The council shall hold one public hearing in each of the 14 counties.

(e) Funds from private and public sources may be accepted and utilized by the council to develop and implement the plan and provisions of this section. Legislative members of the committee shall be entitled to compensation and reimbursement for expenses under section 406 of Title 2. All other members not receiving compensation for service on the committee from another source are entitled to compensation under section 1010 of Title 32.

(f) Not later than January 1, 2008, the council shall submit the working plan to the house committees on appropriations and human services and the senate committees on appropriations and health and welfare. On January 1, 2009, and annually thereafter, until January 1, 2018, the council shall report to these committees on yearly progress toward benchmarks, updates to the plan, and recommendations for budgetary and policy changes in order to accomplish the goals of this act

(g) The council shall cease to exist on June 30, 2018.

Approved: June 5, 2007

Appendix 2. 2013 Witness List

Diana Arnell, Law Clerk, Office of Legislative Council

Daniel Barrow, Public Policy Manager, Vermont Businesses for Social Responsibility

Jennifer Carbee, Legislative Counsel, Office of Legislative Council

Sarah Carpenter, Director, Vermont Housing Finance Agency

Vaughn Collins, Executive Director, Vermont State Dental Association

Barbara Donovan, Public Transit Administrator, Agency of Transportation

Willa Farrell, Court Diversion Director, Vermont Court Diversion

Kim Friedman, Summit Planner, Governor's Early Childhood Summit

Helena Gardner, Legislative Counsel, Office of Legislative Council

Lisa Gosselin, Commissioner, Department of Economic Development

Ellen Grimes, Vermont Technical College

Jennifer Hollar, Deputy Commissioner, Department of Economic, Housing and Community
Development

Gabrielle Lapointe, Clerk of the Court, Judicial Bureau

Katie McLinn, Legislative Counsel, Office of Legislative Council

Michael Pratt, Chief Hearing Officer, Judicial Bureau

Doug Racine, Secretary, Agency of Human Services

Aly Richards, Director of Special Projects and Intergovernmental Affairs, Office of the
Governor

Tasha Wallis, Executive Director, Vermont Retailers Association

Peter Youngbaer, The People's Health & Wellness Clinic