



**Vermont Child Poverty Council
Annual Progress Report
January 2015**

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Senator Dick McCormack, Vice Chair
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I. Statutory Authority and Responsibilities of the Vermont Child Poverty Council

The Vermont Child Poverty Council (Council) was established in 2007 “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.” (See Appendix 1: 2007 Acts and Resolves No. 68.) The General Assembly amended the charge of the Council most recently during the 2014 legislative session, expanding the Council’s membership and extending the Council’s ability to meet into the legislative session. (See Appendix 2: 2014 Acts and Resolves No. 104.)

The General Assembly created the Council in recognition 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 financial pressures on families and how to create an environment in which families can succeed.

The Council comprises legislators, advocates, and other stakeholders. The enabling legislation as amended 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 for Children and Families; of Health; and of Labor; and the Secretaries of Human Services and of Education; 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.”¹ The Council must report annually “on yearly progress toward benchmarks, updates to [its ten-year plan to reduce the number of Vermont’s children living in poverty by 50 percent], and recommendations for budgetary and policy changes in order to accomplish the goals of [Act 68].”²

II. Summary of Council Activities

After the conclusion of the legislative session, the Council reconvened on May 2, 2014. The Council met several times in 2014 during the General Assembly’s adjournment.

The Council reviewed its January 2014 Annual Progress Report (2014 report), which contained recommendations concerning the Council’s legislative priorities for assisting children living in poverty.³ The Council considered each recommendation in the 2014 report to identify whether

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

² *Id.*

³ The Council as a whole made five recommendations in the 2014 report; additional recommendations were endorsed by one or more of the Council’s subcommittees. The 2014 report is available at <http://www.leg.state.vt.us/reports/2014ExternalReports/296310.pdf>.

legislative action was taken or whether progress was otherwise achieved.⁴ The Council heard testimony from a diverse array of stakeholders on a number of issues within its jurisdiction, and it discussed additional actions that the General Assembly and Governor might take in the future to address the Council's unmet goals.

The Council's subcommittees on Housing and Homelessness, on Education, on Economic Security and Empowerment, and on Health and Nutrition met independently to consider the topics set forth in the 2014 report and to make new recommendations to achieve the Council's goals.

III. Council Recommendations

The Council, drawing on the work of its subcommittees and the testimony of witnesses, makes the following recommendations to the General Assembly. (See Appendix 3: 2014 Witness List.)

A. *Ensure that Vermont's most vulnerable children and families are protected from budget cuts that could put their health, safety, and livelihoods further at risk.*

The Council recognizes that in order to reconcile the \$100 million budget shortfall, the General Assembly will face difficult choices this session. In weighing competing needs, the General Assembly may be tempted to consider some aspects of social safety net programs such as Reach Up, 3SquaresVT, LIHEAP, and Medicaid to be nonessential. The Council believe the General Assembly should remain mindful of the short-term and long-term costs attached to depriving Vermonters who live in or at risk of poverty of the assistance they require to become safe and healthy, to remain so, or merely to survive each day. In particular, the Council is concerned about the effects of budget cuts to social service programs on Vermonters who live in deep poverty, defined as those living at or below 50% of the federal poverty level (in 2014, \$486.25 or less each month for an individual or \$993.75 or less each month for a family of four). Any reduction in assistance obtaining necessities such as food, heat, or health care could prove immediately devastating to these most vulnerable Vermonters, while the additional stresses caused by these reductions could have long-lasting effects on their children's health, education, and ultimate financial security.

B. *End child homelessness in Vermont.*

Between July 1, 2013 and June 30, 2014, 3,934 unduplicated persons were sheltered in Vermont, of which 891 were under 18 years old.⁵ The Council plans to hold a press conference on

⁴ A summary of legislative responses to the recommendations in the Council's 2014 report is available at <http://www2.leg.state.vt.us/CommitteeDocs/2014/Vermont%20Child%20Poverty%20Council/Review%20Recommendations/W~Katie%20McLinn~Legislative%20Update%20on%20Council%60s%202013%20Recommendations~7-3-2014.pdf>.

⁵ The *Emergency Solution Grants Vermont Annual Report – State Fiscal Year 2014* is available at <http://www2.leg.state.vt.us/CommitteeDocs/2014/Vermont%20Child%20Poverty%20Council/Runaway%20Youth%20and%20Homelessness/W~Sarah%20Phillips~Emergency%20Solutions%20Grants%20%28ES>

January 9, 2015, to help draw attention to the persistent yet preventable problem of homelessness in Vermont, and it urges the General Assembly to pass a policy resolution aspiring to end child and adolescent homelessness in Vermont by 2020. The resolution would ask the General Assembly and Governor to work to eradicate homelessness among youth in Vermont and to consider the impact of their policies on homeless and precariously housed families.

C. Require all Vermont agencies and recipients of State funds to share responsibility for addressing child poverty and for improving the financial stability and well-being of Vermont's children.

Growing up in poverty can have tremendous negative consequences for children throughout their lives. Because strategies to reduce the impacts of poverty are most effective when assistance is offered to very young children and their families, the Council applauds the poverty prevention efforts of Head Start, youth service organizations offering out-of-school programming and home visiting programs, and other nonprofit organizations devoted to creating opportunities for young Vermont children and their families. The Council would like to challenge all State departments to hold themselves accountable for funding antipoverty efforts and to work together across agencies to coordinate relevant budgets and policies. To this end, the Council recommends that the General Assembly work with the Governor to assess and improve interagency collaboration and shared responsibility concerning antipoverty initiatives and policies that affect low-income families. Additionally, the Council recommends that, as part of any State grant funding process, the General Assembly require that the source agency assess and consider each applicant's efforts to address child poverty and homelessness in Vermont and to reduce the burdens of transportation and childcare on low-income workers. To begin, the Council suggests that the General Assembly establish a work group to collect and review all State grant applications and to make recommendations concerning inclusion of language in these applications to address poverty and homelessness.

IV. Subcommittee Recommendations

Each subcommittee met independently to identify and investigate its highest priorities. Please note that the Council as a whole did not discuss or adopt every proposed recommendation listed in this section.

A. Recommendations of the Subcommittee on Housing and Homelessness

1. The General Assembly should resolve to eliminate child and youth homelessness in the State by 2020.
2. Vermont's temporary rental subsidy and Housing First programs should prioritize helping families with school-age children to remain housed continuously within the same school district.

When that is not possible, these programs should provide transportation assistance so that each affected child can continue in his or her school of origin through the end of the school year.

3. The General Assembly should work with the Governor to expand and improve the State's motel voucher program so that no family in Vermont with minor children need spend even one night without shelter.
4. Vermont's Department of Labor should collaborate with human services agencies and youth advocacy organizations to implement proposed federal changes to the Workforce Education and Training Fund's (WETF) youth eligibility and spending requirements. In particular, the Department should consider that the proposed reallocation of dollars spent on out-of-school youth, set to increase from 30% to 75% of the overall budget, could be used in part to support youth who lack or who are at risk of losing safe and secure housing.
5. The General Assembly should work with the Governor to adopt and implement all of the recommendations of the Governor's Council on Pathways from Poverty concerning housing and homelessness.⁶

B. Recommendations of the Subcommittee on Education

1. The General Assembly should work with the Agency of Education to develop a plan to restructure school policies on suspension and expulsion, so that use of exclusion from the classroom as a disciplinary tool does not inappropriately target students from historically disadvantaged categories or undermine any student's educational growth. Specifically:
 - a. The Governor should set a goal of developing a uniform statewide data system to collect, track, and publicly report on school discipline. This data should be disaggregated by income, race and ethnicity, age, gender, disability, English-language proficiency, foster care status, homelessness status, and immigration status. It should be cross-tabulated by both student offense type and frequency of incidences of suspension, expulsion, restraint, seclusion, referral to law enforcement, and arrest.
 - b. The committees of jurisdiction should solicit testimony from stakeholders concerning school discipline in Vermont, including testimony on the following topics:
 - i. the disproportionate impact of school discipline on historically disadvantaged categories of students, such as students from low-income families, students of color, and students with disabilities;
 - ii. how schools can reduce exclusionary discipline, increase safety for students and teachers, and improve achievement scores through improved school climate; and

⁶ The November 2014 report of the Council on Pathways from Poverty is available at <http://www2.leg.state.vt.us/CommitteeDocs/2014/Vermont%20Child%20Poverty%20Council/Vermont%20Child%20Poverty%20Council%20Report/W~Linda%20Ryan~Report%20to%20the%20Governor%20from%20the%20Council%20on%20Pathways%20From%20Poverty~11-21-2014.pdf>.

- iii. how schools can ensure student rights, family cooperation, and ongoing education for students who must be temporarily excluded from the school building for safety reasons.
2. The General Assembly and Governor should offer continued support for the publicly funded prekindergarten initiative passed by the General Assembly in 2014.⁷
3. The committees of jurisdiction should take testimony concerning the effects of adverse childhood events on educational development.
4. In the long term, the General Assembly and Governor should focus on the prenatal and early childhood development needs of children born into poverty, as well as recognize the special importance of providing individualized education, summer educational opportunities, and an affordable post-secondary education to low-income children and families.
5. The General Assembly and Governor should act, or continue to act, on the Council's eight recommendations concerning education listed in its 2009 report to the General Assembly.⁸

C. *Recommendations of the Subcommittee on Economic Security and Empowerment*

Economic Empowerment and Opportunity

1. In order to create new jobs, build assets, and promote financial skills, the General Assembly should work with the Governor to increase investments in the Micro Business Development Program and Individual Development Accounts; create a Vermont matched savings program; and fund financial coaching, credit repair, and banking programs to restore and enhance economic opportunities for low-income families.
2. The General Assembly should establish and fund a comprehensive study concerning transportation barriers for low-income individuals and families. Specifically, this study should examine existing vehicle and ridership programs, public transportation, and current regulations involving vehicle fines, fees, repairs, and credit, and it should inform future comprehensive legislation designed to address these barriers.
3. The General Assembly should give more families access to quality child care by increasing its investment in Vermont's Child Care Financial Assistance Program. It should raise the base rate to 50% of the current market rate, with the long-term goals of raising the base rate to 75% of the current market rate, raising eligibility for the program to 300% of the federal poverty level, and mandating that program rates and guidelines be adjusted annually and kept current.
4. The General Assembly should work with the Governor to develop a Vermont Children's Savings Program that increases opportunities for college and career success for all Vermont students; that engages and incentivizes positive post-secondary education savings behavior by

⁷ 2014 Acts and Resolves No. 166.

⁸ The Council's 2009 report, *Improving the Odds for Kids*, is available at http://www.leg.state.vt.us/WorkGroups/ChildPoverty/Child_Poverty_Council_Report_Final.pdf.

low-income families; and that provides financial literacy education for all Vermont children and parents in cooperation with local public education systems. The Governor should explore funding this Program through philanthropic organizations.

5. Vermont's Department of Labor should collaborate with human services agencies and youth advocacy organizations in implementing proposed federal changes to the Workforce Education and Training Fund's (WETF) youth eligibility and spending requirements. In particular, the Department should consider that, because of Vermont's comparatively high secondary school graduation rate, the proposed reallocation of dollars from supports for in-school youth to those for out-of-school youth may not, without careful assessment, reach those youth with highest needs.

Economic Security and Safety Net Programs

1. The General Assembly should increase Reach Up grants by continuing its work to reduce or eliminate benefit cliffs, including applying income disregards and eliminating asset tests. This would both create incentives that reward families for getting ahead and help to reduce the Department for Children and Families' caseloads.

2. The General Assembly should allocate budget resources for the implementation of the Transitional Benefits Alternative, in order to provide five additional months of 3SquaresVT benefits to households exiting Reach Up. This would offer beneficiaries some protection from the benefit cliff.

3. The General Assembly should increase its investment in the Low-Income Weatherization Program, increase LIHEAP grant assistance, and fully fund Crisis Fuel needs.

D. Recommendations of the Subcommittee on Health and Nutrition

1. The General Assembly should enact legislation that creates a mid-level oral health provider, called a dental practitioner, to increase access to dental care. Despite a large and growing need for affordable dental care, Vermont lacks dentists and offers only limited access to low-cost dental services. In consideration of this problem, Vermont Technical College (VTC) has created a curriculum for becoming a dental practitioner. Currently at VTC, an individual 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 host dentist would not have to be at the site where the dental practitioner practices, which would be useful to the federally qualified health centers and other remote places in the State.

2. The General Assembly should provide for earned sick time for all employees in Vermont. This would operate to strengthen Vermont families, protect public health, reduce workers' compensation costs, and reduce the strain on hospital emergency departments.

3. The General Assembly and the Governor should continue to assess ways to move toward a universal policy of paid parental leave that supports all new Vermont families.

2015 Report of the Vermont Child Poverty Council

Representative Jill Krowinski, 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. 2014 Acts and Resolves No. 104

No. 104. AN ACT RELATING TO THE CHARGE OF THE VERMONT CHILD POVERTY COUNCIL.

(H.583)

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

Sec. 1. 2007 Acts and Resolves No. 68, Sec. 1 is amended to read:

Sec. 1. VERMONT CHILD POVERTY COUNCIL

* * *

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

(A) the ~~president pro tempore of the senate~~ President Pro Tempore of the Senate;

(B) the ~~speaker of the house of representatives~~ Speaker of the House of Representatives;

(C) the ~~chair of the senate committee on health and welfare~~ Chair of the Senate Committee on Health and Welfare;

(D) the ~~chair of the house committee on human services~~ Chair of the House Committee on Human Services;

(E) the ~~chair of the senate committee on education~~ Chair of the Senate Committee on Education;

(F) the ~~chair of the house committee on education~~ Chair of the House Committee on Education;

(G) the ~~commissioners of the departments for children and families; of health; of education; and of labor~~ Commissioners for Children and Families; of Health; and of Labor; and the Secretaries of Human Services and of Education; and

(H) one representative each from Voices for Vermont's Children, the Vermont ~~low income advocacy council~~ Low Income Advocacy Council, Vermont Legal Aid, and the Vermont ~~superintendents' association~~ Superintendents' Association.

* * *

(3) The ~~council~~ Council shall meet up to six times while the ~~general assembly~~ 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.~~ The Council may meet an unlimited number of times during the legislative session, but legislative Council members shall not receive compensation and reimbursement for expenses pursuant to subsection (e) of this section for participation in meetings during the legislative session.

(e) Funds from private and public sources may be accepted and utilized by the ~~council~~ Council to develop and implement the plan and provisions of this section. ~~Legislative For participation in meetings during the legislative interim, legislative members of the committee~~ Council shall be entitled to compensation and reimbursement for expenses under section 406 of Title 2 2 V.S.A. § 406. ~~All other members not receiving~~

~~compensation for service on the committee from another source are entitled to compensation under section 1010 of Title 32. Nonlegislative members who are not otherwise compensated and reimbursed for their participation on the Council shall be entitled to receive compensation and reimbursement of expenses under 32 V.S.A. § 1010.~~

* * *

Sec. 2. EFFECTIVE DATE

This act shall take effect on passage.

Date Governor signed bill: April 14, 2014

Appendix 3. 2014 Witness List

Charlie Biss, Director, Children, Adolescent and Family Unit, Department of Mental Health

Mary Claire Carroll, Member, Vermont Paid Sick Days Coalition

Amanda Churchill, Director, Youth Development Program, Washington County Youth Services Bureau/Boys & Girls Club

Jay Diaz, Poverty Law Project Fellow, Vermont Legal Aid

Paul Dragon, Chief Administrator, Office of Economic Opportunity and Temporary Aid to Needy Families, Agency of Human Services

Karin Edwards, Director, Student Support, Agency of Education

Carlen Finn, Director, Voices for Vermont's Children

Christy Jo Fogarty, Advanced Dental Therapist, Children's Dental Services, Minnesota

Manuela Fonseca, School Support/Early Education Coordinator, Agency of Education

Robyn Freedner-Maguire, Campaign Director, Let's Grow Kids

Tracy Harris, Agency of Education

Danielle Kane, At-Risk Youth Case Manager, Department of Labor

Dana Lawrence, Family Services Practice and Policy Specialist, Department for Children and Families

Rose Lucenti, Workforce Development Director, Department of Labor

Denise Mason, Director, Economic Development Program, Southeastern Vermont Community Action

Katie McLinn, Legislative Counsel, Office of Legislative Council

Reeva Murphy, Deputy Commissioner, Child Development Division, Department for Children and Families

Beth Nolan, Outreach and Project Coordinator, Voices for Vermont Children

Marissa Parisi, Executive Director, Hunger Free Vermont

Beth Pearce, State Treasurer, Office of the State Treasurer

Sarah Phillips, Community Services Administrator, Vermont Office of Economic Opportunity

Emily Pietig, D.D.S., Children's Dental Services

Kreig Pinkham, Director, Washington County Youth Services Bureau/Boys & Girls Club

Anthony Poore, Senior Community Development Analyst, Federal Reserve Bank of Boston

Karen Price, Family Support Director, Vermont Family Network

Mark Redmond, Executive Director, Spectrum Youth and Family Services

Donna Russo-Savage, Legislative Counsel, Office of Legislative Council

Linda Ryan, Co-Chair, Pathways from Poverty

Mark Schoenbaum, Director, Office of Rural Health and Primary Care, Minnesota Department of Health

Calvin Smith, Director, Vermont Coalition of Runaway and Homeless Youth Programs

Richard Westman, Director of College Investment Plan, Vermont Student Assistance Corporation

Jim White, Director, Financial Futures Program, Champlain Valley Office of Economic Opportunity

BetsyAnn Wrask, Legislative Counsel, Office of Legislative Council