



**Vermont Child Poverty Council  
Annual Progress Report  
December 2016**

*Representative Diane Lanpher, Co-Chair*  
*Representative Jill Krowinski, Co-Chair*  
*Senator Claire Ayer*  
*Senator John F. Campbell*  
*Senator Ann Cummings*  
*Representative David Sharpe*  
*Secretary Hal Cohen, Agency of Human Services*  
*Carlen Finn, Voices for Vermont's Children*  
*Deputy Secretary Amy Fowler, Agency of Education*  
*Jeff Francis, Vermont Superintendents' Association*  
*Dr. Breena Holmes, Department of Health*  
*Karen Lafayette, Vermont Low Income Advocacy Council*  
*Jean Murray, Vermont Legal Aid*  
*Commissioner Annie Noonan, Department of Labor*  
*Commissioner Ken Schatz, Department for Children and Families*

*Prepared by:*

*Catherine M. McLinn, Esq.*  
*Office of Legislative Council*  
*115 State Street - State House*  
*Montpelier, VT 05633-5301*  
*802-828-2231*  
*[kmclinn@leg.state.vt.us](mailto:kmclinn@leg.state.vt.us)*

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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 to include the Secretary of Human Services and extending the Council’s ability to meet during 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.”<sup>1</sup> 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].”<sup>2</sup> The Council will cease to exist on June 30, 2018.

## **II. Summary of Council Activities**

After the conclusion of the legislative session in May, the Council reconvened on July 30, 2016. The Council met a total of six times during the General Assembly’s adjournment.

The Council reviewed its 2015 Annual Progress Report (2015 report), which contained recommendations concerning the Council’s legislative priorities for assisting children living in

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<sup>1</sup> 2007 Acts and Resolves No. 68, Sec. 1, as amended.

<sup>2</sup> *Id.*

poverty.<sup>3</sup> The Council considered each recommendation in the 2015 report to identify whether legislative action was taken or whether progress was otherwise achieved.<sup>4</sup> The Council heard testimony from a diverse array of stakeholders on a number of issues within its jurisdiction, such as [to be completed in December]. It also discussed additional actions that the General Assembly and Governor might take in the future to address the Council's unmet goals.

The Council diverged from the subcommittee structure it had used to organize its work in previous years. Instead, the full Council was present at each meeting regardless of the topic covered or a particular member's subject matter expertise. The Council chose to reorganize itself this way in recognition of the importance and interdisciplinary nature of the topics covered. The majority of the meetings held by the Council this year were organized by topic. The topics addressed at the Council's meetings included child care, education, housing, economic supports, substance abuse, mental health, and financial literacy.

### **III. Council Findings and Recommendations**

Drawing on the work of its members and the testimony of witnesses, the Council makes the recommendations below to the General Assembly. (See Appendix 3: 2016 Witness List.) The Council's recommendations are organized by category to reflect the topical meeting structure employed by the Council this year.

#### **A. Child Care**

On August 18, 2016, the Council heard testimony about the causes of and challenges resulting from insufficient child care offerings in the State. In its "Stalled at the Start" report, Let's Grow Kids estimated that 79 percent of Vermont's infants and toddlers who are likely to need care do not have access to high quality child care.<sup>5</sup> A number of factors contribute to the low number of child care providers serving the State, including the often low wages earned by these workers. As a result of this shortage, many parents are not able to return to work or are forced to choose

<sup>3</sup> In its 2015 report, the Council as a whole made three recommendations; additional recommendations were endorsed by one or more of the Council's subcommittees. The 2015 report is available at <http://legislature.vermont.gov/assets/Legislative-Reports/GENERAL-311855-v1-2015-Vermont-Child-Poverty-Council-Report.pdf>.

<sup>4</sup> A summary of legislative responses to the recommendations in the Council's 2015 report is available at <http://legislature.vermont.gov/assets/Documents/2016/WorkGroups/Vermont%20Child%20Poverty%20Council/Vermont%20Child%20Poverty%20Council%20Recommendations/W~Jennifer%20Carbee,%20Katie%20McLinn~Chart%20-%20Vermont%20Child%20Poverty%20Council%20-%20Legislative%20Update%20on%20Council's%202015%20Recommendations%20-%20Revised~6-30-2016.pdf>.

<sup>5</sup> *Stalled at the Start*, Let's Grow Kids, available at <http://legislature.vermont.gov/assets/Documents/2016/WorkGroups/Vermont%20Child%20Poverty%20Council/Stalled%20at%20the%20Start/W~Robyn%20Freedner-Maguire,%20Jen%20Horwitz~Stalled%20at%20the%20Start%20-%20Vermont's%20Child%20Care%20Challenge%20-%20An%20Analysis%20of%20the%20Supply%20of%20and%20Demand%20for%20Regulated%20Infant%20and%20Toddler%20Care%20in%20Vermont~8-18-2016.pdf>.

between work and less than optimal child care arrangements. An additional burden to parents trying to remain in the workforce is the steep cost of high quality child care, particularly for those families just above the subsidy threshold.

As a result, the Council recommends the following:

1. Committees of jurisdiction are encouraged to take testimony and craft legislative solutions to address the lack of accessibility and affordability in Vermont's child care system.
2. The Departments of Labor and for Children and Families are encouraged to work collaboratively to foster opportunities in which the child care workforce can both grow and enhance its quality of care.
3. The use and sharing of data regarding child care affordability and accessibility should be strategic to ensure that resources are utilized appropriately and that the needs of families are addressed.
4. Committees of jurisdiction are encouraged to monitor the impact of Act 166, an act relating to providing access to publicly funded prekindergarten education, on Vermont's Head Start programs to ensure that early childhood education does not become segregated based on family income.<sup>6</sup>
5. Committees of jurisdiction, relying on the expertise of the Agency of Education and Department for Children and Families, are encouraged to explore policies that will ensure successful public/private partnerships for the delivery of prekindergarten education.

## ***B. Education***

At its September 16, 2016 meeting, the Council heard testimony on the often disparate practices and outcomes Vermont students experience depending on their families' socioeconomic status. The topics covered by the Council ranged from chronic absenteeism to special education, yet the problem of students from low-income families being excluded or out-performed by their higher-income peers remained the same. However, not all of the testimony was dire. The Council was heartened to hear of the successes Head Start was achieving by using a two-generational approach to address the needs of families with low income. In addition to these topics, the Council also received a tutorial on federal education funding from the Vermont Agency of Education.

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<sup>6</sup> 2014 Acts and Resolves No. 166 is available at <http://legislature.vermont.gov/assets/Documents/2014/Docs/ACTS/ACT166/ACT166%20As%20Enacted.pdf>.

In light of the testimony it received, the Council makes the following recommendations:

1. The statutory tools available to address truancy are blunt instruments that often exacerbate the struggles of families with low income without achieving the intended goal of stabilizing school attendance. The committees of jurisdiction are encouraged to reconsider the criminal nature of truancy and the fine imposed on the parents of truant students in favor of diversion and other programs to address families' underlying needs.
2. The collection and use of longitudinal data is essential for tracking the progress of Vermont's students, and the Council looks forward to the Agency of Education's implementation of such a system over the course of the next two years. Once the system is functional, the Council recommends that the unit of analysis be at the supervisory union or school district level to reduce suppression of data from small schools.
3. The Council supports efforts within the public and private sectors to use a two-generational approach for the treatment of entire family units. It suggests that the Agencies of Human Services and of Education look toward this model to coordinate services that specifically address family trauma.
4. Schools and communities are encouraged to distribute resources equitably (versus equally) to ensure that students and families who need more services are able to access those services.
5. Legislative committees and the Agency of Education are encouraged to set policies at the State level that limit the use of exclusionary discipline, particularly with regard to students from low-income families and students with disabilities.
6. Lack of educational programming during the summer recess exacerbates the achievement gap between students from low-income families and their peers. The committees of jurisdiction are encouraged to take testimony on how students from families with low income are affected by the "summer slide" and on potential solutions to shrink the gap between socioeconomic classes.
7. The committees of jurisdiction are encouraged to examine how prevention initiatives could be successfully incentivized in the context of special education.
8. The Council believes that homeless teenagers can only succeed in school if their housing needs are addressed first. It recommends that the committees of jurisdiction bring housing and education advocates together to work collaboratively on this challenge.

### ***C. Housing and Economic Supports***

On October 20, 2016, the Council focused its attention on housing and homelessness in Vermont, as well as on economic supports for families living in poverty. At the meeting, the Vermont Affordable Housing Coalition testified that in order to afford a two-bedroom apartment in Vermont, a renter must earn \$43,947.00 annually, which constitutes an hourly wage of \$21.13 for a full-time job. This amounts to a shortfall of \$9.34 per hour between Vermont's estimated

mean renter wage and the cost of a two-bedroom apartment. The Council also heard testimony about Reach Up, the Post-Secondary Education program, and General Assistance emergency housing.

At the conclusion of the hearing, the Council made the following recommendations:

1. Housing must be addressed prior to placing a person in an employment or educational setting. The Council recommends that the committees of jurisdiction review the approach taken in Utah, in which the state purchased low-income housing units and served as the landlord of those units.
2. The Council recommends that the committees of jurisdiction review the correlation (or lack thereof) between increased minimum wage and homelessness. The Council did not receive sufficient information to draw a conclusion about this relationship.
3. The use of a two-generational approach to combat poverty has proven beneficial to families. The Council supports an expansion of the Post-Secondary Education program, as well as an increase in the ratable reimbursement within Reach Up.
4. Lack of transportation is the single greatest barrier to employment among work-eligible Vermonters. To that end, the Council suggests that economic supports within Reach Up be expanded to provide more families with transportation to their employment and child care sites.

***D. Substance Abuse and Mental Health***

***E. Financial Literacy***

**2016 Report of the Vermont Child Poverty Council**

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Representative Diane Lanpher, Co-Chair

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Representative Jill Krowinski, Co-Chair

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## 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%.

(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% 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.~~

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Sec. 2. EFFECTIVE DATE

This act shall take effect on passage.

Date Governor signed bill: April 14, 2014

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**Appendix 3. 2016 Witness List**

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