
**Report to
The Vermont Legislature**

Foster Parent Working Group Report

In Accordance with Act 116 (S.189) of 2016

Submitted to: The House Committee on Human Services
The Senate Committee on Health and Welfare

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Karen Vastine, Senior Advisor to the DCF Commissioner

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Table of Contents

I. The Working Group	3
II. Introduction	3
III. Next Steps	4
Appendix I - Ongoing Foster Parent Workgroup Goals	7
Appendix II - Relevant Links and DCF Family Services Policies	11

I. The Working Group

Act 116 of 2016 establishes “a Foster Parent Working Group to recommend legislation, rules, or policies, or any combination thereof, pertaining to rights and protections for foster parents in Vermont.” The working group consists of nine members:

- Lissa Schneckenburger, *Chair*, Foster Parent, and VFAFA Member
- Amy Brady, Voices for Vermont’s Children
- Ridmi Coe, Youth Advocate
- David Kennedy (designee for Hon. Brian Grearson, Chief Superior Judge)
- Brenda Hamlin, Vermont Kin As Parents
- Barb Joyal, DCF Family Services System of Care Manager
- Erinn Rolland-Forkey, Foster Parent and VFAFA Member
- Karen Shea, DCF Family Services Interim Deputy Commissioner
- Karen Vastine, Senior Advisor to the DCF Commissioner (designee for the DCF Commissioner)

Act 116 directs the working group to “examine the relationship between foster parents, the Department for Children and Families, and the court system to assess whether any laws, rules, or policies should be amended or implemented to better support the work of foster parents, including the following:

- (1) access to the Department for Children and Families on evenings and weekends;
- (2) access to the Department for Children and Families’ records about a particular foster child or foster family;
- (3) scheduling court-ordered visits and appointments with the Department for Children and Families;
- (4) fear of reprisal for refusal of a placement or raising concerns about the Department for Children and Families or the foster care system; and
- (5) any regional differences identified in the State’s foster care system.

On or before January 15, 2017, the working group is required to submit a written report to the House Committee on Human Services and the Senate Committee on Health and Welfare with its findings and any proposed changes to law, rule, or policy.

II. Introduction

The working group met for the first time on October 12, 2016. Lissa Schneckenburger was selected as the chair at the first meeting. Three subsequent working group meetings occurred on November 2nd, December 7th, and December 19th.

Working group meeting agendas were developed based on the topics included in Act 116. Working group members discussed each topic, the status of what is occurring in practice, changes that are needed, content already found in policy or statute, and proposals for changes to policy or statute. The group worked primarily on agreement by consensus, but opted to vote on pursuing the bill of rights. Not everyone agrees with all of the recommendations, but the document reflects the discussion, general consensus and the vote.

III. Next Steps

The working group agreed that foster parents in Vermont serve a vital role in the state's effort to care for children and youth who cannot safely remain in their homes. The conversations among working group members were productive and helped to improve communication between DCF and foster parents. There is unanimous support within the working group to establish a permanent foster parent workgroup that will focus on the goal of creating better experiences for children in care. Through this work, DCF will partner with foster parents to enhance collaboration, and promote improvements to Vermont's child protective services system. The working group will expand ongoing workgroup membership to include DCF/FSD district office staff and additional foster parent voices from throughout the state.

The work group that was established by the legislature tackled both macro and micro issues that were identified by VFAPA and recognized the value in continuing to improve communication between DCF and foster parents, with a goal of creating better experiences for kids. Ultimately, the group agreed that a foster parents' bill of rights is an important step in establishing a permanent framework for interactions between the two entities, provided agreement on the details can be reached. The ongoing working group will invest in creating a bill that will take into consideration all of the people involved in the child welfare system, and will work to craft a bill that will achieve the intended outcome of improving the experiences of kids.

The working group spent time parsing through the draft of the foster parent bill of rights submitted to the legislature for consideration during the 2015-2016 session to understand the root of the challenges that foster parents were bringing forward. A couple of themes emerged in the group's conversations:

- 1) The need to create opportunities to increase communication between DCF and foster parents was made a priority, this need became the driving force behind the groups decision to continue to meet. The group also agreed that a voluntary, on-going working relationship that includes Department leadership conveys the appropriate message about the importance of this relationship.
- 2) Another common theme was that DCF employees are often overstretched and therefore, do not always have the capacity to communicate with the frequency or duration they desire to sufficiently address the concerns of foster parents. There were several topics that were discussed in which everyone agreed on best practice; but it was clear that creating new expectations, or reinforcing existing expectations with a bill of rights without adding resources could be unfair and

may be counter productive. This group is not requesting an appropriation at this time, but would be remiss to not identify this ongoing challenge.

- 3) The group supports establishing a bill of rights this biennium (legislative or policy-based) and is available to work on a bill that has updated language that reinforces the partnership being established between DCF and foster parents.
- 4) The group discussed individual anecdotes, but did not feel that it had enough data to understand which challenges were isolated incidents, and which challenges were themes. It was agreed that a deeper understanding of current practice would be helpful in order to create recommendations for future changes, which may be legislative, but may also just be changes in policy or practice. The permanent working group has committed to reviewing prior surveys and/or surveying foster parents anew if this is deemed necessary by the group to forward the agenda of increased collaboration and communication with foster parents in order to better understand their experiences throughout the state.
- 5) Some members of the group felt an independent voice would be helpful to either validate the process or flag the need to revisit a specific situation. In addition, having a system to track and monitor how things are operating would identify both where attention is most needed, and what is already working well. The group did not come to a formal agreement on what would be the most effective structure for an independent perspective.

In addition to discussing a framework to create broad system improvements, this group was tasked with addressing the topic areas that legislators identified from the initial bill of rights. We provided an attachment that outlines remedies to the concerns that were voiced, in Appendix 1 of this report. The solutions were created in collaboration, and listed as short-term, mid-term, and long-term goals for your review.

Appendix I – Ongoing Foster Parent Workgroup Goals

NOTE S	SHORT-TERM GOALS	MID-TERM GOALS	LONG-TERM GOALS
GENERAL RECOMMENDATIONS			
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Strive to include foster parents in planning throughout the life of a case; consult foster parents regularly and have conversations to gather their input and explain decisions that have been made Build safety planning into the work that occurs with foster parents early on (safety related to the child, foster parents, visitation schedule, transitions, etc.) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Continue work on a Foster Parent Bill of Rights and with a companion Foster Youth Bill of Rights Development of a DCF-FSD website for foster parents; Q&A page; links to online trainings and training portal Develop and implement strategies to increase communication between foster parents and DCF staff Develop checklists for social workers to use when consulting with foster parents (i.e., discussion of transportation, court visits) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Goal of building and repairing relationships; culture shift
ACCESS TO RECORDS & INFORMATION			
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Develop communication guidelines for “who to ask” and “who to go to” for issues and questions; also, include guidance on what to do when foster parents are not satisfied with the response or solution provided 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Revise policy to make it clear that a foster parent’s information becomes part of the foster care record 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Utilize PL 113-183 implementation regarding normalcy to enhance our work with sharing information and foster parents utilizing the reasonable and prudent parenting standard (RPPS)

NOTES	SHORT-TERM GOALS	MID-TERM GOALS	LONG-TERM GOALS
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Clarify the protocol for sharing and accessing information specific to the foster child, the child/family record, information about the number of times a child has moved, and information about their risky or harmful behaviors Assess and revise the current placement checklist and medical authorization form, and increase consistent use of these forms in every district office 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Develop policy on case records and filing; possibly organizing files differently; develop a strategy about how the information needed immediately can be better accessible to foster parents Clarify the type of information that foster parents have access to when there are maltreatment allegations within the home 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Consider “tiered information sharing” (see practice guidance from California) Consideration of online, secure information-sharing database for placements

ACCESS TO DCF-FSD ON NIGHTS AND WEEKENDS

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Clarify expectations of each other (both DCF and foster parents) after hours; Identify the difference between “support” and “emergency response”; Work with foster parents to build more natural networks of support to sustain them (mentoring, local associations); Create and disseminate information about Centralized Intake and Emergency Services (CIES) and other supports that may be available; Guidance on the types of things to call CIES about and the types of situations that can typically wait until business hours 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Revisions to standby policy/guidance to address foster parent concerns after hours 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Mid-level support (from the district office) for foster parents in an effort to reduce the number of situations that escalate to emergencies and disrupted placements
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reciprocal agreements around planned placement changes / the move process 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Creativity in the Child and Family Support (CFS) contracts or other contracts for flexible hours on nights/weekends

COURT-ORDERED VISITS & FAMILY TIME

NOTES	SHORT-TERM GOALS	MID-TERM GOALS	LONG-TERM GOALS
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Address safety concerns regarding pick-up and drop-offs for unsupported family time (i.e., unapproved individuals present, how to address parents under the influence or car seat safety, unsafe/obscure drop off locations) Protocol or best practice guidance around planning for visits within an existing court order; Use of shared parenting meeting and when this is not possible, ensuring the child/youth's and foster parent's voice is captured regarding what is in the child's best interests. The role of the CFS contract, in this work, needs further exploration. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Create guidance in policy regarding what stage in the case it is appropriate for foster parents to supervise or "host" visits; Must occur as part of a coordinated and thoughtful planning discussion Strategize regarding the best use of the shared parenting meeting (possibly used differently across districts) Review and revise the Family Time Guidelines 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Family Time Visitation Protocols and the inclusion of the foster parent voice in their development Shared expectations and guidelines for all expectations of transportation

RELATIONSHIP IMBALANCE, FEAR OF REPRISAL, & RELATIONSHIP RE-BUILDING

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Exercise sensitivity to the power dynamic that exists between DCF and foster parents; recognize the imbalance of power and message that foster parents have been invited and encouraged to come forward to share their feedback and concerns 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Use relationship-based framework (such as restorative approaches or circle process) to support meaningful engagement of DCF staff and foster parents in problem-solving and goal setting 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Explore an exit interview process for youth and foster parents after a placement
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Survey to gather information about foster parents' experiences 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Develop a non-threatening or anonymous method for sharing feedback 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Explore the interplay between post-adoption contact agreements and fear of reprisal

REGIONAL DIFFERENCES

NOTES	SHORT-TERM GOALS	MID-TERM GOALS	LONG-TERM GOALS
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ongoing DCF-FSD statewide GoToMeetings to address practice consistency, and identified disconnects between policy and practice 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Collaboration with partners within “the system” – DCF, State’s Attorneys, courts, attorneys, GALs, Family Time staff, etc. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Goal of practice consistency throughout the 12 district offices
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Have ongoing regional conversations; support regional associations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Suggestion of a statewide panel to mediate regional differences 	
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Research promising practices in other states/ jurisdictions 	

Appendix II – Relevant Links and DCF Family Services Policies

Licensing Regulations for Foster Homes in Vermont

<http://dcf.vermont.gov/sites/dcf/files/Adoption/Foster-Care-Regs.pdf>

Family Services Policy 91: Kinship Care

<http://dcf.vermont.gov/sites/dcf/files/FSD/Policies/91.pdf>

Family Services Policy 94: Resource Family Care

<http://dcf.vermont.gov/sites/dcf/files/FSD/Policies/94.pdf>

Family Services Policy 95: Respite Care

<http://dcf.vermont.gov/sites/dcf/files/FSD/Policies/95.pdf>

Family Services Policy 121: Notification of Changes for Children and Youth
in DCF Custody

<http://dcf.vermont.gov/sites/dcf/files/FSD/Policies/121.pdf>

Family Services Policy 124: Family Time

<http://dcf.vermont.gov/sites/dcf/files/FSD/Policies/124.pdf>

Family Services Policy 125: Permanency Planning

<http://dcf.vermont.gov/sites/dcf/files/FSD/Policies/125.pdf>