

## **S 280 An act relating to the Advisory Council for Strengthening Families**

Testimony to the House Human Services Committee

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### **Introduction**

Thank you for inviting AHS to testify on this Council for Strengthening Families. I have been a member or designee of the Child Poverty Council for several years in my capacity as Director of the Reach Up Program, Director for the Office of Economic Opportunity, Deputy Secretary and Director of Policy and Planning.

The Child Poverty Council has been in place since 2007 and although it did not meet its ambitious goal of reducing the child poverty rate in Vermont by fifty percent - mainly due to socio-economic forces beyond its control - we know the Child Poverty Council has informed and enriched the discussion regarding childhood poverty and helped to advance important legislation that has had a positive impact on Vermonters with low-income.

In 2009, the Child Poverty Council worked with the National Center for Children in Poverty (NCCP) to issue a Report (Improving the Odds for Kids) identifying a series of recommendations aimed at reducing the benefits cliff and incentivizing work for families on public benefits. These recommendations included;

- Expanding 3SquaresVT eligibility
- Expanding the eligibility for Seasonal Fuel benefits
- Restructuring the child care financial assistance program to bring eligibility standards to the 2010 FPL level and to increase the benefit level to allow for access to 75% of higher quality child care.
- Increasing the TANF Earned Income Disregard
- Restructuring the Vermont's Refundable Child Care Tax Credit
- Changing the Child and Dependent Tax Credit
- Restructuring the Renters Rebate

- Continuing to incentivize work through the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC)
- Reforming Health Insurance

It is worth noting that since that time AHS has completed a number of those changes including:

- Raising 3SquaresVT eligibility to 185% of FPL and removing the asset test for most households
- Expanding eligibility for LIHEAP to 185% (from 125%) of FPL and expanded Crisis Fuel Assistance to 200% FPL (from 150%)
- Expanding Reach Ahead eligibility to two years from one year, so the family receives a full child care subsidy and a small nominal benefit (\$50 for first 12 months, \$5 for last 12 months)
- Expanding the earned income disregard from \$200+25% to \$250+25% in the Reach Up program
- Expanding health care coverage since 2009
- Increasing Child Care Financial Assistance to the 2016 FPL with 90% participation at 100% FPL (although significantly lower as the income goes up)
- Adding a 10% child care subsidy at 300% FPL and increased infant rates
- Advancing legislation this year that will make non-financial structural changes in the Reach Up program

These changes, among others, were influenced if not rooted in the work of the Child Poverty Council.

These programmatic changes are important to low-income Vermonters yet the strength in the former and newly constituted Council is the work at the population level where it can serve as catalyst to inform, highlight and mobilize communities and public and private entities from across the state to be collectively accountable for the social condition of poverty as well as the strategies and actions for economic mobility.

Changing the name from the Child Poverty Council to the Advisory Council for Strengthening Families is in accord with the AHS Strengthening Families Framework which we have been using for several years. The Strengthening Families Framework is a research-informed approach to increase family strengths, enhance child development, and reduce the likelihood of child abuse and neglect. A Strengthening Families approach engages families, programs, and communities to build five Protective Factors:

- Parental resilience
- Social connections
- Knowledge of parenting and child development
- Concrete support in times of need
- Social and emotional competence of children

AHS has recently used the Strengthening Families Framework as a foundation to develop the Act 43 report and plan on Trauma and Resiliency including our community-based initiative called Building Flourishing Communities. We think there is synchronicity between the Council's work and the AHS interrelated initiatives on both trauma and economic mobility.

Our hope going forward is that the Council on Strengthening Families will focus on the relevant Act 186 Outcomes<sup>1</sup> or population level outcomes that help create community and statewide change and use Results-Based Accountability to “turn the curve” and Scorecards to regularly track the outcomes. To that end, we hope the Council will support important statewide initiatives like Building Flourishing Communities and our emerging Two Generation Initiative on economic mobility for whole families. This whole family approach began with a multi-state meeting held in October and hosted by the National Conference of State Legislators and the Administration for

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<sup>1</sup> Number of children living in families at 50%, 100%, and 200% of the FPL or an alternative NAS-type measure when one is available.

2. Number of children living in families paying more than 30% of their cash income for housing and related expenses.

3. Levels of child care subsidies relative to market rates for providers.

4. Number of children “ready to learn” when they enter kindergarten.

5. Disparities in standardized test scores between children eligible for free and reduced lunches and their peers who are not.

Children and Families. A multi-stakeholder Vermont team including Representative Pugh is collecting and developing ideas on ways Vermont can advance the two-generation approach to promote economic mobility for families. We think the Council can be the forum to frame, review and provide feedback on this work.

We know that Children who are raised in low-income families are more likely to earn less when they become adults, to have lower educational attainment and to have lower health outcomes than children who were raised in families that were not low-income. AHS is looking forward to working with Council on a two-generation approach to improve economic opportunities for vulnerable children and families, to reduce poverty and to increase family well-being.