
**Report to
The Vermont Legislature**

Reach Up Case Management Review and Community Engagement

In Accordance with 2019 Act 72, Sec. E.323

Submitted to: Joint Legislative Child Protection
Oversight Committee

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Report Date: October 31, 2019



Table of Contents

<u>EXECUTIVE SUMMARY</u>	<u>3</u>
<u>INTRODUCTION</u>	<u>3</u>
<u>SECTION 1: FAMILY DEVELOPMENT PLAN</u>	<u>4</u>
<u>SECTION 2: MODIFICATIONS REQUIRED TO ADDRESS NURTURING AND CARE OF CHILDREN</u>	<u>5</u>
<u>SECTION 3: CHILD WELFARE AND REACH UP'S ROLE IN PREVENTION</u>	<u>6</u>
<u>SECTION 4: CURRENT PRACTICES TO SUPPORT FAMILY STABILITY AND HEALTHY PARENTING</u>	<u>7</u>
<u>CONCLUSION</u>	<u>9</u>

Executive Summary

The Reach Up program provides financial assistance to families with very low income, with the goal of helping the parents and caretakers in these families attain employment. The overarching goal of Reach Up is to reduce intergenerational poverty in Vermont. Our hope is that in the future, fewer children who are receiving Reach Up today will need Reach Up when they are adults, fulfilling the vision of the program: *Families will be empowered, connected and thriving*. Though the program is considered an employment program, one of the purposes as defined in Vermont Statute is to “measure success of the system by what is best for children.” Employment is the way out of poverty. However, there are many factors that contribute to successful employment for the adults in the family. The child and parent’s well-being are inextricably tied, hence, the Reach Up program addresses the needs and goals of the entire family. The mission of the program reflects the holistic and family-centered approach: *Reach Up joins families on their journey to overcome obstacles, explore opportunities, improve their finances and reach their goals*.

With the Vermont economy experiencing record-low unemployment rates, more Reach Up participants are going to work. Therefore, many of the families still receiving Reach Up benefits are experiencing multiple, complex challenges. The program works to address obstacles with the family by developing individualized and meaningful goals, which are outlined on the Family Development Plan.

The holistic nature of the strengths-based work case managers and participants are doing together address children’s wellbeing in multiple ways:

- Using science informed approaches to case management which employ motivational interviewing skills to help participants set and reach goals related to adult and child well-being, in addition to employment;
- Developing positive relationships between case manager and the family, so that families at risk of being involved in the child welfare system may be identified early, and appropriate interventions sought;
- Increasing home visiting;
- Collaborating with community partners and service providers to ensure families are being supported and care is coordinated.

Though the Reach Up program works diligently to address the needs of the entire family, it is also committed to continuous quality improvement. Strategies include:

- Developing on-going training and professional development for case managers on working with families with complex needs, on topics such as trauma, maternal and child health, and domestic violence;
- Continuing to improve collaboration between programs and community providers, on both an administrative and local level.

Introduction

The Agency of Human Services (AHS) submits this report pursuant to 2019 Act 72, Sec. E.323, *An act relating to making appropriations for the support of the government*, which requires that by October 31st, 2019, the Secretary of AHS shall report to the Joint Legislative Child Protection Oversight Committee with recommendations on how Reach Up services can be focused on strengthening families

and promoting parental responsibilities. The sections of this report correspond to the numerical paragraphs under Sec. E.323(a):

- (1) outline the current components of the statutorily required Individualized Family Development Plan;
- (2) identify what modifications are required to ensure a comprehensive assessment of the family's strengths and service needs is completed so that the family's individualized plan adequately addresses the nurturing and care of the children;
- (3) review how families at risk of involvement in the child welfare system are identified and protocols for providing the preventive and upstream services to so that children can remain safely at home; and
- (4) examine current practices of serving Reach Up families such as home visiting and referrals to enhance parental care and family stability.

Section 1 **Family Development Plan**

Each parent or caregiver receiving Reach Up financial assistance must engage in the creation of an individualized Family Development Plan (FDP). The purpose of the plan is to outline employment and other goals, and the steps necessary to achieve employment goals. The FDP is developed by the participant with the support and guidance of the case manager.

The FDP contains five main components:

1. Employment goal
2. Responsibilities and required activities of both the case manager and the participant
3. Number of hours the participant will take part in activities
4. Participant strengths and areas in which they may need support
5. Identified resources, such as support services available to support attainment of goals

The FDP is a living document and frequently changes to update progress and activities. The FDP reflects additional needs that arise or activities that are adjusted to accommodate changes for the family. Case managers coordinate plans when possible to support the family's progress in a variety of areas. For example, the FDP may also contain elements of, or references to, plans developed by Family Services Division, Head Start, Vermont State Housing Family Self Sufficiency Program, Financial Empowerment Program, and/or Children's Integrated Services. Reach Up recognizes that every person is at a different place along their journey to employment. The FDP reflects a holistic approach to family well-being that addresses the needs of both the parents and children. Reach Up recognizes that for the family to successfully meet their employment goal, all members of the family must have their needs met. In this spirit, goals and tasks reflect the complete mission of the program.

Section 2

Modifications Required to Address Nurturing and Care of Children

Reach Up is committed to the well-being of children in the families served. This was demonstrated by the October 2017 study completed by independent researchers Leslie Black-Plumeau and Rob McIntyre. The study examined indicators of child well-being in a cohort of families who began receiving Reach Up in 2013 and 2014 and stayed on the program for at least 24 months. The results showed marked improvement in housing stability, access to high quality childcare, mental health and substance use of parents, and parenting two years later.

Reach Up case managers use a strength-based, coaching model of case management where a mutually trusting and respectful relationship is built. Recently, case managers transitioned to using an assessment tool called “Stepping Stones” which includes questions about family and child well-being. This work has been guided and facilitated by nationally renowned experts from Mathematica Policy Research and Dr. LaDonna Pavetti, PhD, of the Center for Budget and Policy Priorities. It uses research to inform best practices. This tool was chosen specifically to complement the movement in Reach Up towards a science-based approach to helping participants achieve their goals. Coaching uses motivational interviewing to build upon intrinsic motivation that helps participants pursue goals that are personally meaningful to them. Empowering participants in this way increases their level of trust in their case manager, enabling case managers to more easily determine the strengths and challenges of each family and connect them to appropriate resources. Setting and achieving goals is also key to strengthening critical core adult capabilities needed for financial stability, family well-being, and healthy parenting.¹ The development of responsive relationships between case managers and participants models the healthy relationships needed within families to mitigate the effects of stress.²

Both case managers and participants have reported feeling more motivated and able to meet goals. One case manager described a man she had been working with for years. He had been meeting his work requirement regularly through an unpaid Community Service Placement but was still receiving Reach Up. Prior to shifting to a goal-oriented approach, participants engaged in activities that met the program’s rules and goals where the primary focus was to get them into a countable activity. This participant was engaged in the program but not making progress towards employment. With the shifting practice, the case manager and participant started a conversation about this man’s aspirations. By asking thoughtful and open-ended questions, the case manager worked with the participant to formulate goals related to his interest. Over the next few months he explored his area of interest and the steps necessary to become self-employed. With the new process, this participant discovered on his own that he needed to save money to realize his dream, and in order to do that he needed to get a job. He then obtained a well-paying job and has been working successfully ever since. This simple shift in practice empowered the participant to set his own goals rather than be told how and what to do, which enabled him to move off the Reach Up program within a few short months.

¹ *The Science of Adult Capabilities*, <https://developingchild.harvard.edu/science/deep-dives/adult-capabilities/>

² *Goal 4 It: Science-Informed Approach to Achieving Economic Independence*, Michelle Derr, Ph.D. and Jonathan McCay, Mathematica Policy Research

Goals and activities identified by the family related to their well-being are added to the FDP. Common activities found on the FDP can include:

- Working with Children’s Integrated Services (CIS)
- Working with Head Start
- Attending therapy appointments
- Attending parenting classes
- Working with Family Services
- Housing search
- Childcare search

In addition to these, a participant may identify something specific they want to work on related to their children. For example, a mom might recognize that her kids are regularly late for school. She and the case manager will work together to create a plan to get the kids to school on time. Continually building upon “small” successes increases the participant’s self-confidence and self-efficacy and decreases stress in the home creating a healthier environment for kids.

Though the Reach Up program works tirelessly to improve services to families, there are always positive changes that can be made. Some of the modifications we have identified and are working on are:

1. Assessing the program through a trauma-informed lens and making changes based on that assessment. Reach Up is currently working with the Administration of Children and Families (ACF) technical assistance program and Auburn Watersong, AHS Director of Resiliency Development and Trauma Prevention on this project.
2. Increasing home visiting when appropriate and desired by the family.
3. Continuing to work in collaboration with Head Start, Family Services, CIS, and Parent Child Centers.

Section 3 **Child Welfare and Reach Up’s Role in Prevention**

Reach Up case managers get to know the families they are working with well and are often the first to know about issues that could lead to Family Services involvement. As mentioned in the previous section, the transition to a science-informed, goal-based approach facilitates a trusting and responsive relationship between the participant and case manager. This positive relationship means participants work closely with their case manager to address issues that may lead to involvement with the Family Services Division. Case managers regularly coordinate team meetings with the family and other service providers to address issues such as housing, substance use disorder, mental health concerns of parent and/or child, domestic violence, children’s special health needs, school issues, and legal involvement. Case managers also do home visits for many of their appointments, so they can assess the home environment and address concerns with the family.

Case managers participate in ongoing professional development to increase their skills and help them identify topic areas where they may need additional support. One example of this is the annual all-staff day, in which all Reach Up staff gather to learn together as a community. This year, the topic of the day is “Working with Families with Complex Needs.” Topics include:

- Mental health
- Trauma and resiliency

- Child and maternal health
- Employment for adults with mental health needs
- Domestic Violence

Additionally, the Reach Up team and the Family Services Division staff work together to coordinate services when a family is engaged with both divisions. Families in common are identified, enabling the divisions to work together to address the needs of those families and coordinate their plans.

Section 4

Current Practices to Support Family Stability and Healthy Parenting

The Reach Up program recognizes that for families to thrive and improve their finances, all members of the family must be healthy and safe. There are many ways in which program staff support families.

In addition to the previously mentioned work the program with Mathematica and Dr. LaDonna Pavetti, Reach Up recently put a protocol in place for offering home visits to every family when safe and appropriate. In 2017, Reach Up recognized a need to provide training to case managers to increase their skills and confidence in home visiting. Multiple trainings were held over the last two years addressing safety, logistics and reasons for home visiting. Case managers are gradually increasing the number of home visits, which enables them to get to know the family and their home environment even better. In July 2019, 31% of face-to-face appointments were home visits. By September 2019, that increased to 34%. We continue to focus on supporting our staff to improve this metric even more. When meetings are not taking place in the home, they are taking place at a community out-posting center or the office. Out-posting enables case managers to serve participants efficiently in some of the more remote areas of the state, in locations where participants may want or need to go anyway. Some examples of out-posting sites include the multiple locations of Northeast Kingdom Community Action (NEKCA), the Orange County Parent Child Center, The Family Place Parent Child Center in Norwich, Parks Place in Bellows Falls, and Notch Partnering Project in Richford. The most common reasons meetings take place in the office instead of with a home visit or out-post meeting are:

- Participant preference
- Initial meeting between participant and case manager
- Participant dropped in without appointment
- Family is homeless
- Family accesses other resources and/or meetings in building or nearby, such as food shelf, diaper bank, VT Department of Labor, internet, employment specialists, WIC, etc.

Connections with community partners is a critical piece in supporting families. Local Reach Up teams are exceedingly well-connected both formally (contractually) and informally to services throughout the community and state agencies. These include:

- Designated Agencies – Mental health services for children and adults
- Preferred providers – Substance use disorder treatment
- Division of Vocational Rehabilitation
- Family Services Division
- CIS
- Parent Child Centers – comprehensive education, early childhood education, CIS services, parent education, parenting classes, support groups, etc.

- Hospitals
- Community resource centers (such as Parks Place in Bellows Falls, and Notch Partnering Project in Richford) – these resource centers provide one-stop access to many resources such as education, diaper banks, food shelves, employment services, etc.)
- Housing services – homeless prevention, housing assistance, voucher programs, case management
- Family Supportive Housing (FSH)
- Community Action Agencies – help with housing, food, fuel, financial coaching
- Head Start
- Employment services through VDOL, Vermont Association of Business and Industry Rehabilitation (VABIR), Vermont Adult Learning, Parent Child Centers

In addition to being familiar with community resources and effectively connecting families to those resources, Reach Up staff participate in a plethora of community committees and groups that support family stability and child well-being. Some of the most notable include:

- Workgroups that address the effects of substance use disorder – examples include:
 - CommSTAT – part of the Chittenden County Opioid Alliance,
 - KidStat – collaboration between AHS agencies and Burlington Police Department to combat domestic violence and substance use,
 - Lund treatment teams,
 - CHARM (Children and Recovering Mothers),
 - Community Resource Team [an empaneled group identifying resources for families with substance abuse/treatment issues and FSD involvement or potential involvement and where there is a pregnant person]
- Child protection teams – empaneled groups that address children’s health and safety
- Groups that address children’s physical and mental health needs – examples include:
 - CIS meetings,
 - Building Bright Futures meetings,
 - Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) meeting, and
 - Maternal Child Health Care Coalition.
- Housing review teams and Continuum of Care (housing)
- Groups that address domestic violence and trauma – examples include:
 - Local ACES groups, and
 - Flourishing Communities.

A programmatic assessment of Reach Up, completed in October 2017 by Mathematica Policy Research, noted a particular strength of the Reach Up program:

“Teaming and service coordination occur frequently between Reach Up program staff and community partners. Reach Up program staff and community partners reported regular teaming arrangements within and across agencies to coordinate services for clients. We found a strong commitment to holding regular service coordination meetings involving the parent and a full array of community partners, including child welfare staff.”

Conclusion

The Reach Up program is well poised to coordinate with community partners and address the needs of both parents and children. Case managers are able to do this through a science-informed approach to case management and building strong relationships with families and community providers. However, improvements can always be made.

The program is committed to a culture of continuous quality improvement and using the latest research to inform practice. Examples of this include the strategic planning and goal-achievement work being done with Mathematica Policy Research and Center for Budget and Policy Priorities, ongoing professional development, and a commitment to home and community visiting. The Reach Up program will continue to affect positive change for families receiving Reach Up, part of which is improving outcomes for children in these families. This program is a critical service to Vermont families. Through participation in this program, we hope *families will be empowered, connected and thriving*.