

Voices for Vermont's Children



Respectfully submitted to the Joint Child Protection Oversight Committee
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Voices for Vermont's Children supports policies and practices that will advance child health and safety. Within that context, it is important to acknowledge how complicated the current child protection system is and how much grey area there is within the work.

Voices is grateful for the research that continues to evolve, and are humbled by the ways in which our thinking is continuously challenged as we tackle this work. We are grateful for the opportunity to share what we have learned from impacted people, from the state, from providers, and from other states and countries.

Voices recognizes the historical context that created the systems that we inherited and would like to focus our testimony today on the possibilities ahead. We see Families First as an opportunity to think about our work differently in Vermont. Many of our suggestions extend beyond the Family Services Division to address the root causes of family stress, trauma, and instability, many of which derive from historical and ongoing inequities baked into our systems.

How can we best support a Families First System in Vermont?:

1. **Invest in families.** Much of the language in this section is not my own, it comes directly from the [UpEnd movement](#), a collaborative project of the Graduate College of Social Work at the University of Houston and the Center for the Study of Social Policy who are recognized thought leaders on systems reform.
 - In order for families to be vulnerable and willing to seek support, we need to remove the stigma of accessing support and the surveillance that often comes with the programs we offer.
 - Implement a reparations framework. A reparations framework acknowledges and repairs the past harms and injustices Black people have experienced in this country because of slavery, and continued racial oppression. Reparations also requires acknowledging and repairing the harm of genocide, colonization, and repeated violations of treaties and trusts done to Native communities.
 - Eliminate poverty. Research has documented the stress of poverty on families and on parenting. This stress is within our collective power to end by ensuring a universal basic income for all adults, a child allowance for each child, paid parental leave for families welcoming new children, paid sick leave, and a job guarantee with a living wage. Immigration status should not determine access to these or other financial supports.
 - Ensure all are housed. This should include a wide spectrum of options, including emergency housing for the unexpected situations.
 - Increase support for other basic needs. There are many critical supports that families need, which require significant policy and practice changes, including

access to quality food, transportation, child care, and health and mental health care.

2. **Listen more.** National data shows us that youth who have a say in their placements are less likely to have placement disruptions. Invest in kinship and fictive kin options whenever possible to support continuity in children's lives. This takes time and resources, but is worth the investment. We also need to invest in our Family Support Workers and ensure that they have the time, training, and support to do this work well. While we heard that caseloads are down on average, we were alarmed to hear about the disparities around the state. We need to understand why some offices have such high rates of turnover and staff vacancies.
3. **Invest in a data system that supports good work.** Our state workers are asked to use a DOS based case management system from the 1980s. We have heard many stories of poor practice that are caused by lack of access to information. This includes errors in placement history, family history, medical history and more. This work is difficult and our relationships with family support workers are delicate. When these mistakes happen, youth feel disposable and relationships can become toxic. In addition, our future work should be based on accurate outcome data, it is difficult to separate actual trends from perceived trends without accurate and accessible data. Voices urges this committee to work with the Governor to prioritize a nimble and effective data system. Voices also urges the state to look into a system that allows families and foster families to access information directly and one that gives youth access to their records as they transition out of care.
4. **Look at our court system, its strengths and its challenges.** Some jurisdictions are investing in restorative child protection systems, while restorative practices require careful attention to power dynamics and unintended consequences, they may offer a less adversarial and more sustainable approach to child protection. Others are looking at mediation pre-merits. While Voices agrees that it is important to have a system with checks and balances, we have heard concerns about the way in which the court process (which is adversarial by design) makes it difficult for teams to work together.
5. **Heal violence.** Healing historical, familial, community, and systemic violence is difficult work, but it is necessary in order to create safe spaces for our children and youth.

The current Families First legislation does not create funding mechanisms to do all of this work. However, it emboldens us all to shift our thinking and our practice dramatically and purposefully to reduce the number of kids who experience trauma. Fewer children in care could save the state money, but it does not guarantee better outcomes for kids. Meeting the needs of children and families is the path to a healthier, thriving Vermont. Creative thinking will open up new ways to support children and youth well while navigating life's stressors.

Finally, we need to continue to take steps towards a more transparent and accountable system. The Office of Child, Youth, and Family Advocate is one step towards that goal. We need to look closely at the entire system; at its strengths and its challenges. It is also important to revisit newer policies (Vermont's Families First implementation plan included) to see if they are having the intended impact. The Post Adoption Contact Agreement is a prime example of a shift in practice that I supported, yet I often hear that it is causing more harm than good. As we continue to learn together, we need to be able to reflect on the conditions that created the system we have, the intent of past legislation, and the outcomes that we are getting. By

allowing impacted people to share their first-hand experiences and reflections, we will learn a great deal about where we need to go next.