

VERMONT'S EARLY CHILDHOOD WORKFORCE CRISIS



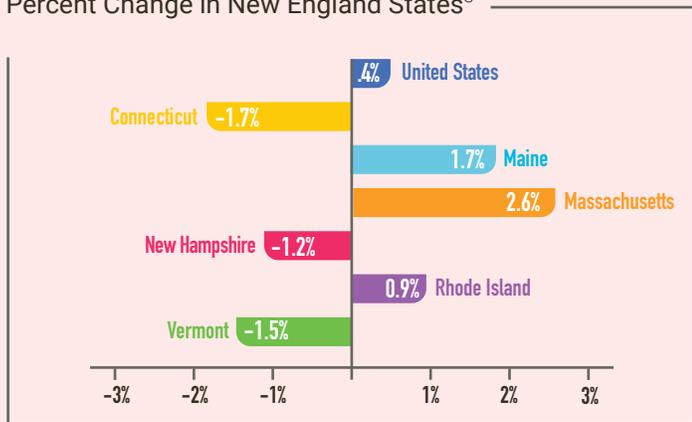
“Hiring”, “Closed due to Staff Shortage”, “We need to close a classroom”, “I can’t do this anymore!”

In 2021, these signs and messages have become all too common.

This year, the long-standing workforce challenges have escalated into a crisis for Vermont’s early childhood system. This workforce is inclusive of mental health providers, early educators, early interventionists, and other critical providers. Concerns related to finding, retaining, and supporting a strong workforce have been described by providers, families, employers, and policymakers alike. The full story is not yet clear due to data gaps and delayed consequences. However, the implications from the social isolation and stress on children and families are beginning to arise in the form of increased frequency and acuity of behavioral, emotional, and mental health challenges for children, and increased burnout for those who serve children and families. These additional needs paired with the vacancies, understaffing, and turnover in essential human services, pose significant risks to Vermont children and families.

This section shines a light on what we know about Vermont’s early childhood workforce crisis, including vacancies and declines in specific early childhood roles, challenges facing Vermont’s overall labor force, and the unique role that women play in Vermont’s workforce and early childhood system.

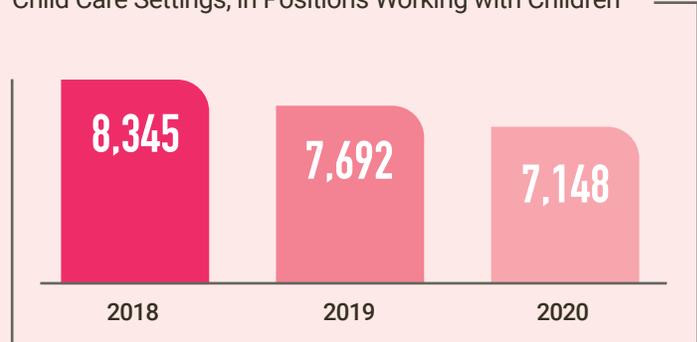
Figure 1 August 2020 to August 2021 Labor Force Percent Change in New England States³



Vermont’s Workforce Challenges

2021 was a time of significant workforce turmoil in the country as a whole, with 2.9% of the American workforce leaving their jobs in August of 2021, the highest ever reported.¹ This challenge seems particularly acute in Vermont, with a loss of 28,000 people from the labor force, which includes both those working and those looking for work, over the course of 15 months.² Vermont continues to struggle with maintaining its labor force as compared with neighboring states. As can be seen in **Figure 1**, between August 2020 and August 2021, Vermont’s labor force declined by 1.5%. This is in contrast to other states in our region, such as Massachusetts, which increased its labor force over this same period by 2.6%.³

Figure 2 Unduplicated Individuals Working in Regulated Child Care Settings, in Positions Working with Children⁴



Early Childhood Educators

According to data from the Bright Futures Information System, between December 2018 and December 2020 there was a 14% decline (1,200) in the number of individuals working with children in regulated child care settings (**Figure 2**).⁴ A number of factors are thought to potentially contribute to this notable decrease, including staffing changes due to COVID-19, a decrease in aides and substitutes, and an overall decline in individuals pursuing and entering the field.

Head Start

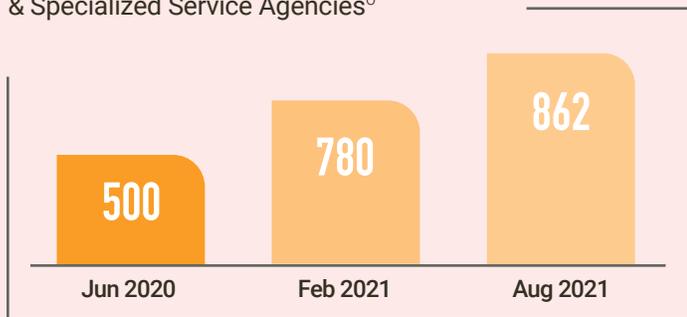
The Vermont Head Start Association identified that between April and September 2021, 14% (92 out of 664) Head Start and Early Head Start staff left their positions, with an average of 3

to 6 months to fill vacant positions. This lack of capacity has led to classrooms being under enrolled or closing altogether. **27% of Head Start and Early Head Start slots are not utilized despite the dire need for child care and wrap-around services** throughout Vermont (1,040 children enrolled, 1,419 enrollment capacity).⁵

Early Childhood & Family Mental Health Providers

Similar to the challenges that appear to be facing the child care and early education workforce, Vermont’s early childhood and family mental health workforce is reporting record high vacancies and turnover rates. As can be seen in **Figure 3**, there has been a substantial and growing number of vacancies among the Designated Mental Health Agencies (DAs) and Specialized Service Agencies (SSAs) from 500 vacancies in June 2020 to 862 in August of 2021. This sector of the workforce makes possible the critical mental health resources, services, and supports for Vermont’s young children and their families. In addition to vacancies, there is a high rate of turnover. **During Fiscal Year 2021, there was a 31% turnover rate across DAs and SSAs, reported as the highest turnover rate experienced by the system.** While there has been fluctuations in the turnover rate between 19% and 31% over the last 10 years, the increased need and acuity paired with the turnover and vacancy rates are of particular note.⁶

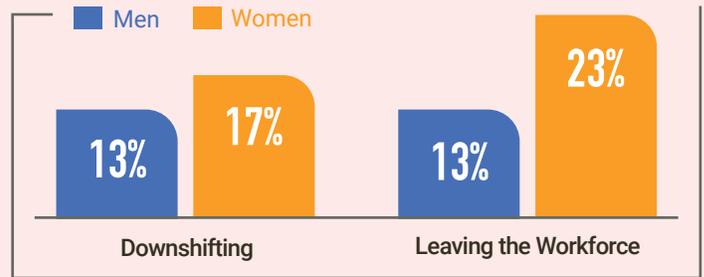
Figure 3 Vacancies in Designated Mental Health Agencies & Specialized Service Agencies⁶



The Workforce, Women, and Young Children

While not new or unique to Vermont, our workforce challenges as a state must take into account the ability, or inability, of parents and caregivers with young children to work, with each parent of a young child who is forced to leave or downshift their career in their prime working ages (25 to 54) considered a loss. There are consequences for the larger Vermont economy both in the short-term decrease in labor force, as well as the long-term impact of reduced future earnings due to career gaps. Additionally, with **women making up 82% of roles in the personal care industry, including child care roles,**⁷ the proportionate loss of women as compared to men has ripple effects on the ability of the larger labor force to continue working.

Figure 4 Workers with Children Under 10 Considering Downshifting Their Career or Leaving the Workforce in 2020⁸



As can be seen in **Figure 4**, according to the Women in the Workplace 2020 report from McKinsey and Lean In, **1 in 4 women with children under 10 were considering leaving the workforce completely, compared to 1 in 5 men nationally.**⁸

This is reinforced by a recent survey conducted by a team of researchers from University of Massachusetts Amherst, Amherst College, and Indiana University and supported by four Vermont organizations which suggests that families with children are facing unique challenges during the pandemic:

- 79% of respondents reported disruptions in school and child care with varying levels of productivity in their jobs; and
- 55% of respondents with kindergarten-age children reported their productivity being extremely affected by disruptions in child care.⁹

What’s next?

It is clear that a statewide, cross-sector strategy is urgently needed to recruit, retain, and sustain Vermont’s early childhood workforce in order to meet the needs of our children and families now and in the future. To address the multitude of challenges, early childhood partners have highlighted a number of strategies through the [2021-2022 Recommendations of the Vermont Early Childhood State Advisory Council Network](#) (starting on page 4).

Each and every individual working in early childhood fields plays a critical role in supporting Vermont children, their families, and the future of the communities and economy of Vermont.