

# Voices for Vermont's Children



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Testimony, Reach Up H.464

Voices commends this Committee on your thoughtful work, your excellent questions, your interest in research/best practices, and your dedication to partner with the state, advocates, and others to draft legislation that will have a significant impact on Vermont's children and families.

The American Public Human Services Association states that "TANF funding rules should be structured in a way that harnesses the program's flexibility to help states invest in the essential programs and services families need to thrive." H. 464 has the potential to shift Vermont's regulations to provide increased flexibility in practice. We appreciate the desire to minimize the administrative burden of tracking families and free up staff time to support families in achieving their goals. To that end, Voices recommends eliminating terms like "with good cause" as it opens the door for bias and judgment. It will be critical that DCF reviews and amends its detailed rules to ensure that participants experience the best practices that we all aspire to.

It is our understanding that this committee is most interested in hearing Voices' perspective on the proposed language that you reviewed yesterday including the concepts that are being drafted as I speak. We are happy to hear that the state has moved to a strengths based, family stabilization approach to practice. We have heard from recent participants that they appreciate it when staff honor their experience knowing that sharing personal life experience demands vulnerability and should not be expected before trust is established. Participants are also aware that case managers have the power to make decisions that will impact their children and are not only sensitive to punitive measures, but also acknowledge that well-meaning staff who believe they are rescuing and saving them can cause harm.

Voices appreciates this Committee's request to shift the language of the bill to match this new style of engagement and we look forward to seeing that language. We acknowledge that culture change is difficult and can take time. It would be helpful to create opportunities for participants to be involved in the evaluation of the program and to share their suggestions for systemic improvements. We continue to hear stories where the best practices that were identified in testimony have not occurred. Voices has also been told that requests for "one time assistance" are often met with "let me

**look at my budget". This highlights the fact that best practices must include meeting the primary mandate of the program, which is to improve the wellbeing of children by providing for their immediate basic needs, including food, housing and clothing.** At a minimum, it is important to base the grants on the current cost of living figures, knowing that the Commissioner can continue to adjust grants by applying a ratable reduction in order to stay within the allocated state budget. It is important to have a full understanding of the impact of the ratable reduction on the health and safety of families.

Voices supports the income disregard and the child support pass through. We see these as supplemental measures that will help transition families off the program well.

Voices enthusiastically supports expanding the definition to participation to include more than simply work, but also family well-being measures. Voices encourages VT to eliminate deferments and minimize sanctions whenever possible. We know that imposing sanctions on families has a direct impact on children. Please remember that Vermont continues to offer less than half of what families need to meet their basic needs. Voices cannot support taking food, toothpaste, diapers, and more from kids because their parents were unable to navigate the demands placed on them.

Voices supports increasing the age of children who can be counted in the household and would recommend matching it to the foster care language (as suggested by Rep. Wood). Therefore, we suggest that youth should be counted as household members even if they have completed high school but are still a member of the household.

In summary, Voices is grateful for the work of this committee and is aware of the need to move this bill forward. As you make your final edits on the draft before you, Voices asks the committee apply the standard that each change in statute be judged based on the best interest of the child/family.