



Request for FFY24 One-Time Appropriations

*Submitted by Dr. Jacqueline Kelleher,
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The mission of Vermont Family Network (VFN), a nonprofit organization, is to empower and support all Vermont children and families, especially those with disabilities, or special health needs. We do this by giving a strong start, lifting family voices, and advancing inclusive communities. Our vision is that all Vermont children and youth reach their full potential and families have the targeted, individualized resources and services they need to support their loved ones.

We serve the entire state, and we are also the federally recognized Parent Training and Information Center (PTIC), which is a requirement of federal special education laws. The PTIC works in partnership with the State Educational Agency in every state (SEA). Parent training and information centers must serve parents of children of all ages (birth to 26) and all types of disabilities. The training and information provided by the PTIC must meet the training and information needs of parents of children with disabilities living in areas served by the PTIC, particularly underserved parents and parents of children who may be inappropriately identified. The parent centers also play an important role in dispute resolution by explaining to parents the benefits of alternative methods of dispute resolution, such as mediation, which states are required, by the IDEA, to make available. Parent center staff attend or facilitate over 1,000 alternative dispute resolution sessions every year in other states. These alternative methods of dispute resolution can help avoid costly litigation. As part of that role, parent centers are required to meet with parents to explain the IDEA-mandated mediation process. In states where parent centers provide this service, they typically do so through contracts with State educational agencies or through allocations as part of appropriations.

I write to request an allocation of \$190,000 as a one-time appropriation in the FFY24 Governor's budget to expand our staff to meet the needs of families with respect to special education support and parent training, as well as to support the Agency of Education regarding the mediation arm of Dispute Resolution. This testimony outlines the VFN impact and explains our area of need which can be ameliorated, and ways we intend to expand supports, if we receive funds.

Reality for Vermont

Vermont has over 15,000 children and youth identified eligible for special education. Vermont has the highest percentage of children in the Nation identified with emotional disturbance, which includes children with anxiety, depression, and externalizing behaviors. There are thousands of kiddos receiving treatment for longstanding medical conditions such as asthma, diabetes, cancer, blood disorders, and muscular dystrophy. Statewide data are not consistently available on students we support who are being served on a 504 Plan or Special Health Plan.



VFN is the “go to” organization for many, many Vermont families when they receive the initial clinical diagnosis or eligibility determination for special education/504 services, and they don’t know where to turn. For many parents and guardians, when you receive that news, you experience a multitude of emotions while your head is filling with questions and concerns. You may become overwhelmed with stress, fear, anxiety, and information overload, as you begin googling everything you can to try to understand what to expect, how to support, and what next steps you should take. It can be isolating and exhausting. My team and I aspire to make sure all Vermont families know they do, and they do not have to walk this path alone. We are on a mission! And we will stay with the family for as long as we are needed.

All Vermont families, regardless of their zip code, should have access to the excellent, high-quality VFN staff, services, programs, and supports. We empower families with knowledge, skills, and confidence as they learn to navigate systems of care and education that their children need and deserve. We wraparound resources for the entire family, from birth into adulthood. We at VFN have all experienced what families are going through and we ensure the entire family unit is supported. What better way to secure our future than to invest in our families and the next generation of Vermonters! We service hundreds and hundreds each year, but there are thousands we need to reach with our no cost supports, particularly in our most rural communities. Vermont families deserve access to all that VFN provides, and here is an opportunity for you to make a difference in the lives of children and youth with disabilities, so we can sustain our work and expand our reach in family support and engagement.

What VFN Does

- **Family Supports Education/Mental Health:** We work with families on navigating schools (We are NOT special education advocates - parents learn how to advocate for their child, not VFN doing the speaking or the writing); they help families with everything from responding to school-based paperwork to applying for Free/Reduced Lunch to locating food pantries and applying for rental/heat assistance to finding a therapist. Families get their own Parent Mentor, not a VFN staffer. We host Saturday SibShops - activities and support group for siblings impacted by a sib with disabilities and disorders. We provide respite and summer camp grants to be used at a families’ discretion. 100% of trained VFN staff have had a child or grandchild with disabilities, disorders, or special health needs. This unit also organizes an Annual Family Conference, bringing in national speakers. We are able to provide the training specific to Parent Training & Counseling as a Related Service when written into an IEP. Newly hired Family Engagement Coordinator to work with Early Intervention and Designated Agencies in the state. A training program for students in Grades 6-12+ on developing self-advocacy skills called *In the Driver’s Seat*.
- **Family Support Health:** Family Faculty are parents who train the medical field (such as medical students and pediatricians) on engaging with families as general practice and in crisis. Staff work with families on school-based health plans and creating supportive home environments to extend the learning. Problem solves with DCF. Supports the coordinated services planning process. One staff member is solely responsible for going into BIPOC/New American communities to ensure access to basic human needs for the whole family - you can find Bidur in libraries, community centers, and food pantries, connecting families to health services. There is a 24/7 crisis hotline for any family that just needs



someone to understand what they are going through. This unit also takes the lead in documenting family stories. We also partner with researchers from other states with connecting families to genetics specialists to get some answers at no cost to them. This group coordinates a Parent Match program.

- **Policy Advocacy Training and Support:** For individuals with disabilities and/or families, there is the Leadership Training series conducted in partnership with the DD Council. For individuals with disabilities followed by monthly skill building and networking sessions. Participants prepare to be engaged citizens on school boards, select boards, state committees, etc. They learn how to advocate at the local, state, and national levels for disability rights guided by one of the best equity advocates in the state.
- **Puppets in Education:** Using a content validated curriculum on SEL/Safety & Health/HHB topics, the puppets Team spend their days in school performing up to five shows on the topic the district needs, differentiated for each cluster of 40 kids. The Puppet Shows are for PK-6 and there are drama/improv workshops for Grades 7&8. The puppets have their own email address and kids write every day about what is on their mind.

All programs and more are offered at no cost to Vermonters, except for Puppets in Education (PIE). PIE must ask for a fee for service to maintain staff, travel costs, and curriculum development. There are currently 40 schools on our waiting list as we seek out sponsorships and provide guidance on how PIE is an allowable cost for several of their federal and state funding streams. When we receive sponsorships, we can subsidize performances or offer at no cost for those districts most in need.

Data on Vermonters Served 2021-2022

- 1,055 individual families were served this year - this count does not include the number of multiple interactions that occurred once a family connected with us. Cases have been incredibly complex and often require frequent meetings that involve training, coaching, education, and connections to wraparound resources.
- 40 trained Support Parents provided 37 families with Parent Matches
- Puppets reached 7,094 individuals (6,501 kids and 593 adults) through 133 presentations at 35 locations
- 52 medical practices and 1 pharmacy throughout Vermont have received the training and sensory supportive tools related to easing stress and anxiety concerning COVID.
- 23 trainings, workshops, and webinars reaching hundreds of Vermont families and school-based professionals
- Over 100 individuals with disabilities or their parents/caregivers have gone through our Leadership series and continue in our Policy Advocacy monthly professional Learning, building skills to take leadership roles in local, regional, statewide committees and task forces.
- Through Family Faculty, 89 families and one self-advocate shared their stories and experiences about family-centered care to 881 graduate and undergraduate medical,



nursing, health sciences and education. This year VFN hosted 8 Panels, 7 Medical Education Project rotations, and 2 Professional Communication Reflection classes.

- SibShops - 10 events throughout the year, both in-person and virtual, engaged 39 siblings of children with special health needs/disabilities and 18 family members.
- New this year is the addition of respite funding to families. Eligible families may access a total of \$1,200 per grant year for both respite and medically necessary funds combined. Initial eligible respite requests are funded up to \$600 per family. If the request is for medically necessary items, families may request up to \$1,200. In total for the fiscal year, \$78,302.91 was disbursed from the Family Support Fund.

FUNDING

Fiscal Year 2022 Revenue (7/1/21 - 6/30/22) - \$1,448,371

Federal Grants: \$618,282

State Funding: \$475,313

Direct Public Support: \$107,555

Fee for Service: \$130,899

Foundation Support: \$44,262

Pledges, Outstanding: \$50,860

Local Government Grants: \$21,200

Learn More About Vermont Family Network

Visit the VFN [website](#). We are active on [Facebook](#), [Instagram](#), and disseminate monthly E-Newsletters. In 2023, we will launch a new Podcast focused on family and education issues.



Immediate Need

Our goal is to receive one time funding as part of the FY24 Governors Budget connected to allocations through the Agency of Education. I have reviewed the other important projects that have been recommended in the FY24 proposal and I do not see a service like ours listed. As we navigate our way through the complex challenges brought on by the pandemic, our organization has never been more necessary for parents regarding education, mental health and special health considerations.

Our immediate need is \$190,000 in unrestricted funds where the Executive Director in partnership with her skilled Board of Directors have discretion over where funds are best allocated to sustain and grow the support we provide to families, meet training needs, and offer our expertise in dispute resolutions. To expand the parent training and support given the unprecedented requests through our Helpline, particularly in the past six months, we must hire additional staff after closing our current gap. To expand our access to resources, our staffing needs to reflect all corners of the state so we can train and support parents and meet them where they are. Further, we are expanding the number and nature of trainings around disability, disorders and special health care needs that can be accessed by practicing and in-service teachers.

To meet the voluminous need in 2022-23, we employed additional staff or had to increase staff hours and, as a result, we must close a \$115,000 gap that expansion has created and so we can maintain staffing levels; further, \$75,000 will support the hire of a trainer to provide timely, accurate, relevant training content for families and teachers/school staff, and allow us to increase staff hours so they can assist effective mediation processes in collaboration with the Agency of Education.

Concluding Remarks

On behalf of VFN, I appreciate the opportunity to tell you more about our organization and how critical it is to expand our capacity to avail services to more Vermonters regardless of income or zip code. Thank you for your consideration and interest in building community with us. Please consider us as a solution to helping all Vermonters. My written testimony is to include us on the recommended list for one time investment. Thank you for your time, consideration, and service.

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Executive Director