



Date: February 1, 2023  
To: House Committee on General and Housing  
From: Dora Levinson, Research and Data Director, Building Bright Futures  
Re: Housing as a Basic Need for Young Children and their Families

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*The trauma of homelessness, even short term, can have a major effect on a youth's future development. Children who experience homelessness have significantly higher rates of emotional, behavioral, and immediate and long-term health problems... They have numerous academic difficulties, including below-grade level reading, high rate of learning disabilities, poor school attendance, and failure to advance to the next grade or graduate.<sup>i</sup>*

### **The State of Vermont's Children: 2022 Year in Review**

At the start of each year, Building Bright Futures, Vermont's Early Childhood State Advisory Council Network releases The State of Vermont's Children which provides Vermont's policy makers, educators, caregivers, health practitioners, business leaders, and community members with an objective, data-driven assessment of the well-being of young children and families in Vermont and highlights the annual recommendations from Vermont's Early Childhood State Advisory Council Network. As the title indicates, this report provides a snapshot of the state of Vermont's children and families. It includes data on access to basic needs, child welfare rates, and utilization of mental health services and offers an in-depth look at each of Vermont's 12 regions.

This year, based on input from our Network of over 450 stakeholders, basic needs, and housing in particular, were prioritized both in a data spotlight on housing and homelessness and Policy Recommendations from Vermont's Early Childhood Advisory Council Network.

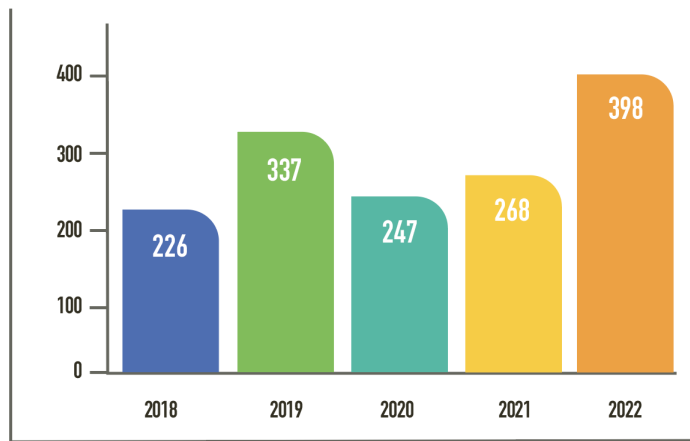
### **Building Bright Future's Role**

The mission of Building Bright Futures (BBF) is to improve the well-being of each and every child and family in Vermont by using evidence to inform policy and bringing voices together to discuss critical challenges and problem solve. BBF brings together a robust network of policy makers, early childhood professionals, educators, health and mental health providers, business leaders, families, and other stakeholders to share insights and problem-solve through regular meetings of 12 Regional Councils, seven Committees moving forward the work of Vermont's Early Childhood Action Plan (VECAP), and a 23-member State Advisory Council. The State Advisory Council (SAC) is Vermont's Governor-appointed, primary advisory body on the well-being of children in the prenatal period through age 8 and their families.

### **The Challenges Vermont Families Experience Related to Housing**

Housing is a basic need for all Vermonters and is particularly crucial for families with young children. According to many early childhood developmental experts, including the Harvard Center on the Developing Child, experiences of homelessness in early childhood expose children to "toxic stress," a strong, prolonged activation of the body's stress response system. Toxic stress is linked to detrimental long-term developmental, physical, and mental health outcomes.<sup>ii</sup> Unfortunately, homelessness is increasingly prevalent in Vermont's families with children.

Students Under 9 Eligible for McKinney-Vento Homelessness Assistance



The McKinney-Vento Homelessness Assistance Act defines homelessness as *lacking a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence which includes sharing the housing of other persons, living in temporary housing, and places not designed for regular sleeping accommodation.*<sup>iii</sup> Children and families meeting this definition are entitled to a number of services, resources, and supports from their Local Education Agency. As can be seen in the figure on the left, there has been a striking increase of Vermont children under 9 enrolled in school who meet the McKinney-Vento definition of homelessness, from 247 in 2020-2021 to 398 in 2021-2022.<sup>iv</sup>

Of those who have stable housing, the costs can be a significant portion of their income, with typical housing expenses above \$15,000 per year for two working adults with two children.<sup>v</sup> Of all households in Vermont, 36% are cost-burdened by their rent or mortgage.<sup>vi</sup> Vermont’s rental vacancy of 2.4% in 2021 is the lowest in the country,<sup>vii</sup> and finding any rental, let alone an affordable, desirable rental can be extremely challenging for families. Homeownership provides a path to building financial assets for families and gives children a secure, stable housing situation, but given the low homeowner vacancy rate of 0.6%<sup>vii</sup> in 2021 paired with soaring interest rates, many Vermont families are finding homeownership increasingly out of reach.

Additional data and context are available on page 4 below in the Spotlight on Housing and Homelessness included in The State of Vermont’s Children: 2022 Year in Review.

### **Early Childhood State Advisory Council Network Policy Recommendations**

In partnership with the Vermont Early Childhood Action Plan (VECAP) Committees and the Regional Council Network, the State Advisory Council (SAC) sets priorities and strategic direction for statewide initiatives using the VECAP and up-to-date data. The annual Policy Recommendations are developed with input from across all BBF Network gatherings and seek to identify the current gaps and needs in early childhood policy, promote action in strategic areas for the coming year, provide recommendations that are measurable, and move Vermont toward a more equitable early childhood system. The full set of 2023 Policy Recommendations are included beginning on page 5.

### **Policy Recommendations Related to Housing from Vermont’s Early Childhood State Advisory Council**

This year, both challenges highlighted above: the increase of families with children experiencing homelessness and the general challenge of finding affordable housing in Vermont came up time and time again throughout the BBF Network as foundational barriers for supporting the well-being of families and young children in the state. Partners across the network also highlighted that these challenges intersect with many other issues currently facing the state’s early childhood system and families including early childhood and family mental health, recruiting and retaining a sufficient early childhood education and mental health workforce, and more.

Therefore, supporting those experiencing homelessness and investing in programs that support Vermont families with young children with finding and affording stable housing are priorities for Building Bright Futures this year and are reflected in the Policy Recommendations that were formally endorsed by the State Advisory Council for the year. (See page 4 for the full 2023 Policy Recommendations.)

**The 2023 Policy Recommendations of the Vermont Early Childhood State Advisory Council Network Related to Housing:**

1. Invest in safe, permanent housing for children as a critical basic need. Invest in housing programs and resources that expand availability and promote affordability and equity in Vermont’s rental and real estate markets by means such as:
  - Expanding the Family Supportive Housing Program
  - Protecting manufactured home communities by investing in infrastructure repair and maintenance
2. Support families who are unhoused or experiencing housing transitions by investing in trauma-responsive shelters, transitional housing, transportation resources, and related staffing. Ensure children are able to attend school in their home districts if preferred.

Thank you for your commitment to the well-being of Vermont’s children and families.

Sincerely,

Dora Levinson, M.P.H.  
Research and Data Director  
Building Bright Futures  
Vermont's Early Childhood Data and Policy Center

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<sup>i</sup> Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. (2022). *Homelessness Resources: Youth*. Retrieved from <https://www.samhsa.gov/homelessness-programs-resources/hpr-resources/youth>

<sup>ii</sup> Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University. (2020). *Toxic stress*. Retrieved from <https://developingchild.harvard.edu/science/key-concepts/toxic-stress/>

<sup>iii</sup> Hud.gov. (2009). The McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act. Retrieved from [https://www.hud.gov/sites/documents/HAAA\\_HEARTH.PDF](https://www.hud.gov/sites/documents/HAAA_HEARTH.PDF)

<sup>iv</sup> Vermont Agency of Education. Number of McKinney Vento Eligible Children Enrolled in School under 9 by Age. Unpublished data.

<sup>v</sup> MIT Living Wage Calculator. (2022). Living wage calculation for Vermont. Retrieved from <https://livingwage.mit.edu/states/50>

<sup>vi</sup> U.S. Census Bureau. American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates, Tables B25070 and 25091, Vermont (2021). Retrieved from [data.census.gov](https://data.census.gov)

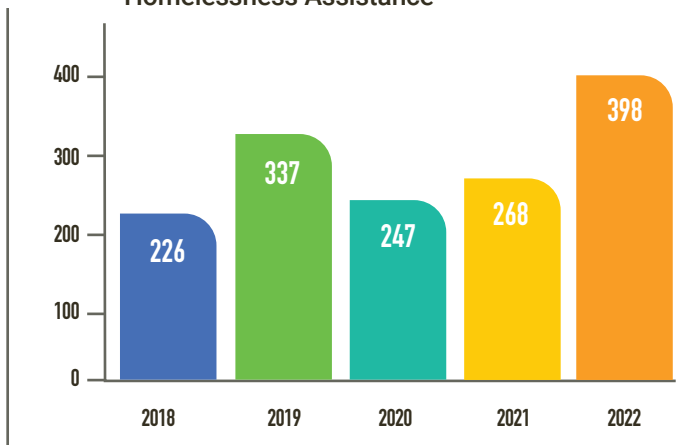
<sup>vii</sup> U.S. Census Bureau. (2021). American Community Survey 1-Year Estimates, Table DP04, Vermont. Retrieved from [data.census.gov](https://data.census.gov)

## SPOTLIGHT ON HOUSING AND HOMELESSNESS

The trauma of homelessness, even short term, can have a major effect on a youth's future development. Children who experience homelessness are more likely to experience significantly higher rates of emotional, behavioral, and immediate and long-term health problems... They may also have numerous academic difficulties, including below-grade level reading, high rate of learning disabilities, poor school attendance, and failure to advance to the next grade or graduate.<sup>12</sup>

There has been an increase in the number of Vermont children experiencing homelessness. The McKinney-Vento Homelessness Assistance Act defines homelessness as *lacking a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence which includes sharing the housing of other persons, living in temporary housing, and places not designed for regular sleeping accommodation.*<sup>13</sup> Children and families meeting this definition are entitled to a number of services, resources, and supports from their Local Education Agency. **As can be seen in Figure 2, there has been a striking increase of Vermont children under 9 enrolled in school who meet the McKinney-Vento definition of homelessness, from 247 in 2020-2021 to 398 in 2021-2022.**<sup>14</sup>

**Figure 2** Students Under 9 Eligible for McKinney-Vento Homelessness Assistance<sup>14</sup>



Similarly, the Vermont Housing Coalition to End Homelessness' 2022 point-in-time count of those experiencing homelessness shows the number of people in households with children under 18 increased by 130% from pre-pandemic levels, from 629 in 2019 to 857 in 2022.<sup>15</sup> Of note, children identified in this count may overlap with children enrolled in school as identified above.

Vermont supports homeless children and families through different programs and resources, one of which is the Family Supportive Housing program (FSH) through the Vermont Department for Children and Families (DCF). FSH "provides intensive case management and service coordination to homeless families with children, following evidence-based practice for housing

families with complex needs and multiple systems involvement."<sup>16</sup>

**In 2022, FSH served 368 families with 693 children, compared to 327 families with 608 children in 2021. The program continues to serve 10 Agency of Human Services Districts with a maximum capacity of 285 families at any point in time.**<sup>16</sup>

Emergency housing policies have been in flux since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic as public health guidance has changed, funding sources have shifted, and the needs of Vermonters have changed. **The Vermont Emergency Rental Assistance Program (VERAP) was designed as a short-term initiative funded by the U.S. Treasury and served 12,613 households since April 2021, providing more than \$138 million in rental assistance.**<sup>17</sup> An additional \$40 million in remaining funds was recently approved to provide services such as eviction counseling and case management through 2025 and temporary continued rental assistance for the most vulnerable Vermonters through June 2023.<sup>18</sup>

Of those who have stable housing, the costs can be a significant portion of their income, with typical housing expenses above \$15,000 per year for two working adults with two children.<sup>7</sup> **Of all households in Vermont, 32% are cost-burdened by their rent or mortgage.**<sup>19</sup> Vermont's rental vacancy of 2.4% in 2021 is the lowest in the country,<sup>20</sup> and finding any rental, let alone an affordable, desirable rental can be extremely challenging for families. Homeownership provides a path to building financial assets for families and gives children a secure, stable housing situation, but **given the low homeowner vacancy rate of 0.6%**<sup>20</sup> in 2021 paired with soaring interest rates, many Vermont families are finding homeownership increasingly out of reach.



The rental vacancy rate in Vermont was just **2.4%** in 2021.

Housing-related policy recommendations from Vermont's Early Childhood State Advisory Network can be found on the next page .

# 2023 POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS OF THE VERMONT EARLY CHILDHOOD STATE ADVISORY COUNCIL NETWORK

The State Advisory Council (SAC) is Vermont's Governor-appointed, primary advisory body on the well-being of children from the prenatal period through age eight and their families. In partnership with Vermont's Early Childhood Action Plan (VECAP) Committees and the Regional Councils, the SAC sets priorities and strategic direction for statewide initiatives using the VECAP and up-to-date data. The annual recommendations are developed with input across all BBF Network gatherings and seek to identify the current gaps and needs in policy, promote action in strategic areas for the coming year, ensure recommendations are measurable, and move Vermont toward a more equitable Early Childhood System.

## GOAL 1: ALL CHILDREN HAVE A HEALTHY START

- Promote and invest in care coordination. Invest in proven care coordination models across sectors to better serve young children and families. Better support access to services for children with special health care needs, children with disabilities, and other marginalized groups by promoting and investing in valuable models of care coordination. Explore creative ways to fund and integrate services across sectors to reduce disparities in access to services.
- Invest in safe, permanent housing for children as a critical basic need. Invest in housing programs and resources that expand availability and promote affordability and equity in Vermont's rental and real estate markets by means such as:
  - ▶ Expanding the Family Supportive Housing Program
  - ▶ Protecting manufactured home communities by investing in infrastructure repair and maintenance
- Support families who are unhoused or experiencing housing transitions by investing in trauma-responsive shelters, transitional housing, transportation resources, and related staffing. Ensure children are able to attend school in their home districts if preferred.

## GOAL 2: FAMILIES AND COMMUNITIES PLAY A LEADING ROLE IN CHILDREN'S WELL-BEING

- Representation matters. Develop and implement a formal guidance/protocol when creating new legislatively mandated bodies (study sections, councils, task forces). A list of potential members should include representatives with lived experience in those groups.
- Utilize the findings of the BBF Families and Communities Committee's Family Needs Assessment, which has been designed and implemented by primary caregivers to inform policy and decision-making related to young children and their families.
- Provide commensurate compensation for families participating in engagement, leadership, or feedback opportunities in order to recognize and honor the time and expertise that parents and caregivers contribute. Make other logistical and cultural decisions that welcome and promote the inclusion of primary caregivers, such as offering alternative or evening meeting opportunities, paying for any associated child care or transportation costs, and providing interpretation services.

## GOAL 3: ALL CHILDREN AND FAMILIES HAVE ACCESS TO HIGH-QUALITY OPPORTUNITIES TO MEET THEIR NEEDS

- Prioritize and invest in the current early childhood education workforce to ensure the field is justly compensated, well-resourced, and valued as leaders and partners in the Early Childhood System by:
  - ▶ Making strategic and substantial investments to bolster the compensation of the early childhood workforce
  - ▶ Investing in proven professional development programs and ensuring that all early childhood educators have access to resources and supports that make the field a more sustainable and attractive one, such as practice-based coaching, mentorship, Special Accommodations Grants, Early Childhood and Family Mental Health Consultation and treatment, and Early Multi-tiered System of Supports. Ensure these professional development programs and opportunities are comprehensive and coordinate their offerings and activities.
- Continue to commit to stakeholder engagement and national best practices within the STARS Revision work and related Continuous Quality Improvement (CQI) efforts. The updated Quality Rating Improvement Scale (QRIS) should support efforts to dismantle systemically racist and inequitable tools and structures, and to build a system that supports early childhood education programs in providing the highest quality teacher-child interactions possible through a continuous quality improvement lens.
- Respond to the mental health challenges facing young children and their families and the need to build resilience in our communities by:
  - ▶ Investing in efforts to recruit a diverse mental health workforce reflective of the communities served (including diversity of race/ethnicity, culture, sexual orientation and identity, socioeconomic status, etc).
  - ▶ Continuing to increase Medicaid reimbursement rates for mental health services to adjust for the higher cost of providing services associated with inflation.
  - ▶ Investing in trauma and resilience training for family-serving providers (in the fields of mental health, education, etc.) to enable them to be better prepared to respond to the increased mental health needs of children due to the pandemic. Invest in translation services for training programs to promote equitable and broad access to training.







## GOAL 4: THE EARLY CHILDHOOD SYSTEM WILL BE INTEGRATED, WELL-RESOURCED, AND DATA-INFORMED

- Prioritize collective legislative action and coordination related to early childhood administration, governance, and any potential investments by holding joint hearings, forming ad hoc committees, and working collaboratively on hearing key testimony, advancing well-vetted legislation, etc.
- As legislation is considered related to Vermont's early childhood governance infrastructure, the Legislature must prioritize accountability by tasking a specific entity to monitor governance transition, with responsibilities that include:
  - ▶ Developing a concrete transition plan with accountability and metrics (process and success) prioritizing cross-sector stakeholder engagement
  - ▶ Monitoring any and all transitions over time and reporting annually to the Legislature
  - ▶ Defining and measuring success in process and outcomes using a continuous quality improvement framework
  - ▶ Ensuring alignment with the vision articulated in the Vermont Early Childhood Action Plan
- Respond to inequities in data collection and reporting in order to better represent and understand the intersectional experiences of people of color, children with disabilities, and other marginalized communities in Vermont.
  - ▶ Develop a statewide strategy to gather demographic information that allows people to self-identify in an authentic and appropriate manner while meeting federal demographic reporting requirements.
  - ▶ Value qualitative data. When the small population size of a group necessitates the suppression of their quantitative data, utilize qualitative data collection to ensure that everyone is counted.
  - ▶ Secure sustained funding to support high-quality data through compensation for direct service providers who collect and report data.
  - ▶ Partner with impacted communities throughout the data cycle to ensure that marginalized communities, in particular, have ownership of their experiences and are empowered to advocate for and make decisions on behalf of themselves.
  - ▶ To enable Vermont to execute the above recommendations, secure sustained funding for additional personnel to increase capacity with a specific focus on equitable data.

## LEARN MORE

While the Policy Recommendations can be leveraged in a variety of ways, their foundational goal is to provide a common agenda and unifying vision for the state's early childhood system and its partners. The Policy Recommendations are a tool that requires both championing and monitoring in order to be successful. Read more in our 2023 Policy Recommendation Playbook at [buildingbrightfutures.org/2023-policy-recommendations/](https://buildingbrightfutures.org/2023-policy-recommendations/), which outlines the process for developing recommendations, provides more information on each recommendation, and describes how stakeholders can put the Policy Recommendations into action.