

February 16, 2024

Good morning,

Thank you, members of the committee, for taking the time to hear from me today. My name is Trissie Casanova, I am the chair of the DCF FSD Labor Management Committee. I have worked for DCF Family Services Division for the last 21 years in a variety of roles. For the first 13 years I worked as a Family Services Worker in the St. Albans District Office as a Child Protection worker, a Juvenile Services (JS) worker, and lastly an investigator. Currently I am the Deputy Compact Administrator for ICPC/ICJ and the Human Trafficking Consultant.

As a social worker and a former JS worker I believe in the science behind the Raise the Age (RtA) initiative. I also believe that when planning for the implementation of new initiatives you need to make sure that there is the proper infrastructure in place to handle it. Any change to a system such as ours should include consideration of readiness and capacity. Otherwise, the initiatives will have unintended consequences and will fail or detract from our mission and other statutory mandates. And this is not an initiative that we want to fail. This is an initiative that we are behind and want it to succeed. If RtA is implemented now, the population who would be most negatively impacted would be the youth who we are to help. In fact, we may be creating more harm. Right now, the High-End System of Care (HESOC), is on fire. And when you have a fire, you need to put it out first, then you rebuild and then you add on. You can't make additions to the house while it is still on fire.

We are just as frustrated almost four years after the closure of Woodside and we still lack a secure crisis stabilization program. In this time, we have experienced a diminished capacity in our residential programs and within our community-based programs and wraparound supports. At this time the State of Vermont does not have any residential drug treatment programs to serve adolescents and finding providers who can complete substance abuse assessments with this population is equally challenging. These programs were meant to support children and families in their homes and communities to provide treatment, reduce risk, and help alleviate the need of a higher level of care or entry into our system. Our DCF system is unique in that we are both the Juvenile Justice agency and the state's Child Protection agency. Since we are responsible for both entities, both entities need to explore the issue of capacity before any new initiatives are implemented as any change will have an impact on the other. It has been reported that the RtA initiative won't have a significant impact on our caseloads; that information is misleading and would only be accurate if this was the only population we were serving. Many of our district offices are small and most ongoing Family Services Workers carry a mixed caseload. Their JS caseload would include teenagers in custody as a result of child abuse, neglect, beyond the control of their caregiver, truancy or delinquency; this is why those numbers need to be looked at in a holistic manner.

Our current state of crisis and lack of options for justice involved youth impacts the other kids in our care. For example, when we have a JJ youth who has more acute needs, they will get prioritize for a bed in a stabilization program which means another child is disrupted from that

placement and are then likely staffed by our workforce at several different locations by numerous different staff unknown to the child. All of this is having a negative impact on all the kids we are serving, and in fact, we are making them worse because this is the best we have to offer. And it is having a negative impact on our staff.

As mentioned by colleagues, the types of kids we are serving are more acute than before. We are seeing more DS kids within our HESOC who are in need of placement and specialized services. We have a high number of kids in our system of care who are involved in gangs, committing crimes involving weapons, drug trafficking, etc. While there is some speculation that these are out of state youth engaging in these delinquent acts, we are here to tell you that there are Vermont kids who are also engaging in these acts. These kids are incredibly difficult to find placements for based on their charges and levels of aggression.

The impact of our current system is as follows:

- Youth who are too dangerous to be at our staff secure program or staffed with our staff are sent back homes into their communities. That puts their families and community at risk of harm.
- When we staff these young people with our rotation of staff (who are not trained as residential providers), we make these kids worse because we are unable to provide them with the consistency, structure, services, treatment, education, a clinical milieu, or peer and community engagement that they deserve and need in order to stabilize.
- The number of kids per year that we are staffing continues to rise. In 2023 we had 126 staffings of 106 children/youth. This is an increase from 2022 when we had 66 staffing instances.
- We have staffed children as young as 6 and as old as 17
**see last page for more specific data regarding staffing's
- We have seen an increase of DS children in our HESOC that require staffing. This has led to an increase of assaults on our staff. Between 11/5/2023-1/22/2024 we staffed 4 children who assaulted our staff a minimum of 17 times (this number is underreported as there was one child who was assaulting staff daily during each staffing).

**Please see attached document with example of profiles of youth who we are having been staffing the last year who are justice involved.

This lack of a HESOC impacts the quality of work that our staff are able to provide because when FSWs are staffing youth **during business hours** they are not doing their daily work, so others have the burden of the things that can't be rescheduled i.e court, emergency moves, etc. This means they can't engage families in a way that we know has better outcomes for children and families.

When FSWs are staffing youth **after business hours** they are pulled away from their family and their personal life, they don't experience down time to rejuvenate from the stress of highly emotional work and they have to go to work the next day and carry on their daily tasks. Many

of these overnights require staff to stay awake or, if sleep is permitted, one can imagine it's not a good night's rest.

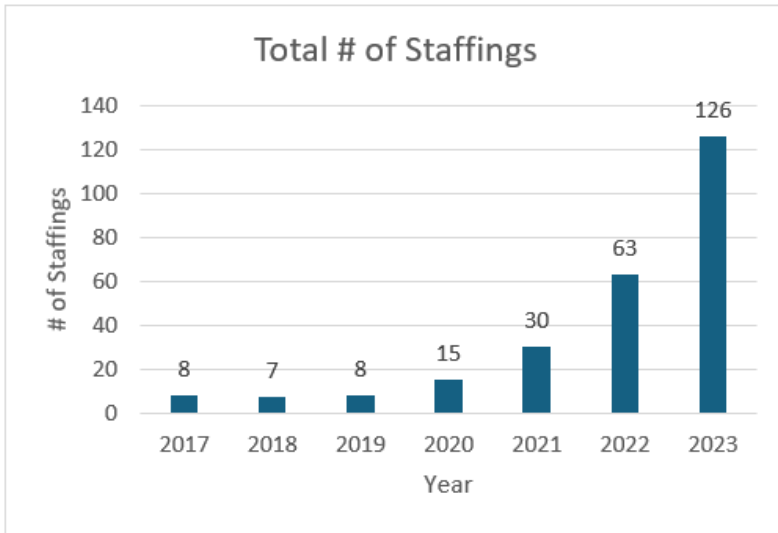
All of this is leading to burnout, emotional drain, high rates of turnover, low rates of retention, and continual safety issues for our staff. Why would staff stay with FSD if they can move on to a different state job with no stress, no afterhours requirements, all while maintaining their rate of pay and benefits? We are struggling to keep people in their positions, coupled with the demands of hiring, onboarding, and becoming knowledgeable of the work. High turnover within our staff significantly impacts the experiences and outcomes of the children, youth, and families we serve. Based on this we are not ready to implement RtA right now. Until our HESOC is stabilized we cannot take on any new initiatives as our system is barely hanging on enough to meet our basic mandates. If we implement it now, there are a lot of potential unintended consequences, starting with the youth and communities we are trying to serve. Secondly it could cause a knee jerk would be to bring the age back down and that would be a travesty. In order for RtA to be successful, we need to hit the pause button on its implementation for now.

1- Examples of youth we have been staffing

- a. 17 yr. old male. Probable cause found to charge with first-degree aggravated domestic assault by chasing a family member with a butter knife threatening to kill them.
- b. 14 yr. old male who identifies as part of a gang. Charges include reckless endangerment, grand larceny & stolen vehicle. Assaulted staff, pushed, slapped, and punched in the face multiple times while another youth held staff.
- c. 15 yr. old male. Entered custody after incident with a firearm that resulted in a shooting. This youth was in possession of the handgun and after the shooting he hid the magazine from the gun in his room.
- d. 14. yr. old male. Car theft, physically aggressive to mother. Punched father in face.
- e. 16 yr. old male. attempted to take control of the vehicle of his provider and assaulted her and hit her car causing damage. A month ago, made threats to kill his family members with a hammer over the span of a few days.
- f. 16 yr. old male. Charged with Aggravated Assault, Simple Assault, disorderly conduct, & False Public alarms
- g. 13 yr. old male. Runs away, selling drugs, coerced a female peer into sexual acts, physical assault to mother and females.
- h. 11 yr. old male charged with arson, unlawful mischief, reckless endangerment.
- i. Female sliced a family relative with a box cutter and punched them in the head multiple times.
- j. Female Charged w/ Agg. Assault with a Deadly Weapon and Reckless Endangerment.
- k. Foster parents found bottles of gasoline and lighters in youth's room. Youth said that he wanted to make a Molotov cocktail to throw at his adoptive parents. He then damaged the state car that the FSW came in and smashed the windshield as the FSW began driving away.

- l. Youth, stabbed caregiver, caused two black eyes and threatened to kill family members.
- m. Charged with Aggravated Assault “tazed” three people with one being injured. assaultive behavior, sexual acting out.

2- Total Instances of Staffings:



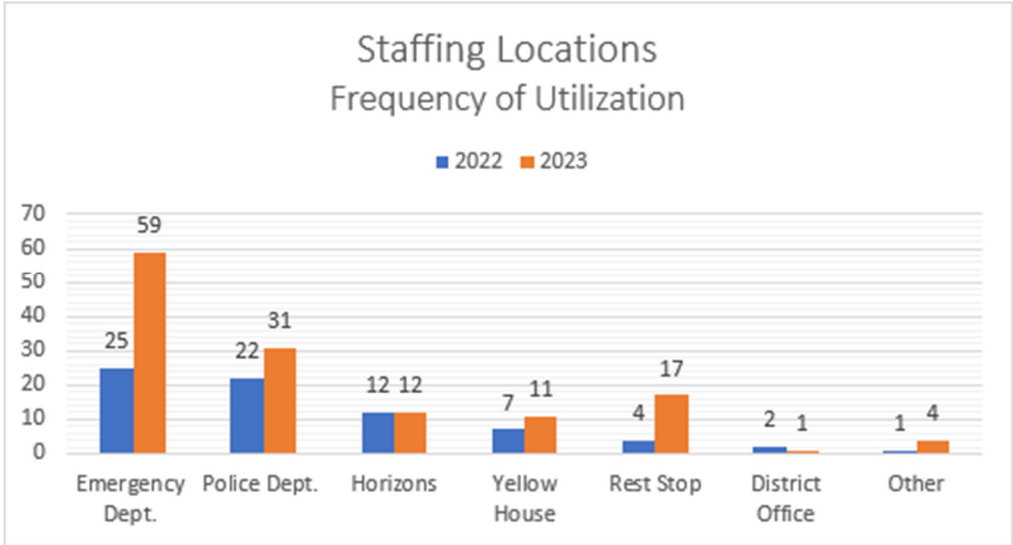
Total Staffings	
2017	8
2018	7
2019	8
2020	15
2021	30
2022	63
2023	126

Total # of Juveniles Staffed

2022	2023
51	106

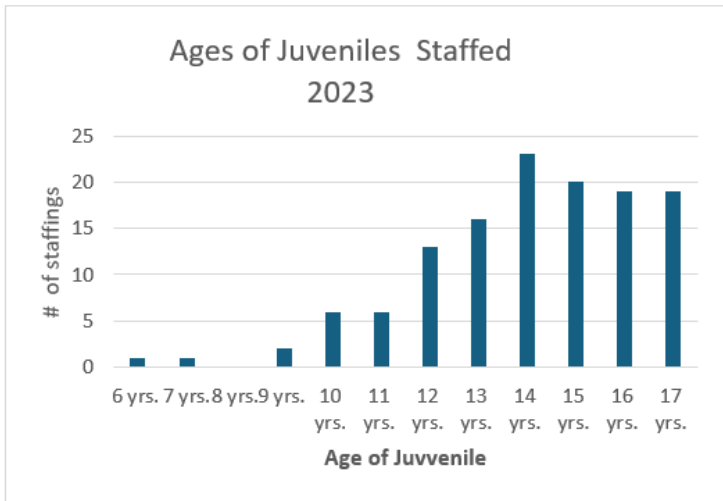
3- Staffing Locations:

	# of Times Location Utilized						
	Emergency Dept.	Police Dept.	Horizons	Yellow House	Rest Stop	District Office	Other
2022	25	22	12	7	4	2	1
2023	59	31	12	11	17	1	4



Other Locations: Families First, Hospital Pediatric Unit, Hotel, Mountainside, Shelburne House

4- Ages & Gender/sex



Age of Juvenile	# of Staffings
6 yrs.	1
7 yrs.	1
8 yrs.	0
9 yrs.	2
10 yrs.	6
11 yrs.	6
12 yrs.	13
13 yrs.	16
14 yrs.	23
15 yrs.	20
16 yrs.	19
17 yrs.	19

Birth Sex of Juveniles Staffed	
M	67
F	59

Identified as Transgender Female	Identified as Transgender Male
1	4