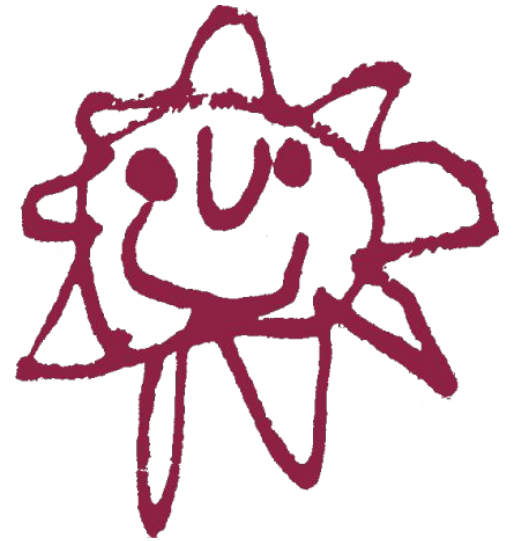


Voices  
for Vermont's Children



## Reach Ahead Pilot Testimony

Amy Rose, Policy Director  
April 1, 2025

## STATE STRATEGIC PLAN 2018–2023 (FY2019–FY2023)

**VISION:** Vermont’s economy is growing faster than the costs of living; our state is measurably more affordable each year for families and businesses; and we are meeting our obligation to protect the most vulnerable.




**STRATEGIC OUTCOME**

### GROW THE ECONOMY

We will grow Vermont’s economy by expanding existing businesses, recruiting new employers and expanding our labor force (workers age 25 to 64), resulting in increased economic opportunity, more jobs, higher K-12 school enrollment and growth in state revenues.

**Breakthrough Indicators**

- ▶ Size of Workforce: Percent of Population; Statewide and by County
- ▶ Employee Growth Rate: Total and Size by Employee Count
- ▶ Wage Growth by Region



**STRATEGIC OUTCOME**

### MAKE VERMONT MORE AFFORDABLE

We will make Vermont a more affordable place for families and businesses by advancing policies that support both economic expansion and affordability; working to prevent state spending and regulated costs, like electric rates and healthcare spending, from rising faster than wages; and building capacity in state government through innovation, improvement and efficiencies.

**Breakthrough Indicators**

- ▶ Average Percent of House Hold Income Spent on:
  - » Healthcare
  - » Housing (including utilities and heating costs)
  - » Taxes and Fees



**STRATEGIC OUTCOME**

### PROTECTING THE VULNERABLE

We will protect the most vulnerable by providing services and benefits aimed at lifting more Vermonters out of poverty, ensuring the greatest degree of participation and independence, protecting children, and improving overall health and wellness of our communities.

**Breakthrough Indicators**

- ▶ Percent of Population Living at or Below 200% FPL
- ▶ Rate of Homelessness/Housing Stability
- ▶ Kindergarten Readiness
- ▶ Percent of Population with Access to Comprehensive Healthcare (includes preventative, primary and mental health, substance use disorder treatment and recovery)



**STRATEGIC OUTCOME**

### MODERNIZE AND IMPROVE EFFICIENCY OF GOVERNMENT

We will nurture and institutionalize a culture of continuous improvement by integrating the Governor’s vision with employee-driven reforms to improve processes and modernize state government’s systems, providing more efficient and effective services and improving customer service in all areas of state government.

**Breakthrough Indicators**

- ▶ Employees Trained In Continuous Improvement
- ▶ Employees Trained in Continuous Improvement by Cabinet and Non-Cabinet Units
- ▶ Number of On-Line Transactions



## STRATEGIC OUTCOME

# PROTECTING THE VULNERABLE

We will protect the most vulnerable by providing services and benefits aimed at lifting more Vermonters out of poverty, ensuring the greatest degree of participation and independence, protecting children, and improving overall health and wellness of our communities.

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**THE REACH UP MISSION:** We join families on their journey to overcome obstacles, explore opportunities, improve their finances, and reach their goals.

**OUR VISION:** Families are empowered, connected and thriving.



Reach Up

Reach First, Reach Ahead

Post-Secondary Education (PSE)

Child-Only Reach Up

# April is National Child Abuse Prevention Month

nearly **85%**  
of families investigated by  
child protective services  
have incomes below 200%  
of the federal poverty line

*(\$49,720 for a family of 3 in 2023)*

(Dolan, 2011 - *National Survey of Child & Adolescent Well-Being II Baseline Report*)  
(HHS Poverty Guidelines, 2023)





# Effect of Material Hardship on Child Welfare Involvement

Experiencing any type of material hardship (*food, housing, utilities or medical*) is **strongly associated with an elevated risk** for CPS involvement

If families experience **at least one** material hardship

- **Likelihood of being investigated for neglect increases nearly 3x**
- **Likelihood of being investigated for physical abuse increases nearly 4x**

If families experience **multiple types** of material hardship

- **Greater likelihood of being involved in a CPS investigation than families who experience a single type of material hardship**

If families experience multiple types of hardship **after** experiencing no hardships

- **Likelihood of being involved in a CPS investigation increases 4x**
- **Likelihood of being investigated for physical abuse increases 7x**

(Yang, 2015)

## Reach First

Part of the Reach Up family of programs, Reach First can help your family get through a temporary, short-term financial crisis and avoid the need for longer-term assistance.

### Who Is Eligible

You may be eligible for if you:

- Are filing a new application
- Meet the eligibility requirements for Reach Up
- Will likely not need help in 4 months or less.



# Post-Secondary Education (PSE)

Part of the Reach Up family of programs, PSE can help you earn an undergraduate college degree so you can get a good paying job and support your children.

## Who Is Eligible

Parents who:

- Live in Vermont.
- Have minor, dependent children at home.
- Have household income under 150% of the federal poverty level.

## If Your Application Is Approved

You'll get:

- Monthly cash payments (if you are income eligible).
- Support services like case management and help setting goals.
- Help with childcare, transportation, and school supplies.

## What You'll Have To Do

- Get accepted into college.
- Secure the funds for tuition. The [VT Student Assistance Corporation](#) can help.
- Agree to work no more than 20 hours a week so you can focus on your education.





# Reach Up Child Only

Provides cash assistance to help adults care for the minor, dependent children of relatives or family friends.

## Who Is Eligible

To be eligible, a child must:

- Be under 18 (with a few exceptions\*)
- NOT be getting SSI benefits
- NOT be in foster care
- Have little or no income of their own
- Be living with/cared for by someone other than a legal, step or adoptive parent

In some situations, additional factors will be considered.

## If Your Application Is Approved

You will receive monthly cash assistance (called a *caretaker benefit*).



# REACH UP

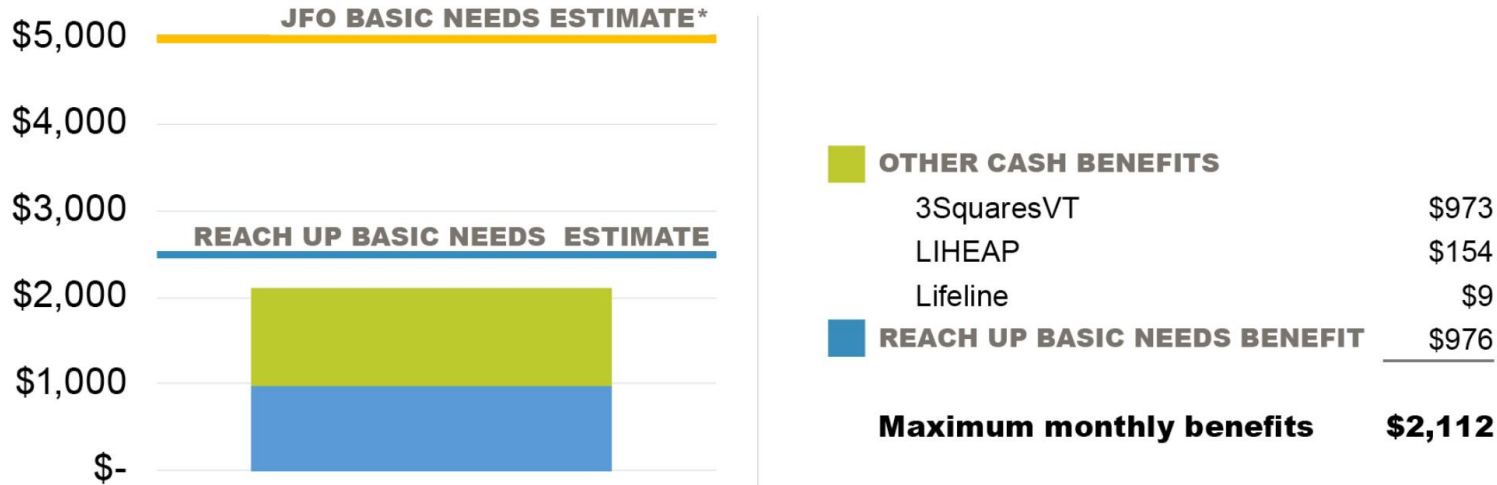


The purpose of the Reach Up program is to:

- A. assist families, recognizing individual and unique characteristics, to obtain the opportunities and skills necessary for self-sufficiency;
- B. encourage economic independence by removing barriers and disincentives to work and providing positive incentives to work;
- C. support parental nurturing;**
- D. support parental responsibility and positive parental role models, both custodial and noncustodial;
- E. measure the success of the system by what is best for children;**
- F. improve the well-being of children by providing for their immediate basic needs, including food, housing and clothing;**
- G. respect the dignity of individuals and families receiving assistance by providing employment, education, and other services through social service delivery systems available to all Vermont citizens and by encouraging the private sector to integrate families receiving assistance into the mainstream of the employment market;
- H. recognize the challenges facing many families receiving assistance by minimizing structural financial disincentives to increased earnings and the abrupt termination of assistance before parents are fully integrated into the employment market;
  - I. conserve state public financial resources by operating the system of aid in a manner that is efficient and avoids federal fiscal sanctions; and
  - J. conform to the federal TANF law.

# Even counting other benefits, Reach Up still falls short

Maximum monthly benefits, Reach Up basic needs and housing, and Joint Fiscal Office basic needs estimate, family of four, 2024



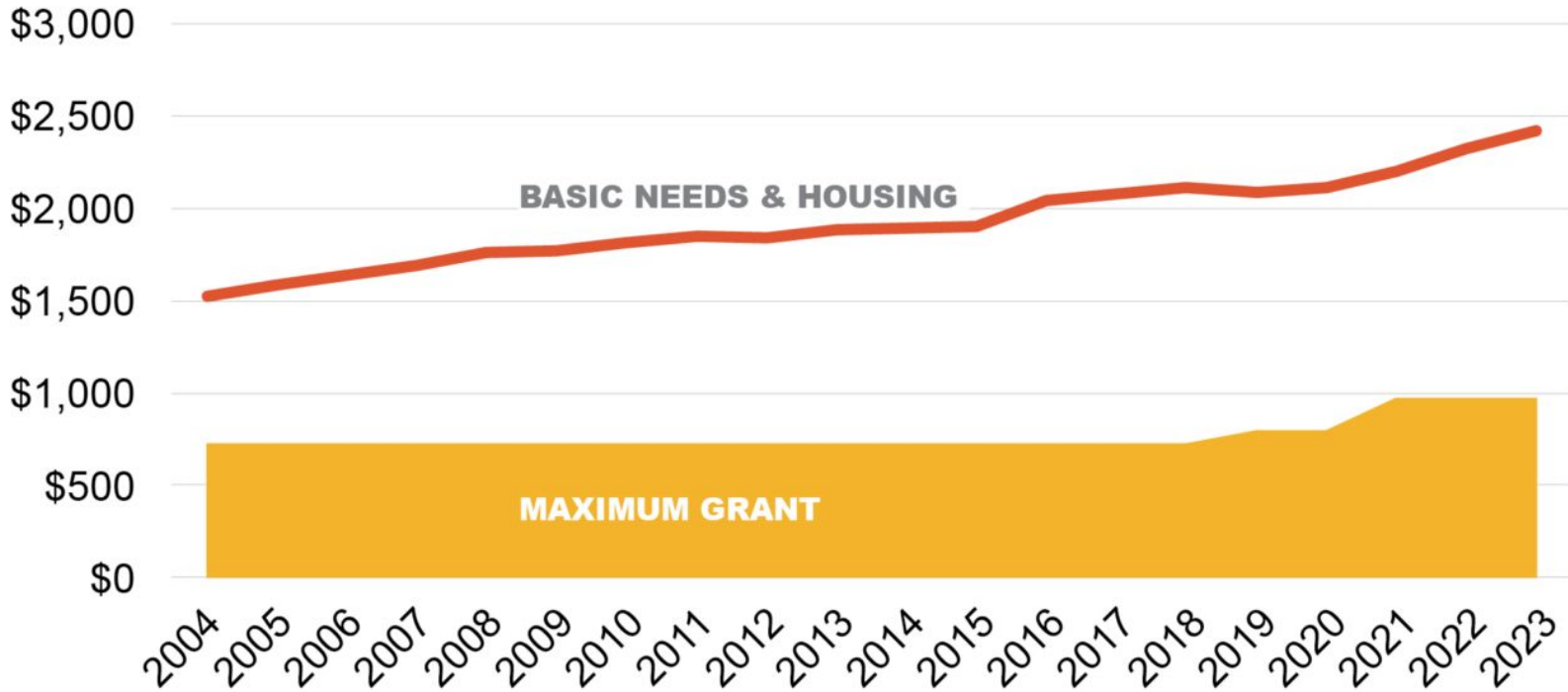
\*Excludes health care, child care, rental and life insurance, and savings

Data sources: Department for Children and Families, Joint Fiscal Office, Vermont Department of Public Service, and LIHEAP Clearinghouse

©2025 Public Assets Institute

# Increased Reach Up grant helped, but still met less than half of basic needs

Cost of basic needs and housing, and maximum monthly Reach Up grant, family of four, 2004-2023



Data source: Vermont Department for Children and Families

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# Reach Ahead

Reach Ahead helps families transition from Vermont's Reach Up or Post-Secondary Education (PSE) program to work.



To be eligible:

- -You must live in Vermont
- -Your family must include minor children
- -Your Reach Up or PSE grant must have closed within the last six months
- -At least one adult in your family must meet the Reach Up work requirement through paid employment
- -You cannot exceed your lifetime limit for Reach Ahead (24 months)

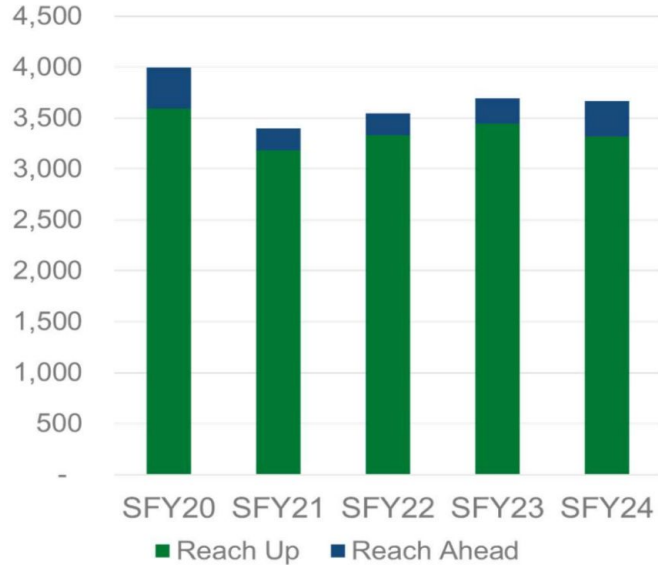
Reach Ahead may provide the following benefits for up to 24 months:

- -Support to help you keep a job. This could include, for example, cash incentives for working and help paying for car repairs, work clothes and work supplies.
- -A 100% child care subsidy. You'll get the maximum subsidy available. This means you won't have to pay as much out of pocket.
- -A cash benefit to help you buy food. You'll get \$50 a month for the first 12 months and \$5 a month for the remaining 12.

How do I get Reach Ahead?

If you're eligible, we will automatically enroll you in Reach Ahead when your Reach Up or PSE grant closes. You won't have to fill out an application or enrollment form to start getting benefits. But you might have to complete a review at some point to keep getting them.

## Reach Up Average Monthly Caseload



Year	Reach Up Caseload (Avg/Month)	Reach Ahead Caseload (Avg/Month)
SFY20	3,592	402
SFY21	3,185	216
SFY22	3,329	220
SFY23	3,445	249
SFY24	3,316	349



# Measure the success of the system by what is best for children.

“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.”

~American Public Human Services Association



# Reach Ahead Pilot Program

(July 1, 2023 - June 30, 2025)

Part of the Reach Up family of programs, Reach Ahead Pilot can help you transition from Reach Up or Post-Secondary Education (PSE) to work.



## Who Is Eligible

To be eligible, your family must:

- Live in Vermont.
- Include a minor child.
- Have a Reach Up or PSE benefit that closed sometime in the last 12 months.
- Include at least one adult who meets the work requirement through paid employment.

## The Help Available

Reach Ahead Pilot may provide the following for up to 24 months:

- Support to help you keep a job (e.g., help paying for car repairs, work clothes, and work supplies).
- The maximum child care subsidy available.
- A cash benefit to help you buy food: \$100 a month for the first 6 months, \$50 a month for the next 18 months.

## How To Apply

If you're eligible, we'll automatically enroll you in Reach Ahead Pilot when your Reach Up or PSE benefit closes.

# What You Need to Know About Reach Ahead Pilot Program

The Reach Ahead Pilot helps families to transition from either Reach Up or PostSecondary Education (PSE) to work. The Reach Ahead Pilot is part of the Reach Up family of programs. The Reach Ahead Pilot program is from July 1, 2023 through June 30, 2025.

**Mission:** Reach Up joins families on their journey to overcome obstacles, explore opportunities, improve their finances and reach their goals.

**Vision:** Families will be empowered, connected and thriving. When your Reach Up or PSE benefit closes, you'll automatically be enrolled in the Reach Ahead Pilot Program if you are eligible, unless you have chosen to not be auto enrolled. You won't have to fill out an application or enrollment form to start getting benefits. But you might have to complete a review at some point to keep getting them.

**Who is eligible?** To be eligible for Reach Ahead Pilot: 1. You must live in Vermont; 2. Your family must include minor children; 3. At least one adult in your family that meets the work requirement through paid employment; and 4. Reach Ahead Pilot allows 24 consecutive months starting July 1, 2023 and ending June 30, 2025.

**What help does Reach Ahead Pilot provide?** The Reach Ahead Pilot will provide the following benefits for up to 24 consecutive months: Support to help you keep a job. This could include, for example, help paying for car repairs, work clothes, and work supplies. A child care subsidy. You'll get the maximum subsidy available. This means you won't have to pay as much out of pocket. **A food benefit of \$100 a month for the first 6 months and then \$50 a month for the remaining 18 months.** Work support payments following this structure.

The Reach Ahead Pilot is from July 1, 2023 through June 30, 2025. **o \$750 work support payment after 6 months of Reach Ahead Pilot o \$1000 work support payment after 12 months of Reach Ahead Pilot o \$1000 work support payment after 18 months of Reach Ahead Pilot o \$1000 work support payment after 24 months of Reach Ahead Pilot**

A few other things you should know: You can opt out of automatic enrollment if you don't want to get the Reach Ahead Pilot. If you're not eligible for the Reach Ahead Pilot when your Reach Up or PSE benefit closes (or you opt out), you can apply within 12 months from the date your Reach Up or PSE closed. If you want the child care subsidy and work supports, you'll need to talk to your case manager to make arrangements. The cash benefit is automatic. You'll get your Reach Ahead Pilot cash benefit on an EBT card. It can only be spent on food items allowed by 3SquaresVT. If you have any questions, talk to your case manager or call 1-800-479-6151.

## Report to Legislature - January 31, 2025

Reach Ahead Pilot The Reach Ahead Pilot program, which provides supports for working parents transitioning off Reach Up, started its second year in July 2024. Participants receive an increased food benefit for 24 months and job retention work payments of \$750 to \$1000 at 6, 12, 18, and 24 months of participation. All families enrolled in Reach Ahead meet the federal work requirement and contribute to the state's meeting the Work Participation Rate. Evaluation of the program has included analyzing administrative data and survey data from participants.

The pilot concludes on June 30, 2025. At that time, all data and findings collected during the pilot program will be compiled for further review by the administration and relevant stakeholders. This will help determine whether the program met its intended goals and any potential next steps. In preparation for the pilot's conclusion, the Central Office team is actively working on a comprehensive communication plan. We will ensure that participants and staff are well informed as we get closer to June, with detailed information and next steps shared in a timely manner.

An average of 681 Reach Up and Reach Ahead participants per month were working. Of the 681 participants, 348 were in the Reach Ahead program. The number and percentage of active Reach Up participants who are working has decreased over the last year, while transition to Reach Ahead has increased.

Most Reach Up participants' grants will close when they start working since very little income make the family ineligible for Reach Up financial assistance. As the average wage has increased, the Reach Up benefit levels have not, driving the income eligibility threshold lower each year. The number of families enrolled in Reach Ahead has increased from 231 in 2022 to 262 in 2023, then to 348 in 2024 with the Reach Ahead Pilot Program. More families are leaving Reach Up and going to work than in previous years.

# Questions

- \$ 2 million was appropriated for the two year pilot. How long were families accepted into the pilot? Will all the families have the opportunity to benefit from the 24 months of payment or will the payment end in June even if they are 6 months in?
- What is the base level appropriation for Reach Ahead?







A story from Vermont - single mom of two, Caledonia County

# Feedback

- Transportation continues to be a major obstacle for families. Currently, 275 participants are on the wait list to receive a vehicle. In 2024 the Reach Up program successfully purchased 26 state surplus fleet vehicles that were awarded to participants to help them overcome obstacles and reach their goals.
- Unfortunately, shelter barriers also increased from 19% in 2022 to 22% in 2023, and again to 25% in 2024. This is not surprising given the housing crisis throughout Vermont. Families enrolled in Reach Up, who are experiencing poverty rates below 45% of the Federal Poverty Level, are particularly vulnerable to the lack of affordable housing and housing vouchers.

# Feedback

- It is impossible to save on a reach up budget - so the reach ahead pilot is extra helpful.
- Access to a housing voucher makes a HUGE difference. Reach Up participants pay about a third of their max benefit for housing when they have a voucher, but without housing - it is impossible to meet basic needs.
- “My RU case managers have all been great - they connect me to other programs and resources. It is hard when they change, it is like I am starting from scratch each time someone new comes in.”
- “I forgot about the special funds, I don’t ask for them because they are never available.

“Thank the legislature for asking. It feels good to know that they are thinking about us.”

