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Agency of Human Services, Department for Children and Families

Reach Up Annual Report

In Accordance with Title 33 V.S.A. 1134

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Introduction

The Department for Children and Families (DCF) submits this report for the [Reach Up program](#), pursuant to 33 V.S.A § 1134, which requires that annually by January 31st, DCF report to the Governor and the General Assembly on progress achieving the goals in 33 V.S.A. § [1002](#), § [1102](#), and § [1202](#) in the past year. The sections in this report following the “Highlights and Changes” correspond to the numerical paragraphs under subsection 1134. Most data and information referenced in this report, unless stated otherwise, are for the period October 1, 2024, through September 30, 2025 (federal fiscal year 2025) and extracted from the State’s ACCESS system. Links throughout this report provide access to data tables for a more in-depth look.

The Reach Up program provided assistance to an average of 3,228 Vermont families, including 6,266 Vermont children. This benefit, along with the coaching provided by Reach Up case managers and career coaches from Vermont Association of Business Industry and Rehabilitation (VABIR), helped provide the fundamental building blocks for long-term success ([link to Reach Up Demographics and Caseload data](#)). For the last year, an average of 2,681 adults participated in the Reach Up program each month by working with case managers and career coaches to set goals for education, training, housing, employment, and family well-being. Of the 6,266 children enrolled in the Reach Up program, 34%, or 2,176, are under age six. This is a critical time in child development, and the Reach Up program offers these families and children resources during a particularly important period for brain development in young children.

The Reach Up program, administered by the Agency of Human Services Department of Children and Families' Economic Services Division, supports families with low-income by providing cash assistance and ensuring children's basic needs are met. Its mission is to help families overcome obstacles, improve finances, and achieve goals by offering support for job skills development and employment. The program also assists with childcare, transportation, and work-related expenses.

Highlights and Changes in 2025:

Professional Development

The Reach Up Central Office team collaborated with Dr. Nicole Bossard from TGC Positivity Inc. to design and implement a comprehensive training initiative aimed at strengthening staff proficiency in Goal Plan Do Review Revise (GPDR/R), the Reach Up program's goal setting model, and enhancing related coaching competencies. The training, titled *Empowered, Connected and Thriving – Embracing GPDR/R and Coaching to Support our Vision* was initially launched for leadership in Fall of 2024 and subsequently delivered to case management and career coach staff in Winter 2025.

Alongside this, the Reach Up Central Office team, in collaboration with staff from across Economic Services Division (ESD), established a work group to design and implement a Supervisory Coaching Tool. This initiative was developed to strengthen supervisory practices, enhance staff development, and support consistent, high-quality service delivery across the Reach Up program. The resulting Coaching Reflection Forms provide a structured framework for case management staff and supervisors to reflect on participant meetings, assess strengths, identify areas of growth, and engage in collaborative learning. Through this tool, the program continues to foster a culture of reflection, professional growth, and continuous improvement in support of positive outcomes for families.

Amazon Connect

The Reach Up program implemented the Amazon Connect platform as part of the Reach Up Services model to strengthen communication, service delivery, and program oversight. The platform enables the recording of calls for training and quality assurance purposes, providing supervisors and staff with opportunities to review interactions, reinforce best practice, and identify areas for improvement. Approximately 80% of

meetings with participants occur by phone, which highlights the importance of the Amazon Connect platform. To support this work, a coaching reflection form was created to guide staff development. Supervisors can listen to a recorded call and provide structured feedback, while Reach Up Case Managers have the opportunity to self-reflect on their approach.

The use of recorded calls enhances staff development through targeted coaching and ensures greater consistency, accountability, and quality in participant engagement. This initiative reflects the program's ongoing commitment to maintaining high standards of service and supporting continuous improvement across all levels of practice. The Reach Up program follows strict confidentiality protocols, and recordings, like all case records, are securely stored, access-limited, and used only for appropriate, defined purposes.

Housing Case Management

Reach Up case managers continued to provide integral support to families facing obstacles around their housing. In the spring of 2025, concentrated efforts were made to assist families living in hotel rooms through the General Assistance (GA) program. Of the 185 families that were housed through the General Assistance program, 79 were receiving Reach Up and 106 families were not. Reach Up case managers connected with both groups of families to offer them support. Many families who were receiving Reach Up and living in a hotel room were able to work with their case manager and create a plan for where they would stay after they had used up their allowed nights through the General Assistance program. While the most desirable plan was obtaining a long-term housing voucher and locating an apartment, other plans included increasing household income to be able to rent a room or self-pay at the hotel, moving in with family or friends, or camping.

Since July 2025, Reach Up Case Managers have met weekly with Reach Up households who were also connected to the GA program in an effort to further overcome barriers to housing. Reach Up Case Managers have worked countless hours helping families brainstorm alternate housing solutions to General Assistance, complete

housing applications for subsidized housing, obtain documents necessary for a successful application, and take steps to improve their rental resume.

Families faced with housing insecurity often experience multiple obstacles, including mental health symptoms, substances misuse, domestic violence, and criminal histories. These factors, accompanied by a lack of positive rental histories, can greatly reduce the availability of housing options for families and require intense work and creative solutions. With the reduction in federally funded long term subsidized housing opportunities, case managers also supported families in maintaining their existing housing whenever possible to reduce the numbers of households newly entering homelessness.

Reach Ahead

The Reach Ahead Pilot program was implemented as a time-limited initiative, spanning from July 1, 2023, through June 30, 2025. The pilot provided support for working parents transitioning away from Reach Up. Participants received 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, meeting the federal Work Participation Rate (WPR). Evaluation of the program has included analyzing administrative data and survey data from participants.

The goal of the program was to improve the long-term employment outcomes to household exiting the Reach Up program through continued case management. Unfortunately, the Reach Ahead pilot was not designed as a scientific experiment, as it lacked a control group to reliably demonstrate that the program effectively helped more individuals maintain employment, increase wages, stay up to date on rent, or reduce involvement with family services. The program's evaluation relied on analyzing administrative data and participant survey responses, which were self-reported by those benefiting from the program and receiving higher levels of support. No statistical data

was gathered. The pilot program was notably expensive, with spending per case rising by 383% from FY23 to FY25. Given the substantial costs and the absence statistical data on outcomes, the division decided not to continue the pilot

The pilot program concluded on June 30, 2025. Starting July 1, 2025, the original Reach Ahead rules were reinstated. Under these rules, eligible families receive monthly food benefits of \$50 for the first 12 months and \$5 for the following 12 months. The Reach Ahead program has a cumulative lifetime limit of 24 months, meaning families can only receive these benefits for a total of 24 months over their lifetime.

Section 1: Participant Barriers

Participant barriers or obstacles may prevent or delay entrance into the workforce. Reach Up participants and their families often face significant obstacles on their path to employment. Reach Up case managers and VABIR career coaches work with families to identify and set goals to overcome these obstacles and to access opportunities that will help them become economically mobile. Case management staff assess participants' strengths and barriers to employment on an ongoing basis. Data is entered into the Family Support Matrix in the ACCESS system as changes occur in the participants' situations. From October 2024 to September 2025, case managers and career coaches assessed 4,559 participants and found 12,452 barriers, an average of 2.7 barriers per participant ([link to Reach Up Barriers and January 31, 2026 DCF: Evaluation of Reach Up 4 Deferments data](#)).

To help mitigate these obstacles, Reach Up provides incentives and support services designed to help families reach their employment, training, and education goals. Reach Up provides a wide range of support services, including payments for childcare (for example a summer camp that does not accept Child Care Financial Assistance Payments (CCFAP)), car repairs, cash incentives, work supplies, and transportation.

Case managers and career coaches provide financial coaching to integrate financial capability into goal setting and to address financial barriers. Participants set and work towards their own goals, many of which address barriers to employment.

This past year, improvements in adult employment and finances continued. In 2019, 62% of participants reported obstacles related to adult employment; by 2025 that number had decreased to 40%. Likewise, the percentage of participants reporting finances as a barrier decreased every year from 49% in 2021, to 34% in 2025. Shelter barriers ¹increased from 19% in 2022 to 22% in 2023, and again to 25% in 2024. In 2025, shelter barriers saw a slight decrease to 24%. 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 options and housing vouchers. Transportation is the highest barrier; 42% percent of participants report transportation as a barrier to success.

Section 2: Participant Outcomes

An average of 698 Reach Up and Reach Ahead participants per month were working ([link to Reach Up Employment and Wage data](#)). Of the 698 participants, 403 were in the Reach Ahead program. Most Reach Up participants' grants will close when they start working, since earning a small amount of income will make a family ineligible for Reach Up financial assistance. As the average wage range ([link to Reach Up Employment and Wage data](#)) has increased, the Reach Up benefit levels have not, causing the income eligibility threshold to be lower each year. The number of families enrolled in Reach Ahead decreased in 2025 to 403; in 2024 the average case load was 422. The decrease is due to the Reach Ahead Pilot Program ending. When the Reach Ahead

¹ Homeless/living in shelter, dangerous/inadequate housing, lack of affordable housing, owes back rent, other

Pilot ended, the 24-month cumulative lifetime limit was re-established which caused some participants to no longer be eligible for Reach Ahead.

More families are leaving Reach Up and going to work than in previous years. In the past the program has tracked the number of participants earning at least \$15 per hour and that number has increased dramatically every year since 2018, from 8.7% to 48% in 2023. In Federal Fiscal Year (FFY) 2022 17.5% of earners made more than \$17 per hour; that percentage increased to 22.1% in 2023. In the 2024 data, the highest wage bracket was increased from \$17/hour to \$18/hour. Again, in the 2025 data, the wage increased from \$18/hour to \$19/hour. Twenty-five percent of working participants earn at least \$19/hour now.

Section 3: 3SquareVT Participation of Reach Up “Leavers”

An average of 1,614 families left Reach Up each quarter. Totals include Reach Ahead participants. The Reach Ahead pilot ending on June 30, 2025, did increase the number of participants exiting the program in June 2025. ([link to Reach Up Demographics and Caseload data](#)). This was an increase from last year's average of 1,387 per quarter. An average of 1,307 or 80% of these families were still off Reach Up four months later, which was comparable to last year. More families used 3SquaresVT upon leaving Reach Up this year. When they left Reach Up, 90% of these families were receiving 3SquaresVT benefits compared to 84% last year; four months later, 57% still received 3SquaresVT compared to 55% last year.

Section 4: Health Care Enrollment of Reach Up “Leavers”

Vermont is a leader in providing healthcare assistance to children and families. When a family’s income exceeds the Medicaid eligibility threshold due to earnings or increased child support, the family will continue to be eligible for Medicaid through Transitional Medical Assistance (TMA) regardless of the family’s increased earnings. TMA extends a family’s Medicaid eligibility for up to 12 months. This is because of the Health Benefits Eligibility and Enrollment rule § 7.03(a)(6)(i)

Section 5: Summary of Reports by Contractors

The [“Vermont MOMS Partnership Data Snapshot: July 2024-June 2025”](#) sustainment report was submitted by Yale University in September 2025. The data snapshot is a summary of activities and data synthesized by Yale University’s Elevate Policy Lab, based on information collected by the Reach Up program from Howard Center, who operates the Vermont MOMS Partnership. Mothers and female caregivers connected to the Reach Up program can be referred to participate in VT MOMS, which is an eight-week, cognitive behavioral therapy-based group program targeting maternal mental health and designed to build skills for stress and mood management.

This is the first report of its kind since Yale, Reach Up, and Howard have initiated procedural and data collection changes to the program. Because this shift in process and data occurred mid-year, data is limited and pre-post changes in depressive symptoms and general well-being could not be tested. Going forward it is anticipated

that future data snapshots will provide a more complete picture of ongoing MOMS programming in Vermont.

Section 6: Work Participation Rates and the Caseload Reduction Credit

States must submit the percentage of families participating in federally approved “countable” activities to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families (ACF). Countable activities include paid employment, community service, limited hours of job search and readiness, and, in a few cases, job training and education. Federal countable activities do not include many activities that address multiple, complex barriers to employment, such as mental health treatment, housing search, and finding childcare and transportation. Further federal limitations on hours of participation and the age of participants in certain activities exist. ACF computes each state’s monthly Work Participation Rate for “All Families” and “Two-Parent Families” and then averages those rates over 12 months to calculate the state’s overall Work Participation Rate for the federal fiscal year ([link to Work Participation Rates data](#)). States are required to meet a 50% All-Family rate and a 90% Two-Parent Family rate.

An adjustment to the state’s Work Participation Rate, called the Caseload Reduction Credit (CRC) ([link to Work Participation Rates data](#)), may be calculated based on two factors: decline in the state’s caseload due to employment during the prior FFY, and state spending above the federally required Maintenance of Effort (MOE) funds.

Adding the Caseload Reduction Credit (CRC) to the participation rates for 2025 results in a 56.5% All Families rate and a 55.8% Two-Parent rate. The two-parent rate is 90% minus the caseload reduction credit (55.8%). Vermont’s actual target Work Participation Rate for the two-parent rate is around 34%. Vermont is on track to meet the 2025 Work Participation Rate for both All-Families and Two-Parent rates.

Section 7: Basic Needs, Housing Allowances, and Maximum Grants

As part of the benefit calculation, DCF uses the “basic needs standard” ([link to Basic Needs and Shelter](#)) from 2019 based on the Consumer Price Index that includes the cost of living considered essential to all households and a “housing allowance” that is based on what participants reported paying for their housing in 2001. Each year, DCF reports a comparison between what’s currently being used for basic needs standard (2019) and the housing allowance (2001), and the current basic needs standard and housing allowance (both 2024).

Current Maximum Grants are determined by the following formula ([link to Basic Needs and Shelter](#)): Basic Needs plus Housing Allowance plus Special Needs Housing Allowance (if applicable) multiplied by the Ratable Reduction. The maximum grants for families of one to four members outside Chittenden County range from \$562 to \$976.

Section 8: Profiles of Families with 60 Countable Months of Reach Up

During the last fiscal year, there were an average of 595 families each month at the 60-month limit ([link to RU Time Limits data](#)). Families in this population face higher rates of barriers than those in the overall Reach Up population, with an average of 4.9 barriers per household, compared to 2.7 barriers per household in the overall Reach Up population.

Barrier	Overall Reach Up Population	60 Month Population
Emotional Health	30%	50%
Health and Safety	22%	38%
Transportation	42%	49%
Adult Employment	40%	60%

To see the impact in 2025 on time limits “leavers” from the previous year, DCF looked at 35 unique families who left Reach Up due to time limits between October 2022 and September 2023. The data analysis shows an increased need during 2022 for these leavers:

- ▶ 100% used 3SquaresVT,
- ▶ 27% used General Assistance housing,
- ▶ 77% returned to Reach Up within 12 months, compared to 69% in 2023.

Section 9: Families Participating in the Post-Secondary Education (PSE) Program

According to data, an average of 18 students per month participated in the [PSE](#) program during FFY25. This number has been steadily decreasing over the last decade. However, participants may be accessing post-secondary education in the Reach Up program instead, since Act 133 allows Reach Up participants to access a broader range of activities that benefit them. From discussions with parents and case managers, we

know that PSE students struggle with many of the same obstacles as Reach Up participants, such as finding childcare, accessing transportation, affordable housing, and dealing with mental health challenges. We know that a PSE graduate earns significantly more income than a Reach Up leaver, are more likely to be employed, and that they return to Reach Up less frequently. The Reach Up team is exploring ways to increase participation in this important program, which plays a critical role in helping families achieve economic mobility.

Conclusion

In summary, this report highlights various initiatives aimed at improving participant well-being. Key achievements include enhanced professional development, effective housing case management, and improved communication through recorded phone calls. The report addresses barriers to income enhancement, participant outcomes, and the transition of individuals to other programs such as Healthcare and 3SVT after exiting Reach Up. It also covers aspects related to contractors, Work Participation Rates, Caseload Reduction Credit, Basic Needs, Housing Allowances, and Maximum Grants. Additionally, it profiles families with 60 countable months of Reach Up and those engaged in the Post-Secondary Education (PSE) Program.