
**Report to
The Vermont Legislature**

Evaluation of Reach Up

In Accordance with 33 V.S.A. §1134

**Submitted to: Governor
General Assembly**

**Submitted by: Chris Winters, Commissioner
Department for Children and Families**

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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, 2023, through September 30, 2024 (federal fiscal year 2024) and extracted from the State’s ACCESS system. Data reported in Section 3 (Reach Up leavers’ participation in 3SquaresVT) are for the period July 1, 2023, through June 30, 2024 (state fiscal year 2024). Links throughout this report provide access to data tables for a more in-depth look.

The [Reach Up program](#) provided household income for a monthly average of 3,347 Vermont families, including 6390 Vermont children. This income, along with the coaching provided by Reach Up case managers and VABIR career coaches¹, 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 2746 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 6390 children enrolled in the Reach Up program, 36%, or 2296, 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.

Highlights and Changes in 2024

Professional Development

The Reach Up Central Office team partnered with The Prosperity Agenda to provide [Family Centered Coaching](#) training to all Reach Up and Career Coach staff, Reach Up Supervisors, and Program Administrators. From January 2024 through or to May 2024 they attended a seven-workshop series, which allowed for learning and reflection on mindset, tools, and skills needed to work with families holistically towards financial wellness. The coaching skills learned through the workshop series are being incorporated into all aspects of the program, from supervision to supporting Reach Up participants in goal setting. The Reach Up Program uses a model of goal setting called [Goal Plan Do Review Revise](#) (GPDR/R). As an additional layer of training, the team has launched a training series that integrates GPDR/R into Coaching for economic mobility. This training is titled Empowered, Connecting and Thriving - Embracing GPDR/R and Coaching to Support Our Vision. The training series is presented in collaboration with Dr. Nicole Bossard from TGC Positivity Inc. and was launched for division leadership staff in the fall of 2024. Case managers and career coaches will attend sessions starting in January, 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.

¹ Vermont Association of Business Industry and Rehabilitation

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.

Reach Up Car Purchase Program

Transportation continues to be a major obstacle for families. Currently, 275 participants are on the wait list to receive a vehicle. The Reach Up program collaborates with the State of Vermont Department of Buildings & General Services (BGS) to purchase surplus fleet vehicles. BGS provides surplus fleet vehicles to Economic Services Division's (ESD) Reach Up Program for the benefit of individuals who are enrolled in Reach Up and need reliable transportation to overcome obstacles, explore opportunities, improve their finances, and reach their employment, education, and training goals. The purpose of this agreement is to support the goals of Vermont's Reach Up Program to help reduce intergenerational poverty and support the well-being of children and families, help reduce transportation obstacles for Vermont households who are enrolled in Reach Up and find a new use for BGS surplus fleet vehicles. 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.

Addressing Domestic Violence and Intimate Partner Violence

This past year the Reach Up team has reenergized the ESD Domestic Violence (DV) Liaisons group. Each district office, the General Assistance (GA) Housing Unit, and the Benefits Service Center (BSC) identified staff to serve as the DV Liaison. Across the state, 15 DV Liaisons provide education, local and national resources, consultation, and training on best practices for staff and participants who are experiencing or dealing with a situation where there is Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) or Domestic Violence (DV). The DV Liaisons meet regularly to learn from each other and from local experts in the field. They create and maintain working relationships with local DV agencies and provide guidance to colleagues regarding mandatory reporting.

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 coach families to identify and set goals to overcome these obstacles and access opportunities that will help them become economically mobile. Reach Up Case Managers assess participants' strengths and barriers to employment on an ongoing basis. Case managers enter data into the Family Support Matrix in the ACCESS system as changes occur in the participants' situations.

From October 2023 to September 2024, case managers assessed 4,546 participants and found 12,733 barriers, an average of 2.8 barriers per participant ([link to Reach Up Barriers and](#)

[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 CCFAP), car repairs, cash incentives, work supplies, and transportation. Case managers and career coaches also use the “*Your Money, Your Goals*” toolkit to integrate financial capability into goal setting and to address financial barriers. Fully embracing the coaching model with participants, 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 2024 that number had decreased to 41%. Likewise, the percentage of participants reporting finances as a barrier decreased every year from 49% in 2021, to 35% in 2024. 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.

Section 2: Participant Outcomes

An average of 681 Reach Up and Reach Ahead participants per month were working ([link to Reach Up Employment and Wage data](#)). 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.

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. Twenty nine percent of participants earn at least \$18/hour now, which is 7% higher than those earning at least \$17/hour last year.

Section 3: 3SquareVT Participation of Reach Up Leavers

An average of 1,387 families left Reach Up each quarter ([link to Reach Up Demographics and Caseload data](#)), which was a decrease from last year's average of 1,500 per quarter; an average of 1,115 or 80% of these families were still off Reach Up four months later, a slight decrease from last year. Also, slightly fewer families used 3SquaresVT upon leaving Reach Up this year. When they left Reach Up, 84% of these families were receiving 3SquaresVT benefits compared to 87% last year; four months later, 55% still received 3SquaresVT compared to 62% 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.²

Section 5: Summary of Reports by Contractors

The "Vermont MOMS PartnershipSM Evaluation Report" was submitted by Yale University in October, 2023 and is available here.

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.³ 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. 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 CRC to the participation rates for 2024 results in an **97.7% All Families rate** and a **100.8% Two-Parent rate**. Vermont is on track to meet the 2024 Work Participation Rate for both All-Families and Two-Parent rates.

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

Basic Needs and Housing Allowances

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 the basic needs standard (2019) and the housing allowance (2001) DCF currently uses, and the current basic needs standard and housing allowance (both 2023).

² Health Benefits Eligibility and Enrollment rule § 7.03(a)(6)(i).

³ Further federal limitations on hours of participation and the age of participants in certain activities exist.

Current Maximum Grants

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 530 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 barriers per household, compared to 2.8 barriers per household in the overall Reach Up population.

Barrier	Overall Reach Up Population	60 Month Population
Emotional Health	31%	52%
Health and Safety	24%	36%
Transportation	41%	48%

To see the impact in 2024 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,
- 23% used General Assistance housing, compared to 35% in 2021
- 57% 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 extracted from ACCESS, an average of 36 students per month participated in the [PSE](#) program during FFY24. 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. ESD does not collect barrier information for PSE students, but 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 and affordable housing, and dealing with mental health challenges. We know that a PSE graduate earns significantly more income than a Reach Up leaver, is more likely to be employed, and returns to Reach Up less frequently. The Reach Up team is exploring ways to increase participation in this important program, which fulfills a critical role in helping families achieve economic mobility.