
**Report to
The Vermont Legislature**

Evaluation of Reach Up

In Accordance with 33 V.S.A. §1134

Submitted to: Philip B. Scott, 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, 2022, through September 30, 2023 (federal fiscal year 2023) 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, 2022, through June 30, 2023 (state fiscal year 2023). 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 3,439 Vermont families, including 6,295 Vermont children. This income, along with the coaching provided by case managers, 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 2,739 adults participated in the Reach Up program each month by working with case managers to set goals for education, training, housing, employment, and family well-being. Of the 6,295 children enrolled in the Reach Up program, 37%, or 2,330, 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 critical time for brain development in young children.

Highlights and Changes in 2023

Reach Up Emergency Rental Assistance (RUERA) and Transition to Reach Up Vermont Rental Subsidy (RUVRS)

The Reach Up Emergency Rental Assistance (RUERA) program stabilized housing and rent payments for Vermont families and property owners during federal fiscal year (FFY) 2023, using the federal Emergency Rental Assistance Program funding. In FFY 2023, over \$7.94 million went out in rental payments, serving 1,976 unique households.

The Reach Up program transitioned 143 families into the RUVRS program to preserve the housing for families who had previously been enrolled in RUERA. The program identified families with the highest risk factors for housing instability, including the highest rent-to-income ratio, larger family size, younger children, single parents, no other housing options, and additional factors such as special health needs, area of children’s school, and involvement with the DCF Family Services Division. Case managers worked with these families to identify longer-term solutions to affordable housing, ensuring that they were connected to other voucher opportunities such as Section 8 and project-based housing. The RUVRS program will end in June 2024.

Housing Coordination and Training

The Reach Up team has been supporting the efforts to house Vermont families in a number of ways. Reach Up case managers continued to provide housing case management for families unable to be connected to Coordinated Entry because of local capacity issues or not meeting the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development’s (HUD) definition of homelessness. The DCF Economic Services Division (ESD) may be the first service provider to identify the family’s situation as they apply for Emergency Housing, allowing the Reach Up case manager to start connecting families with local housing resources, including Coordinated Entry if appropriate. Several Reach Up case managers participated in the Care Coordination Housing

Review Teams (CCHRT), enhancing their skills and expertise as local Reach Up team experts.

Peer Support Groups

Reach Up case managers participated in monthly peer-led and facilitated “Peer Support Groups,” which provided time and space for professional development and peer consultation. When surveyed about their experience in participating for the past year, Reach Up case managers indicated that the groups were a valuable way to share information and to support each other in a difficult job. The Peer Support Groups will continue as we head into the next year, and we anticipate they will be an integral part of processing and reflecting on the coaching mindset.

Implementation of Reach Ahead Pilot

In July 2023, the Reach Up program launched the much-anticipated [Reach Ahead Pilot](#) program, which provided additional work supports for people transitioning off Reach Up. The enhanced work support provides participants with an increased food benefit for 24 months and a job retention incentive at 6, 12, 18, and 24 months of participation. All families enrolled in Reach Ahead are meeting the federal work requirement. In just three months, the pilot increased participation by over 100 families, a 38% increase over the previous year’s participation, and enrollment continues to increase.

Preparation for the changes due to Act 133, Approved May 24, 2022

The central office administrative Reach Up team worked hard to ensure the program was ready for changes to be implemented January 1, 2024, with the following preparation:

- ACCESS changes completed for eligibility changes (increased child support pass through, earned income disregard increase, increase of age of dependent child)
- ACCESS changes in progress for case management
- Coaching training started in January with [The Prosperity Agenda](#), who is providing [Family Centered Coaching](#) training on the “[Coaching Mindset](#)” in six biweekly modules.
- Forms, procedures, and rules updated and in progress

Pandemic Emergency Assistance Funding (PEAF)

Vermont was fortunate to receive another round of PEAF in FFY 2023 in the amount of \$178,531. This funding was allocated for short-term, non-recurrent assistance that met an emergency need. Some examples of situations that Reach Up addressed with this funding include:

- Assisting families fleeing domestic violence
- Back rent to prevent eviction
- Security deposits
- Car repairs

Participant Engagement

Throughout the last year, the Reach Up administrative team has worked to engage participants in program planning. The intent of this work is to create a meaningful partnership between participants and former participants to help us continuously improve Reach Up with families at the center. Work this year has included:

- Creation of surveys,
- Learning about meaningful family engagement through research, webinars, and participating in the regional “Whole Families Approach,” a community of practice with other states and organizations,

- A deliberate hiring practice of considering the value of lived experience,
- Creating an ongoing participant advisory group, who will be paid experts in helping Reach Up evolve and grow, set to launch in early 2024,
- Becoming the host site for two AmeriCorps VISTAs, who bring their expertise and passion to the Reach Up administrative team and have worked to incorporate participant voice into program planning.

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 2022 to September 2023, case managers assessed 4,489 participants and found 12,269 barriers, an average of 2.7 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 child care, car repairs, cash incentives, work supplies, and transportation. Case managers also use the "*Your Money, Your Goals*" toolkit to integrate financial capability into goal setting and to address financial barriers. This past year, notable improvements in adult employment and finances continued. In 2019, 62% of participants reported obstacles related to adult employment; two years later, that percentage decreased to 51%, it decreased again in 2022 to 46%, and in 2023 to 42%. Likewise, the percentage of participants reporting finances as a barrier decreased from 49% to 41% in 2021, 38% in 2022, to 36% in 2023. Unfortunately, shelter barriers also increased from 19% in 2022 to 22% in 2023. This is expected, given the housing crisis throughout Vermont.

Section 2: Participant Outcomes

An average of 562 Reach Up and Reach Ahead participants per month are working ([link to Reach Up Employment and Wage data](#)). Of the 562 participants, 262 are in the Reach Ahead program. The number and percentage of active Reach Up participants 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 will 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 to 262, indicating that more families are leaving Reach Up and going to work than in previous years. The Reach Ahead pilot has further increased these numbers, supporting families who leave Reach Up and join the workforce.

The number of participants earning at least \$15 per hour has increased dramatically every year since 2018, from 8.7% to **48% in 2023**. In FFY 2022 17.5% of earners made **more than \$17 per hour; that percentage increased to 22.1% in 2023**.

Section 3: 3SquareVT Participation of Reach Up Leavers

An average of 1,500 families left Reach Up each quarter ([link to Reach Up Demographics and Caseload data](#)), which was an increase from last year's average of 1,237 per quarter; an average of 1,249 or 83% of these families were still off Reach Up four months later, a slight increase from last year. However, slightly more families used 3SquaresVT upon leaving Reach Up this year. When they left Reach Up, 87% of these families were receiving 3SquaresVT benefits; four months later, 62% still received 3SquaresVT.

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.¹

Section 5: Summary of Reports by Contractors

No reports were submitted by contractors in state or federal fiscal year 2023.

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.² Federal countable activities do not include many activities that address multiple, complex barriers to employment, such as mental health treatment, housing search, and finding child care 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 2023 results in an **80.4% All Families rate** and a **96.8% Two-Parent rate**. Vermont is on track to meet the 2023 Work Participation Rate for both All-Families and Two-Parent rates.

¹ Health Benefits Eligibility and Enrollment rule § 7.03(a)(6)(i).

² Further federal limitations on hours of participation and the age of participants in certain activities exist.

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).

Current Maximum Grants

Maximum grants are determined by the following formula ([link to Basic Needs and Shelter](#)):

Basic Needs + Housing Allowance + Special Needs Housing Allowance (If applicable) X
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 462 families each month at the 60-month limit ([link to RU Time Limits with Narrative](#)). Families in this population face higher rates of barriers than those in the overall Reach Up population, with an average of 3.8 barriers per household, compared to 2.7 barriers per household in the overall Reach Up population. However, the additional coaching and intensive services provided to these families may be impacting them positively, as the average number of barriers remained stable from the previous year. Prior to that, it had decreased from the previous year’s high of 4.8. Below are some examples of additional comparisons:

Barrier	Overall Reach Up Population	60 Month Population
Emotional Health	31%	49%
Health and Safety	22%	33%
Transportation	40%	46%

To see the impact in 2023 on time limits “leavers” from the previous year, DCF looked at 35 unique families who left Reach Up due to time limits between October 2021 and September 2022. The data analysis shows an increased need during 2022 for these leavers:

- 100% used 3SquaresVT, compared to 96% in 2022,
- 34% used General Assistance, compared to 17% in 2021; all 12 families who used General Assistance accessed emergency housing,
- 69% returned to Reach Up within 12 months, compared to 43% in 2022.

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

According to data extracted from ACCESS, an average of 46 students per month participated in the [PSE](#) program during FFY23. This number has been steadily decreasing over the last

decade. 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 child care, 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.