

MEMORANDUM

To: Dr. Harry Chen, Secretary, Vermont Agency of Human Services
From: Governor's Council on Pathways from Poverty
cc: Ken Schatz, Commissioner, Vermont Department for Children and Families
Date: September 22, 2014
Re: *Summary of Online Survey/Public Comments*

Dear Secretary Chen,

The Governor's Council on Pathways from Poverty requested a public comment period prior to release of recommendations by the Secretary for possible changes within the Agency of Human Services (AHS) and the Department for Children and Families (DCF). Governor Shumlin reviewed the Council's request and granted it, extending the time for recommendations of the Secretary to October 1, 2014.

The Council recommended three vehicles for public participation to inform the Secretary's work: two public hearings (one after business hours in the evening, and one during business hours), written comment directed to the Secretary, and an online survey. To date, the public hearings have been conducted. The Secretary's office has also received some written testimony. The Council offered to review comments elicited through the online survey and to summarize them for your review. All online survey comments are public record and should be transferred to a .pdf document available for review by the Administration, lawmakers, stakeholder groups, or any interested members of the public.¹

Summaries of responses to each survey question received to date are set out below, preceded by the question posed by the survey.² We hope this exercise in public participation is useful to the Administration, lawmakers, policy-makers, and other interested parties as discussions continue about the future of the Agency of Human Services and the Department for Children and Families.

¹ A .pdf document with recorded responses to the survey to date is available at: <https://www.dropbox.com/s/8zyekh1ig045cr3/surveymonkeyresults.pdf?dl=0>.

² The survey is open through September 30, 2014. This summary of survey responses is current as of September 19, 2014. The Administration is encouraged to review each response to the survey individually when considering its recommendations – including any responses arriving subsequent to the Council's summary. The survey consists of open questions for consideration by respondents. This affects the methodology for collection of responses because responses were qualified in some cases, or in many instances one question might be answered with multiple responses. As a result, when adding up responses or quantifying responses the numbers or percentages attributed to responses will, in some cases exceed the total number of individual respondents in order to include responses that contained more than one idea or response. This summary is not intended to be scientifically valid. It is not a poll and respondents are self-selecting. This summary is offered in an attempt to identify general trends that may be helpful to the Secretary in informing his recommendations.

Overall, the survey elicited several general themes – first and foremost among them to protect the health and safety of vulnerable and at-risk children. Respondents expressed a desire for the Agency/Department to accomplish that in several ways:

- 1) Respondents feel the Agency/Department does not have the **resources** in personnel or information technology to adequately perform its functions – both in terms of child protection and economic services. Many respondents also identified insufficient resources or supports for families to assist them in meeting their basic needs.
- 2) Respondents identified **communication** as a problem – both within the Agency/Department and with community partners, mandatory reporters, and with families they serve. Respondents identified poor communication as everything from failure to timely return calls to inability to access real-time information about the status of families across divisions to concerns about confidentiality laws or policies that impede the ability of helping agencies, mandatory reporters, or family members to know what is happening with at-risk families with children. Some of this was also described as a “culture” problem within the Agency/Department.³
- 3) Many respondents identified creating a “**child-first**” approach, and re-examination of **reunification** policy to ensure that children in at-risk families are safe – especially in households where substance abuse is present.
- 4) Respondents overwhelmingly preferred an **integrated services** approach to helping families versus a segregated approach.

Question 1 (172 responses): How can DCF better serve Vermont families with children?

This was a broad, open-ended question that invited multiple and varied responses. However, certain trends become apparent when reviewing the responses. A clear plurality of respondents (34%) indicated that more resources and in particular more staffing to reduce caseloads was important. A large number of these respondents also identified intra-agency communication as an area warranting improvement and additional resources to address it and in particular the need to improve information technology (IT) within the Agency and the Department to help facilitate better communication.

Another 19% clearly indicated a preference for greater emphasis on placing the best interest of the child ahead of reunification – especially in cases involving drug abuse – although responses differed about what specific recommendations might be (more mandatory reporting, more investigation, etc.).

12% of respondents requested more engagement and external communication with community providers and stakeholders – including mandatory reporters.

9% of respondents commented on the importance of changing the culture within the Agency and the Department to better accommodate and respond to families in need. Another 9% referenced the need for more resources directed to parenting education for at-risk families.

³ The Council construed “culture” broadly to encompass references to poor individual service or perceived attitudinal response within the Agency or the Department. Not every respondent used the term “culture”, but for ease of reference and to ensure inclusion of multiple responses regarding perceived organizational attitude or posture, the Council chose to use that term as representative of multiple responses along those lines.

Other responses varied, but included: more training for staff (6%); more resources directed to “prevention” and “early intervention;” greater transparency and revisiting confidentiality rules that may prevent effective communication in some cases (5%); increasing the number of home visits (4%); and trauma training for staff (4%).

Question 2 (154 responses): How can AHS and DCF avoid duplication of administrative functions and fragmentation of services for individuals and families?

The top three responses to this question included greater “teaming” or “integration” of services (including specific references to what many respondents viewed favorably: children’s integrated services (CIS) and integrated family services (IFS) (27%), better communication (including resolving IT problems and addressing confidentiality issues) (19%) and increasing resources available to the Department, primarily by increasing personnel to reduce caseloads.⁴

Internal structural changes were a close fourth in terms of responses – or if taken together constituted a slim plurality. These responses ranged in nature from increased collaboration with other agencies (both within and external to state government) (12%), to decentralized and/or personalized relationships to families (10%), to greater accountability and staff oversight (9%). Only 3% of respondents expressly identified total “re-organization” as a priority.

Other respondents mentioned “simplifying eligibility” for public assistance programs to changing the culture within the agency to be more customer-service focused, or creating more “consistency” in applying rules throughout the Department. Still others referenced more training for staff and support for families, and doing more to distinguish between those cases requiring investigation and those requiring “assessment” (or review of “differential response”).

Question 3: Do AHS and DCF have the resources needed to be most effective? Are existing resources allocated properly? How could resources be better employed?

If there was one clear message from the survey results it is that respondents felt that the Agency and/or the Department do not have the resources required to be most effective. 62% of respondents indicated a lack of sufficient resources. Some respondents emphasized lack of staffing or personnel, others focused on IT resources. The inability of the Department to regularly have contact with families it serves was an overriding concern of respondents. Only 11% of respondents indicated they felt the state has what it needs in personnel or IT to properly do its job. Another 11% were unsure if resources were sufficient or not.

About a fifth (21%) of respondents suggested that the Agency/Department might better use or deploy its resources. Suggestions were wide ranging and included: more staff training, using “teaming” models, more internal collaboration, greater emphasis on substance abuse/mental health supports for families, access to parenting classes, increase in Reach Up funding, more oversight and accountability internally, mentoring programs, discretionary funds for case managers to assist families with emergency needs, among others. However, there was little, if any, discussion of what programs or services would be reduced or eliminated if monies were re-allocated to these other areas.

⁴ Respondents did not always specify which “caseloads” they were referring to: family services caseloads or economic services caseloads. However, many respondents made express reference to one or the other, or both.

Question 4 (156 responses): What is the most efficient use of state resources in serving families? For example, should divisions and/or functions be separate or integrated? How can communication within DCF be improved to better serve families?

The overwhelming sentiment of respondents indicated a preference for more integrated program and service delivery within the Department for Children and Families. Respondents favored integration over division or separation within the Agency and/or the Department by a margin of approximately 4-to-1 (44% to 10%).

Additionally, 23% of respondents expressly referenced more communication and collaboration within the Department – “communication” and “collaboration” varied among respondents but included more communication and inclusion of families in shared decision-making (9%) and greater communication and collaboration with community partners and mandatory reporters, and improved communication and collaboration within the Agency and the Department itself. The percentage of respondents citing this would be higher if we include those who specifically referenced making changes to confidentiality rules governing information sharing with respect to at-risk families (3%).

Other respondents specifically referenced a need for improving the “culture” within AHS/DCF and/or improved customer service (8%).

Respondents varied on the most effective program(s) offered by AHS/DCF, but included: Reach Up, 3Squares VT, Affordable Housing initiatives, Housing Review Teams, and the Women Infant and Children (WIC) program. Other respondents referenced the need for more staff, greater emphasis on “child-first” policies, the need for more case reviews, abolishing central intake and more resources for family planning and/or parenting education.

Question 5 (159 responses): How can DCF build stronger relationships between the families it serves and staff working with those families? For example, should enforcement capability be separated from day-to-day case management (that is, should sanction or removal powers be exercised by different people within the department)? Would that help or hinder the department?

Primary responses to this question focused on whether enforcement and social work/case management should continue to be exercised by the same worker, or if those responsibilities should be separated. Interestingly, respondents were almost evenly split on this question with a slight edge to those who believed enforcement powers should be separated from day-to-day case management activity (29%) compared to those who felt those duties should remain in the hands of the primary case manager (23%). The rationale most frequently cited by respondents is that it is difficult for families to fully trust or confide in the case manager who may also exercise the power to reduce benefits or remove a child from the home. Several respondents (6%) indicated that a teaming or hybrid model might be effective in ensuring the Department can timely respond to concerns without exposing the individual family and social worker to barriers at building a trusting relationship.

20% of respondents identified more support for families or more direct involvement or activity by case managers with families they service.

Many respondents cited the importance of changing the “culture” within the agency (14%). These responses varied but included references to families who fear the enforcement powers of the agency, to an environment that in some cases is not as welcoming, respectful, or impartial to families engaged with the Department as one might hope.⁵ It also relates to what other respondents indicated in terms of inability of workers to adequately or timely respond to families needs, to assist them in problem solving, or to overcome barriers to success in their own lives. Many respondents also cited the lack of resources, training or support for workers who may be doing their best under challenging circumstances to meet the needs of the families they serve – either in these responses or in other areas of the survey.

Question 6 (146 responses): Are there particular laws, rules, or policies that should be changed to improve outcomes for families? If so, what are they?

This question brought out the single largest response dedicated to family services and child protection. 31% of all respondents indicated that more should be done expressly to protect children. These responses fell into two primary groups: 23% of all respondents clearly identified greater investigation and removal powers for at-risk children – especially in homes where substance abuse is substantiated. Another 8% specifically identified review of the state’s reunification policy as something that should be addressed.

Other responses were much more varied and likely related to the individual respondent’s experience with the Department. Several respondents identified more integration as an area for exploration (additional resources for CIS/IFS). Others identified a desire to see more classes of mandatory reporters in abuse or neglect cases and a desire to have more information available to mandatory reporters after initial reports are filed. Others cited a desire to revisit confidentiality laws of the state to make it easier for the Department and others to communicate when high-risk or complex cases arise.

6% of respondents identified more basic needs support for low-income families with children including more funding for Reach Up, SNAP, and affordable housing options.

While substance abuse counseling and treatment and a concern about the need to potentially remove children from at-risk households where substance abuse is substantiated was identified only two respondents identified mandatory drug-testing as something the state should investigate. Instead, respondents tended to identify the need for additional treatment⁶, counseling and support services over coercive tactics in determining how best to improve outcomes for families dealing with substance abuse problems.

Question 7 (141 responses): What is the agency or department doing well; are there existing areas of success the agency can and should build on?

One of the Department’s challenges in terms of addressing “culture” is also one of its

⁵ However, this feedback, while important and valuable is qualified by other responses to the survey. For example, in question 7 many respondents expressed support for individual staff members and their efforts to serve families well. Accordingly, while these responses do illustrate a culture problem, it cannot be considered universal.

⁶ Some respondents identified “mandatory treatment” as a consequence or prerequisite for families interacting with family or economic services.

greatest assets: its staff. 15% of all respondents to this question identified caring and dedicated staff as a resource the Agency and Department must build on. The other response of note was a positive association from some respondents (6%) with integrated services.

Other responses or positive areas identified by respondents ran the gamut from co-location of substance abuse screeners and community partners to collaboration with schools and community partners, to the implementation of housing review teams (HRT's), and prevention and early childhood interventions.

Some respondents took differing positions on whether or not centralized intake is effective and at least one was critical of the "process management" system generally.

Question 8 (91 responses): Other Comments

This section was entirely open-ended. Respondents could add any comments they wished. Of note were comments relating to:

- Establishing a "child-first" approach with respect to reunification policy (8%)
- New leadership at the Agency/Department (8%)
- More, and better paid staff (7%)
- Greater collaboration with public schools (7%)
- More financial resources for families (childcare subsidy, housing subsidy, etc.) (5%)

Other suggestions included: Criticism of centralization/modernization (desire for cases and decision to go back to district offices); Paid, professional Guardians ad Litem; Greater emphasis on kinship care; Ability to share more information internally and externally to protect children; more openness and transparency; Culture change at the Department; Establishment of independent oversight or outside authority.

Conclusion

It is difficult to sum-up the many responses received in conjunction with an open question public survey. As challenging as that is several trends emerged from this process: A desire expressed by recipients to protect children manifested itself in responses clearly signaling the Department needs more resources to meet its charge (and the families themselves require adequate resources to meet basic needs if they are to be successful); a desire for more communication internally and externally; the need for a culture of kindness and respect and impartial assistance. Respondents also specifically articulated a desire to revisit the reunification policy of the state and develop a "child-first" approach to family services cases. Finally many respondents articulate a need for greater integration of services within the Department.

The Council is gratified by the outpouring of interest and concern expressed by the public: affected families, service providers, stakeholder groups, and advocates, among many others have responded to this process. We hope this summary is helpful to the Secretary in considering public input for his recommendations to the Governor for possible changes or reforms to the Agency of Human Services and the Department for Children and Families.