

Recommendations of the Governor's Council on Pathways from Poverty

For the Agency of Human Services and the Vermont Department for Families and Children

September 22, 2014

Poor Vermont families with children are in crisis. Wages are low and public benefits cover less than 50% of the cost of living. Housing is expensive and scarce. Too many families struggle under the shadow of deep trauma: violence, abuse, and sexual predation. This suffering, often sharpened by mental illness and addictions, places children and their parents at intense risk for harm or mortality. The recent untimely deaths of infants and toddlers have touched each of us, and we know Vermont must do better.

The Governor's Council on Pathways from Poverty considered these issues for the past year. Most of the members are involved in direct service and engaged intensively with families on the local level. The Council also requested and helped convene two public hearings and offered an anonymous survey to those unable or unwilling to speak out. Our recommendations for changes to services for families with children fall into five essential areas:

1. ***Provide Integrated Family Services*** that offer wraparound teams, including resources and interventions for families, based on a vulnerability index. We believe that silos are for farms, not families; and thus strongly recommend against dividing the Department of Children and Families (DCF), but instead suggest:
 - a. DCF separate the functions of service coordination and enforcement, and thus provide for prevention and support, but also for rapid intervention when children are at risk;
 - b. DCF improve collaboration and resource allocation to community partners with expertise in prevention, parenting, early childhood development, harm reduction and family support. For example, in many communities the Parent Child Center is the hub of support, and its services deserve to be sustained through grants and Medicaid reimbursement.
2. ***Establish a culture of kindness, respect and accountability*** throughout DCF and the Agency of Human Services.
3. ***Improve communication and transparency*** with families, community partners and the general public by lifting secrecy when prudent, and by improving and integrating information technology systems with community partners.
4. ***Provide adequate system-wide resources to keep children safe***, including resources within DCF, for community partners, and for the Judiciary
5. ***Establish independent oversight and accountability*** over DCF, through creation of an Office of Child Advocate. Empower community partners to assist with this function.

What will change look like?

- Services for children and families are integrated with increased teaming and collaboration. The philosophy and framework are guided by Vermont's existing initiative on "Strengthening Families." The approach is strengths-based, person-centered, flexible and collaborative.
- The functions of service and enforcement are separated. Families no longer distrust and fear the agency and department set up to serve them.
- All interactions with families are based on respect, kindness, and clear outcome measures for accountability.
- DCF has adequate staff and resources to accomplish its mission. For example, staff members make home visits and follow up as needed, return calls in a timely manner, keep appointments, and answer questions with candor.
- Multi-disciplinary teams work at the local level and include representatives from all necessary services. DCF designates a lead service professional to coordinate the communication and planning for each family.
- DCF staff and community partners provide a full array of family supports including stable housing, treatment and recovery services, parenting, and financial literacy and asset development. Community partners have adequate resources to do the job.
- DCF staff members and teams work with no more than 25 families.
- DCF staff members are trained to work with people who have experienced trauma. They are trained to handle vicarious trauma, and they receive strong support and supervision.
- Resources and services are flexible, timely, designed around a family's schedule and are provided in homes or safe environments.
- Families have ready access to trauma treatment, mental health counseling, and addictions treatment -- including medication-assisted treatment.
- DCF's information technology, reporting, documentation, and regulatory structures are designed to support and serve the values of integrated family services.