
**Report to
The Vermont Legislature**

Status of Families 60 Days after Closure Due to Reach Up Time Limits

In Accordance with section E.323.3(c) of Act 50 (2014)

Submitted to: General Assembly

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Executive Summary

In 2013, the General Assembly enacted changes to the Reach Up Program that limited the number of months a family may receive Reach Up assistance. Effective May 1, 2014, families who had received 60 “countable” months of assistance became ineligible to receive further assistance, unless the parents were fully participating in the program requirements. This report is submitted pursuant to section E.323.3(c) of Act 50 (2014), which requires the Commissioner to “report to the General Assembly on the status of families 60 days after the family becomes ineligible for the Reach Up program pursuant to subsection E.323.1(a) of this act.”

In order to assess the status of these families, the Reach Up program collected data on the number of families whose assistance closed due to time limits between May 2014 and November 2014. The program also measured the number of families who returned to the program after closure. The program tracked whether families accessed other benefits (3SquaresVT, General Assistance, child care services subsidy, and subsidized housing) during the time period they were not receiving Reach Up assistance. The program examined the number of families involved with Family Services and the number of families who were receiving substance abuse treatment. In addition, the program determined whether families had any unearned or earned income in the household.

More than half of the families whose assistance closed returned to the program within two months. Of the families who did not return to the Reach Up program within 60 days of closure, nearly all continued to receive 3SquareVT benefits while only 12 percent received General Assistance. All of the families who were in receipt of a child care services subsidy at the time of Reach Up termination continued to receive a subsidy for four months. Twenty-nine percent of the families lived in subsidized housing. Ten percent of the families were involved with Family Services, and 17 percent were engaged with some form of substance abuse treatment through a hub¹. Finally, 40 percent of the families had some identifiable income in the household.

¹ “A *Hub* is a specialty treatment center responsible for coordinating the care of individuals with complex addictions and co-occurring substance abuse and mental health conditions across the health and substance abuse treatment systems of care.” <http://www.healthvermont.gov/adap/documents/HUBSPOKEBriefingDocV122112.pdf>

Part I:

Overview of Reach Up Time Limits

Effective May 1, 2014, 33 V.S.A. § 1108 was amended to impose a time limit on families' receipt of Reach Up financial assistance. Families who had received 60 or more cumulative, countable months of Reach Up financial assistance (including months of assistance funded by the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) block grant in another state) became ineligible to receive additional months of assistance unless the adult members of the family were meeting the work requirement through a community service placement or employment.² Adult members who qualify for a deferment under 33 V.S.A. § 1114 may also continue to receive assistance beyond 60 months.³

Title 33 V.S.A. § 1108(b) exempts certain months from counting toward a family's 60-month limit on financial assistance. Any month in which a participant is deferred for one of the following reasons is considered a "non-countable" month:

1. Unable-to-work due to a medical condition, including substance abuse and mental health;
2. Caring for a child less than 24 months of age (only 12 cumulative months in a lifetime are exempt for this reason);
3. Unable-to-work due to the effects of domestic violence; or
4. Needed in the home on a full-time basis to care for an ill or incapacitated family member.

In addition, under 33 V.S.A. § 1108(a) and (c), certain families are completely exempt from time limits:

1. Recipients of Reach Ahead or Reach First;
2. Participants in the Post-Secondary Education (PSE) program;
3. A family where both parents receive SSI;
4. Non-parent caretakers; or
5. A family where one or both parents in the household are under the age of 18.

Program regulations implementing the time limits legislation impose a two-month break in benefits for a family whose assistance closes for non-compliance without good cause.⁴

² The months of assistance received are counted from July 1, 2001, the date on which the program began tracking months of assistance received. Reach Up Rules § 2238(B).

³ A deferment delays the onset of the work requirement for a specific reason and gives the participant time to address the barrier to employment. 33 V.S.A. § 1114.

⁴ Reach Up Rules § 2238.2. Good cause for non-compliance with program requirements is defined as "circumstances beyond the control of the participants." Reach Up Services Rules § 2373.

Part II:

Number of Families Whose Reach Up Assistance Closed Due to Time Limits

In December 2014, the program collected the following data regarding the number of families who's Reach Up financial assistance closed due to time limits:

A. Number of families whose Reach Up assistance closed due to time limits

During the time period of May through November, 2014, a total of **575 families were terminated from the Reach Up program** due to time limits. These families were not fully complying with the requirements of the program, and therefore, their Reach Up grants closed.

B. Number of families who returned to Reach Up

Of the 575 families mentioned above, **300 families returned to Reach Up thus**, these families were excluded from the 60-day status analysis.

C. Number of families who did not return to Reach Up

As of December 2014, of the 575 families mentioned above, **275 families had not returned to Reach Up**. Of these families, **224 families had not received Reach Up for at least two months**. The program collected data on these families' receipt of 3SquaresVT and General Assistance benefits 60 days after leaving Reach Up. The remaining 51 families who left Reach Up in November had not been closed for two months at the time the data was collected; therefore, these families were excluded from the analysis.

Part III:

Status of Families Who Did Not Return to Reach Up as of November 2014

To assess families' status 60 days after leaving Reach Up due to time limits, the program collected data on the number families—from the 224 families who did not return to Reach Up as of November 2014—to determine which services they received and the type of income in the household. It is important to note that while the preliminary data may give the Department important information about these families, the data is not sufficient to draw either a correlational or causal relationship to the Reach Up time limits policy.

A. Other Economic Services Division (ESD) Benefits

- As of November 2014, **217 of the 224 families (97 percent)**, received 3SquaresVT benefits in at least one of the months after leaving Reach Up.
- As of November 2014, **27 of the 224 families (12 percent)** received General Assistance benefits in at least one of the months after leaving Reach Up. Of the 27 families who received General Assistance, **11 received temporary housing assistance and 16 received dental assistance or personal needs assistance**. The General Assistance program has two categories of assistance: non-catastrophic and catastrophic. The non-

catastrophic eligibility criteria require that applicants “cooperate in meeting requirements to maintain” other sources of income.⁵ These 224 families were only eligible to receive General Assistance if they qualified for assistance under catastrophic eligibility criteria because they had been terminated from Reach Up for not complying with program requirements.⁶

B. Involvement with Family Services

Of the 224 families who were terminated from the Reach Up program since May 2014 and had not returned as of November 2014, only 10 percent of those families subsequently opened a case with Family Services.

C. Families Receiving Treatment/Care for Substance Abuse

DCF contacted the Department of Health’s Alcohol and Drug Abuse Program (ADAP) to determine how many of the 224 families were engaged with treatment services through a hub. During calendar year 2014, 37 (17 percent) of these families were connected to a hub. In December 2014, 33 of these families were still receiving services through a hub. The closing of their Reach Up benefits did not affect their engagement in services with the hub. Those who were receiving hub services prior to closure continued to receive services even if their Reach Up did not re-open.

D. Child Care Services Subsidy

All of the families who had Reach Up benefits close due to non-compliance with program under the time limits policy continued to receive a child care services subsidy for four months if they were receiving a subsidy while on Reach Up. Providing four months of child care subsidy post-closure maintains continuity for the children and families. If the family returns to Reach Up and child care is still needed, the subsidy can be extended at that time.

E. Income

Out of the 224 families that have not returned to Reach Up as of November 2014:

- 89 families (40 percent) had identifiable income in the household. This income includes Supplemental Security Income (SSI), Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI), Social Security benefits (SSA), unemployment compensation, and income from employment.
- 58 of the 89 families had unearned income:
 - Of these 58 families, 97 percent received unearned income from SSI, SSA, or a combination of the two.
 - Three percent of the 58 families received unemployment compensation.
- 31 of the 89 (14 percent) families had earned income from employment.

⁵ General Assistance Rules § 2610(B)(3).

⁶ To qualify for catastrophic General Assistance, applicants must have an emergency need attributable to one of the following catastrophic situations:

- A. Death of a spouse or minor dependent child;
- B. The presence of an emergency medical need;
- C. A natural disaster; or
- D. A court-ordered or constructive eviction.

General Assistance Rules § 2621.

F. Subsidized Housing

66 families (29 percent) live in subsidized housing.

Part IV:

Anecdotal Stories

Ongoing data reveals that approximately half of all families leaving Reach Up due to time limits return at a later date. In most cases, these families return as soon as the two-month break in benefits has ended. Department staff provided stories they felt gave a cursory understanding of how some families have fared after being impacted by Reach Up time limits. While staff reported some families struggle to participate in the requirements of the Reach Up program, many stories show that families are engaging in employment when possible. The percentage of families who had employment income after leaving Reach Up due to non-compliance was rather small (14 percent). However, this number does not reflect those participants who left Reach Up voluntarily or because their employment income closed their grant.

- One two-parent family who had been receiving Reach Up for many years started fully participating in services in May 2014. The family has multiple children who have been in and out of Family Services custody, and one child is on SSI. They did not participate consistently in Reach Up prior to May, but last May one parent got a job as a housekeeper at a local motel and the other got a manager position at a local retail store. They are both still working and are doing well.
- One Reach Up case manager reported that he was surprised to see that of the handful of families who left Reach Up due to time limits, all but one had found employment immediately and they were better off than they were while receiving financial assistance. One family responded that they would have sought employment earlier if they had been pushed to do so sooner, but the previous rules did not force them to take those final steps. The only parent in this district who was not employed after leaving Reach Up due to time limits found a new partner who was employed and no longer needed to worry about her income.
- “John” had been sanctioned⁷ frequently for approximately two and one half years. He was consistently late for his sanction appointment, if he showed up at all. His partner made lots of excuses for him as to why he could not work. When they reached 60 months of Reach Up, “John” signed a plan to do a community service placement. He showed up there the same day to initiate it. He has been meeting his 30 hour per week work requirement since then and is now looking into an apprenticeship program, showing excitement about his volunteer

⁷ A sanction is a reduction in the amount of a family’s grant, up to \$150 per month, due to non-compliance with program requirements. 33 V.S.A. § 1116.

placement and possible future opportunities. He is not, however, currently looking for paid work.⁸

- “Jane” was a Reach Up participant for many years. She is a single mother with a child on SSI, has unstable housing, and lack of transportation. When time limits were implemented she was able to start a part time job as a house cleaner and volunteer to fulfill her work requirement with the help of her Reach Up team. Transportation remained a barrier—she used a combination of Reach Up transportation and the local bus. Within weeks, she had missed meeting her work requirement because her child had to stay home from school. She reapplied once, but soon after ran into the same issue with missing hours. At this point, she has not reapplied.
- “Mary” has repeatedly reported to her case manager that her success in the program is due to the time limits policy. She had never been in compliance prior to the implementation of the new program requirements. She will remain on Reach Up for some time due to a strained family dynamic and her addiction recovery process, however she has been one of the most engaged participants this particular district has had in the past year. Mary has volunteered to come to workshops for Reach Up participants, to share her difference between “then” and “now”.

Summary

Preliminary data collected by the program reveals that just over half of the families who left Reach Up due to time limits returned to the Reach Up program within two months. The vast majority (97 percent) of families who were not receiving Reach Up financial assistance received 3SquaresVT benefits, so the program was able to collect additional data on these families. The data gives us a general understanding of services, assistance, and income still received by these families. However, it does not allow us to make any connection between those things and the time limits policy. Anecdotal stories from district workers reveal that while some families have struggled with the new program requirements, the time limits policy has motivated some families to find work or address barriers such as substance abuse.

⁸ The time limits statute requires participants to meet their work requirement through either community service or employment; therefore, John’s case manager cannot require him to complete additional hours dedicated toward job search. 33 V.S.A. § 1108(d).