



2024 Policy Recommendations of the Vermont Early Childhood State Advisory Council Network

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Vermont's Early Childhood State Advisory Council (SAC) is the state's Governor-appointed, primary advisory body on the well-being of children from the prenatal period through age 8 and their families. Building Bright Futures (BBF) advises the Governor, Administration, and Legislature on policy and systems improvements for children and their families. Each year, in partnership with Vermont's Early Childhood Action Plan (VECAP) Committees and Regional Councils, the SAC sets priorities and strategic direction for statewide initiatives by endorsing a series of policy recommendations. These annual policy recommendations of Vermont's Early Childhood State Advisory Council Network are developed using the VECAP, up-to-date data, and the most pressing feedback and challenges being faced in the early childhood system collected throughout the year. The annual recommendations identify the current gaps and needs in policy, promote action in strategic areas for the coming year, and aim to be measurable.

Access to Basic Needs (VECAP Goal 1)

Invest in Perinatal Supports

- Invest in statewide strategies that center early relational health to ensure families are supported across clinical and community settings during the critical perinatal period, including after experiencing the loss of a child or loss of a caregiver.
 - Fund the expansion of Developmental Understanding and Legal Collaboration for Everyone (DULCE) approach sites.
 - Invest in peer- and community-based strategies such as multiagency collaboration teams, like regional CHARM/Community Response teams, to ensure families have the supports they need through a strength-based approach and in recognition that Vermont's maternal mortality

incidences have a concerning overlap with substance use disorders (SUD).

- Ensure continuity of care and high-quality services are available for the perinatal population. Expand billable services through Children's Integrated Services (CIS) to include families experiencing bereavement. Expand CIS supports past the 8-week postpartum period to the full year postpartum for the birthing person, in alignment with postpartum Medicaid expansion. Pursue strategies that center equitable services and birth-related outcomes for Black, Indigenous, and parents/caregivers of color, including expanding Medicaid coverage to doula services.

Housing, Nutrition, and Economic Security

- Continue to invest at high levels in the creation of housing, to expand access and create more affordable housing for Vermont families, including providing full statutory funding for the Vermont Housing and Conservation Board.
- Provide high-quality care coordination to support families in accessing housing and related services. Ensure that families navigating affordable housing and those experiencing homelessness are both supported through these processes and are assisted in navigating and accessing other related needs. Ensure documentation requirements are not a prohibitive barrier for homeless families or those navigating affordable housing services.
- Increase the Reach Up housing allowance, based on 2001 housing costs now, to the current year housing costs, and adjust annually based on the current year costs. Study how Reach Up housing allowances are calculated, and propose a method that accurately captures the cost of housing in Vermont.
- Increase availability of and financial support for nutrition security education, state credit (the Child Tax Credit and Earned Income Tax Credit), and other economic security programs to early childhood professionals to ensure they can support families in navigating and utilizing these resources, and are compensated for their time doing so.

Paid Family and Medical Leave Insurance

- Enact a Paid Family and Medical Leave Insurance program for Vermonters seeking to take time off to care for a family member or themselves while welcoming a new child into the family, while navigating an illness or injury, or after experiencing a loss. Ensure that the benefit through this program covers all caregivers in the case of a two-parent household, and that the benefit is generous enough that loss of income is not a barrier for those looking to utilize the program.

Family Partnership and Resilience (VECAP Goal 2)

Renewed Policy Recommendation (2022): Guidance for Legislatively Mandated Bodies

- Develop and enact a formal guidance/protocol for naming membership when creating new legislatively mandated bodies (study sections, councils, etc.). A membership template must include individuals with relevant and current lived experience. This guidance should also include resources and best practices for holding accessible meetings that are welcoming and inclusive for community and family representatives, as well as considerations for adopting a trauma and resilience-informed lens.

Renewed Policy Recommendation (2022): Leveraging the Findings from the Family Needs Assessment

- Utilize the findings of the 2022 Vermont Early Childhood Family Needs Assessment and future Family Needs Assessment projects and data collection efforts of the Families and Communities VECAP Committee to inform program implementation, policymaking, and decision-making.

Invest in Statewide Family Leadership Training Opportunities

- Invest in statewide family leadership training opportunities to prepare and support parents and caregivers with serving on boards, commissions, etc. In order to be effective in supporting the leadership development of families with lived experiences that will inform policymaking and decision-making, these opportunities must be free of charge and must compensate parents/caregivers for their time and any associated child care and transportation costs. Outreach and admissions for training opportunities must prioritize groups underrepresented in existing Vermont family leadership circles, including Black and Indigenous parents/caregivers, parents/caregivers of color, LGBTQ+ families, and families with special health care needs and disabilities.

High-Quality and Inclusive Physical and Mental Health Services (VECAP Goal 3)

Mental Health

- Invest in the mental health workforce and other proven strategies that are necessary to support Vermont children currently in high levels of crisis care in or out of state.

- Expand rate increases for mental health services provided to Designated Agencies (DAs) and Specialized Services Agencies (SSAs) to include all mental health service providers that receive Medicaid funding.
- Ensure that rate increases for mental health services keep pace with the true rate of inflation for those services.
- Prioritize recruiting mental health professionals that represent Vermont's population including Black, Indigenous, people of color, and disabled professionals.
- Elevate the promise of mental health integration strategies as described in the [Mental Health Integration Council's Interim Report](#). Develop financial incentives and implementation support for initiatives aiming to integrate mental health into primary care settings serving children and families to promote wellness and upstream prevention.

High-Quality and Inclusive Early Care/Education/Afterschool Programs (VECAP Goal 3)

Renewed Policy Recommendation (2022): Universal Pre-K Access and Equity

- Support the Universal Pre-K Implementation Committee mandated under Act 76 by studying how best to expand the vision of universal, high-quality, equitable, mixed-delivery, inclusive education for all 3-, 4-, and 5-year-olds not yet enrolled in kindergarten. Ensure that the Committee is prioritizing equity of access to high-quality services, including a focus on:
 - Seeking resolution in the appropriate number of hours and weeks per year for UPK education and appropriate weighting of students.
 - Ensuring access to year-round services for children 0-8, including early childhood education, afterschool, and summer care.
 - Examining parity between public and private programs.
 - Ensuring that 3-year-olds are able to access Early Childhood Special Education services. Ensuring that funds for ECSE follow the child, even outside of their home district, to improve access and reduce barriers/burdens on families.
 - Providing access to pre-K for families living in ultra-rural border regions who currently do not have access by expanding existing K-12 cross-state tuition agreements to include pre-K. Prioritize providing a continuity of services for children in rural regions, many of whom go on to attend kindergarten in bordering states.

Act 76 Implementation

- Prioritize the successful implementation of Act 76 to meet the law's goals to expand access and quality of early care and education, stabilize the early

childhood education system, advance the early education workforce, and maintain a mixed-delivery system for universal pre-K, child care, and afterschool and summer care, among other goals.

- Ensure that implementation plans include sufficient opportunities for engagement and feedback from stakeholders (including family, early childhood educator, program director, school district, community).
- Ensure that outreach and communications are extensive and are tailored to the diverse needs of impacted communities, particularly families, the early childhood workforce, and other stakeholders impacted by this law.
- Ensure that families newly eligible for the Child Care Financial Assistance Program (CCFAP) (undocumented or mixed-status families, families newly eligible based on income expansion, families not yet connected to services, etc.) are aware of and supported in applying for the program (including interpretation services, etc.). Utilize community partners to effectively reach targeted groups.

Screening, Assessment, and Services for Children with Autism/on the Autism Spectrum

- Improve access to family-engaged developmental and behavioral/autism screening to improve early identification and support timely follow-up and referral to needed services.
 - Build capacity to improve access to autism assessments by training health care providers, early interventionists, and others to conduct developmental and autism screenings and by increasing collaboration between Children's Integrated Services (CIS) and pediatric medical homes.
 - Support families by addressing barriers to accessing assessments including assessment paperwork, transportation, cost if not covered by insurance, and having documents in other languages and/or having interpreters available.

Early Childhood Workforce (VECAP Goal 3)

Adapt Systems to Better Support the Workforce Related to Children's Social and Emotional Development

- Embrace coordinated professional development for the early childhood workforce to promote inclusion, support social and emotional development, and contribute to programs' continuous quality improvement, STARS goals, required CEUs, or other relevant professional development requirements.

- Invest in professional development resources that support the social-emotional development of children, include children with specialized health needs, and aim to reduce bias and discrimination.
- Utilize multiple methods for outreach and enrollment (e.g., social media, mail, email, text messages) to make it easy for early childhood programs to access information about upcoming social-emotional related professional development opportunities.

Seamless, Equitable, Data-Driven System of Care (VECAP Goal 4)

Renewed Policy Recommendation (2023): Inequities in Data Collection

- Respond to inequities in data collection and reporting in order to better represent and understand the intersectional experiences of people of color, children with disabilities, and other marginalized communities in Vermont.
 - Develop a statewide strategy to gather demographic information that allows people to self-identify in an authentic and appropriate manner while meeting federal demographic reporting requirements.
 - Value qualitative data. When the small population size of a group necessitates the suppression of their quantitative data, utilize qualitative data collection to ensure that everyone is counted.
 - Secure sustained funding to support high-quality data through compensation for direct service providers who collect and report data.
 - Partner with impacted communities throughout the data cycle to ensure that marginalized communities, in particular, have ownership of their experiences and are empowered to advocate for and make decisions for themselves.
 - To enable Vermont to execute the above recommendations, secure sustained funding for additional personnel to increase capacity with a specific focus on equitable data.

Review State Process and Practices for Grantmaking and Payments

- State agencies, particularly those working to meet the needs of children and families, should review their procedures related to grantmaking, and identify strategies to streamline these practices. Payments should be paid in a timely manner and, when possible, made in advance to support small, community-based organizations and nonprofits building the state's capacity for meeting the needs of children and families. Consider the ways in which current state practices may discriminate against people or organizations who face barriers when applying for or receiving grant funding, including having access

to liquid assets and a bank account or having the time, skill, and capacity to write a grant.

Make Critical Investments in Data Infrastructure to Support Case Management and Service Delivery

- **Renewed Policy Recommendations (2020, 2021):** Fully fund and expedite the development and execution of the Child Development Division's Information System (CDDIS), including a module for Children's Integrated Services data collection and monitoring.
- **New Policy Recommendation:** Secure sufficient state funding to fully implement the Comprehensive Child Welfare Information System (CCWIS).