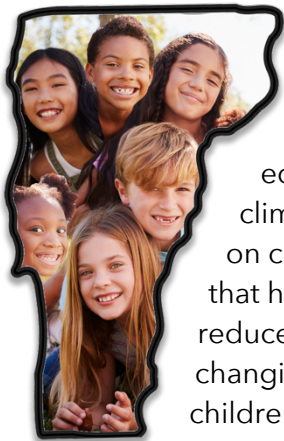


How Do Kids Fare in Governor Scott's Proposed Fiscal Year 2021 Budget?



Virtually all aspects of the state budget impact children and youth; from how we fund public education to our investments in clean water and climate change solutions. Even if we define spending on children more narrowly, focusing on the programs that help meet kids' basic needs, a troubling trend of reduced spending on kids reveals that we are short-changing our future. At the federal level, investments in children have decreased by almost 10% in the last 4 years, placing increasing pressure on state budgets to pick up the slack...or not.

Increased health care costs and social service demands linked to the aging population are straining state and federal budgets. But rather than explore revenue reforms to ensure that everyone has what they need to thrive, policymakers are restricting spending on children. The impacts of this short-sighted approach are showing up in Vermont's overworked and under-resourced child protection system, struggling schools, a lack of affordable child care, and a weakened safety net.

This brief assesses the executive budget's impact on children, youth, and families as it intersects with Voices for Vermont's Children's policy priorities. While there are promising steps in some areas, on the whole it is not a budget that centers the wellbeing of Vermont's kids.

Top Takeaways

The Good:

- Creation of mobile crisis response teams
- Proposal to establish universal after school programs by 2025

The Bad:

- Budget continues to operate in a scarcity frame, failing to make critical investments in prevention.
- Cuts to safety net programs like Reach Up that are already underfunded and unable to meet their statutory obligations.

What's Missing:

- Investments in proven strategies to reduce poverty, support children and families, and put the state on a path to shared prosperity.

Family Economic Security

→ Reach Up Income Assistance

Since the dramatic restructuring of welfare programs in 1996, there has been a realignment of who benefits from social safety net programs. Child poverty has been relatively unchanged, but more of the benefits that mitigate the impacts of poverty are tied to workforce participation. As a result, fewer benefits are directed to children in extreme poverty, including those whose caregivers are not attached to the workforce in a significant way.

In Vermont, the declining value of Reach Up means that it is helping fewer kids. In 1997, 83% of families living in poverty were served by Reach Up. In 2018, that number had fallen to 50%. Last year, the legislature approved the first increase to Reach Up in at least 15 years. This modest bump brought the maximum benefit for a family of three outside of Chittenden County from \$640 to \$700 per month. The Department for Children and Families states that a subsistence income for this family is almost \$1,900. Even with the maximum 3SquaresVT benefit families would have about \$1,200/month to secure housing, food, clothing, school supplies, personal hygiene and cleaning supplies, and other incidentals. This is not enough to prevent children from suffering material hardship.

In addition, the proposed budget substantially reduces the Reach Up transportation program that helps participants get to work. This is counterproductive, given that transportation issues rank third on the list of Reach Up participants' barriers to employment. The need for transportation assistance is greatest for families who have been enrolled in Reach Up for 60 or more months, 36% of whom list transportation as an issue.

Barrier	Overall Reach Up Population	60 Month Population
Emotional Health	24%	43%
Health and Safety	21%	35%
Transportation	29%	36%

Reach Up should provide 100% of the basic needs budget calculated by DCF, with no grant reduction penalty for disabled adult family members. Voices opposes the administration's proposal to cut more than \$600,000 dollars out of the Reach Up budget, including about \$188k in transportation support. The legislature must continue the effort started last year to bring Reach Up grants into alignment with the cost of providing for children's basic needs.

→ *General Assistance Emergency Housing Vouchers*

Voices is concerned with the proposal to end the General Assistance emergency housing voucher program and the proposed absence of a centralized last-resort safety net for housing in extreme weather conditions. The state has an obligation to provide basic safety options to our residents, especially families with children. It is unwise to dismantle the current system without confirmation and demonstration that community supports are fully adequate, permanently funded, and are reaching everyone with a need for housing across a full spectrum of circumstances.

When this happens, utilization of GA housing vouchers should become even more rare, and at that point the program will not pose a significant budgetary impact anyway. It should not be necessary to end the program even should the proposed transition be successfully realized. It should remain in place as a last resort.

Continued use of the voucher system is evidence that other systems are not adequate; removing the safety net as an attempt to force communities to create more robust systems, and to do so on an impossibly fast timeline, is an approach that creates risk - a risk that is borne most significantly by families and children, who, in the event of a less than perfect transition, will be forced to remain in unsafe situations of various kinds with potentially dire outcomes including death.

The state must find a way to incentivize the creation of robust and appropriate community-based systems without abdicating responsibility for basic safety protections for the state's most vulnerable children. This transition can be managed and fully realized without ending the GA program. And certainly, at a bare minimum, the timeline can be extended beyond the impossibly brief period currently proposed. We would support the goal of creating a nearly budget neutral GA program, that nonetheless exists as a true safety-net, and a fully-functional continuum of care. This must be done without putting a single child at greater risk than they are now.

→ *Child Care Access & Affordability*

Vermont's Child Care Financial Assistance Program is a critical resource that helps Vermont families afford child care. However, the level of financial assistance offered by the program does not reflect the current cost of child care in Vermont, meaning that eligible families and child care providers still struggle. Voices supports immediate and continued progress toward the goal of ensuring affordable access to care for every Vermont child who needs it. In 2020, we join Let's Grow Kids and other early care and learning organizations in calling for the allocation of funds to support necessary IT upgrades and to continue to increase the rates paid by the program to reflect the most current data on the cost of child care.

Child Welfare and Juvenile Justice

→ *Office of Child Advocate*

Right now, Vermont is the only state in New England without an Office of Child Advocate. When it comes to child protection, we can't access the data we need to understand whether the system is working as intended, and the limited information we do have paints an increasingly worrisome picture.

What we do know is that Vermont consistently ranks among the highest rates of out-of-home placement in the United States. It has a higher than average rate of children being placed in two or more foster homes (39% in VT vs 35% nationally in 2016). And Vermont's low-income families are much more likely to come in contact with the child protection system, despite the fact that poverty is not an allowable cause for child protection investigation.

Yet the Department of Children and Families has been unable to address these concerns. This lack of transparency in our child protection system means that it is impossible to know if the system is functioning as intended. Without more information, there is no clear path forward to build trust or create accountability. **Voices calls for the creation of an Office of Child Advocate to accomplish this goal.**

→ *Woodside Juvenile Detention Center*

We support the administration's plan to close Woodside. Woodside is an outdated model and Voices recognizes the need to shift toward healing-centered treatment, gender specific housing, and restorative models of justice. However, we acknowledge that some of our youth have experienced a great deal of trauma, and have adapted in ways that make them reactive. It is in their best interest and the best interest of the community to have secure spaces where accountability is restorative. In order to achieve this, we believe that community partners and the state need to have a shared ownership of a new model for care. This ownership needs to be fiscal, philosophical, and practical. While we agree with the plan to close Woodside, we do not support an abrupt transition. We urge the state to prioritize creating community investment in a continuum of care that meets the needs of all children and youth.

We support the administration's proposal to invest in mobile crisis response units to complete the continuum of care for Vermont's families.

Public Health

→ *High Technology Nursing Services*

Vermont has about 20 Medicaid-eligible children and 25 adults living at home with very high medical needs. These individuals have been assessed by the State of Vermont, and have been determined to be eligible for a certain number of hours of medically necessary in-home nursing services. However, only about 54% of the approved nursing services are actually being provided, largely due to the inability of Home Health Agencies to pay a competitive rate. This puts the children's and adults' health at risk, and puts tremendous strain on their families. The failure to provide all medically necessary services, especially to children, violates federal Medicaid law. Voices supports the proposed \$460,000 request for an enhanced pay rate for or Home Health Agencies to increase wages by \$10 an hour for registered nurses in the Medicaid funded High Technology Nursing Program (also known as Medically Complex Nursing).

→ *Dental Therapy Program Lab*

Substantial disparities exist in access to oral health services for Medicaid-enrolled children across the state. As of 2017, 78% of primary care dentists in Vermont were accepting 5 or more new non-Medicaid patients a month, but only 32% were accepting 5 or more new Medicaid patients a month. About 6,000 people visit the emergency department for oral health conditions per year -- a costly and ineffective service delivery model. And the share of these visits billed to Medicaid increased 10% between 2007 and 2013.

In 2016 Vermont authorized the practice of dental therapists, a new dental health provider with a scope of practice that includes the most common preventive and restorative procedures similar to a physician's assistant or nurse practitioner in medical care. Dental therapists are an important part of the solution to closing the access gap for dental care, especially in low-income and rural communities where there are few practices accepting Medicaid. Dental therapists can be deployed to nursing homes, schools, and even primary care settings to improve access to and integration of oral health care.

Vermont Technical College received a substantial federal grant to establish a dental therapy education program at their Williston campus, and is seeking a combination of public and private funding to complete the matching requirement. Senators Sirotkin, White and Lyons have submitted S.242, a request for a one-time \$100,000 appropriation that will leverage additional private philanthropy funds to build the clinical lab space required to run the program.

Education

→ *Universal School Meals*

Every student should have access to the same things while at school, whether it's educational opportunities or food. Right now, not every student has access to school breakfast and lunch, and all students need good nutrition to learn well. When schools switch to universal school meals, the social climate in the cafeteria and the entire school shifts as differences in family income become less visible, students are more ready to learn, and school administrators report more positive relationships with students' families. Voices supports Hunger Free Vermont's efforts to ensure that every student can eat at school every day by requiring all public schools in Vermont to provide universal school meals as part of a student's education by 2025, and by providing state funding to supplement the federal funding all schools receive.

→ *Afterschool for All*

There is substantial evidence that afterschool and summer learning programs support student learning and growth and reduce the risk of negative outcomes. Unfortunately, many Vermont families do not have access to quality affordable programs in their communities. According to Vermont Afterschool, there are currently 467 afterschool and summer learning programs across Vermont serving over 21,000 children and youth. Yet an estimated 22,000 more would likely participate if programs were affordable and available in their community. We applaud the Governor for highlighting the importance of afterschool in his budget address and for proposing to create a universal afterschool network by 2025. We know that increasing afterschool programs and access requires significant state investment and we urge the Governor and legislature to include in its design funding of the Expanded Learning Opportunity Special Fund.