

V E R M O N T

EARLY CHILDHOOD
ADVOCACY ALLIANCE

2025 Legislative Agenda

BUILDING BRIGHT FUTURES: Supporting Capacity to Advise and Monitor Vermont’s Early Childhood System

BACKGROUND: Building Bright Futures (BBF) is named in state statute as the entity charged with advising the Legislature, Governor, and Administration on the well-being and needs of young children and their families. BBF’s role and utility has increased in recent years, including being named responsible for monitoring implementation, impacts, and outcomes related to Act 76. This increased role takes significant time, skill, and capacity from Building Bright Futures’ small team. Current state appropriations do not sufficiently support the ever-changing needs of the early childhood system and the increased level of responsiveness BBF’s role requires.

PROPOSAL: The Alliance supports BBF’s request for an additional \$322,445 in base funding in FY26 to support monitoring, accountability, technical assistance/building state and legislative capacity, and advisement. This additional funding is necessary to support personnel, overhead, and program expenses/contracts that will support BBF’s ability to provide timely direct advisement on policy and program implementation based on the most up-to-date data and monitoring efforts.

LEAD ORGANIZATION: Building Bright Futures

DATA POINT: BBF advised the Legislature and decision-makers more than 150 times during the 2023-2024 biennium.

EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION: Delivering on the Promise of Act 76 - Ensuring an Equitable, Affordable, and Sustainable Early Childhood Education System in Vermont

BACKGROUND: In 2023, the Vermont Legislature passed Act 76 (an act relating to child care and early childhood education) with overwhelming support. Since Act 76 started rolling out, more than 1,000 new child care spaces have been created, early childhood educator wages are increasing, and more families are getting access to affordable child care. But there’s still more work to be done to grow the early childhood education workforce, increase affordability for families, and fully realize the promise of Act 76.

PROPOSAL: The Alliance supports Let’s Grow Kids and the Vermont Association for the Education of Young Children in their work to continue building on the success of Act 76 with the goal of making it work for all Vermont families with young children, and to ensure that

funding gets into the hands of those who need it most – child care programs and early childhood educators, families, and kids.

LEAD ORGANIZATIONS: Let’s Grow Kids (LGK) and Vermont Association for the Education of Young Children (VTAEYC)

DATA POINT: Since Act 76 went into effect, over 1,000 new child care spaces have been created.

CHILDREN’S INTEGRATED SERVICES (CIS): Protect Family Access to Integrated Support Through CIS

BACKGROUND: Children’s Integrated Services (CIS) delivers evidence-based and informed services to families with young children as part of a coordinated continuum of care across multiple types of providers and settings. Unfortunately, recent state investments in CIS have not substantially improved the ability of community-based agencies to retain staff and provide services, even as demand has remained far higher than pre-pandemic levels. The study conducted by Burns and Associates the spring of 2024 analyzed CIS system costs and determined the actual costs were 14% higher than the current reimbursement rate.

PROPOSAL: The Alliance supports efforts to secure: 1) an FY26 Budget increase of about \$1.6m to allow for full funding of the per member/per month rate of \$738 identified by the recent study of the true cost of care; 2) inclusion of CIS services in a proposed bill that would require an annual rate study for certain services provided by state contractors, including Designated Agencies; and 3) full funding for the development of CIS data management modules.

LEAD ORGANIZATION: VT Early Childhood Advocacy Alliance

DATA POINT: The actual costs of delivering CIS are 14% higher than the current state reimbursement rate.

FAIR SHARE FOR VERMONT: Build a Vermont that Works for Everyone

BACKGROUND: The Governor’s Administration and the Legislature currently focus on the amount of revenue expected when building state budgets, instead of the needs of Vermont residents. As a result of this focus on revenue rather than needs, state programs and services are chronically underfunded. Even as demonstrated needs are increasing, there has been no adjustment to the Vermont personal income tax rates for years. At the same time, wealth and income inequality has grown, resulting in a population of wealthy Vermonters who are able to pay significantly more in taxes than they currently are. The state must raise revenue from those who can afford to pay.

PROPOSAL: The Alliance supports Fund Vermont’s Future’s “Fair Share for Vermont” Campaign, which is advocating for a new tax bracket on annual personal income over \$500,000.

This tax increase would generate over \$74 million annually in state revenue to improve public goods and services.

LEAD ORGANIZATION: Fund Vermont’s Future Campaign

DATA POINT: The “Fair Share for Vermont” proposal would generate over \$74 million in state revenue each year.

HOUSING & HOMELESSNESS: Addressing Vermont’s Homelessness Crisis

BACKGROUND: Vermont’s housing and homelessness crisis is the result of multiple factors, including a lack of sufficient permanently affordable housing units, skyrocketing housing and constructions costs, more people moving to Vermont, increasing short term rentals, a failure to ensure a living wage, a failure to provide adequate mental health and substance use services (and continuing to criminalize people who use drugs), and more. While we urge the Legislature to make the sustained long-term investments necessary to ensure perpetually affordable housing with the necessary support services to meet the demand, we also urge the Legislature in the shorter-term to provide the resources necessary to ensure sufficient emergency shelter.

PROPOSAL: The Alliance supports the Housing & Homelessness Alliance of Vermont (HHA) in its request for the Legislature to ensure there is sufficient state funding in FY26 to:

- maximize the capacity of Vermont's affordable housing developers
- maintain Vermont's existing homelessness prevention infrastructure; and
- provide emergency shelter for unhoused Vermonters.

LEAD ORGANIZATION: Housing & Homelessness Alliance of Vermont

DATA POINT: According to the 2024 Point In Time count, there were 3,458 unhoused Vermonters on a single night, including 737 children.

ACCESS TO DOULA COVERAGE: Medicaid Coverage for Community Doula Care

BACKGROUND: Doula support is an evidence-based policy that promotes more equitable, safer, less expensive births, and improves perinatal outcomes in the short- and long-term. Doula support is also correlated with improved infant-parent bonding and less postpartum depression and anxiety throughout the perinatal period.

PROPOSAL: The Alliance supports the efforts of the Doula Association of Vermont to secure policy changes that will enable Vermont families covered by Medicaid to access the support of a Community Doula, who can provide care and advocacy during the perinatal period that meets the self-determined needs of the birthing person.

LEAD ORGANIZATION: Doula Association of Vermont

DATA POINT: About 40% of all births in Vermont are covered under Medicaid.

PARENT CHILD CENTER NETWORK: Leveraging Tobacco Settlement Funds to Reduce Smoking Exposure for Families with Young Children

BACKGROUND: The 15 Parent Child Centers (PCCs) that make up the Vermont PCC Network (VPCCN) currently offer a limited range of smoking and vaping cessation, health education and prevention activities as part of the eight core services funded by the State’s Integrated Grant to the VPCCN. PCCs are in a unique and strategic position to reach parents and caregivers most at risk for smoking, to reduce the number of pregnant and parenting adults who use tobacco products and to protect children from the detrimental effects of secondhand smoke. Vermont continues to have one of the nation’s highest rates of tobacco use, with over 13% of all live births affected by cigarette use in 2023. By building long term, supportive and trusting relationships with parents, and integrating enhanced smoking prevention education and cessation throughout the early childhood services, home visiting, parent education, play groups and concrete supports, PCCs can be successful where smoking cessation programs alone are not enough.

PROPOSAL: The Alliance supports VPCCN’s request to allocate \$500,000 of the State’s Tobacco Settlement funds to build the capacity and reach of the 15 PCCs to provide screening, cessation program referrals, education, and prevention activities to support parents to stop smoking and vaping and maintain smoke-free homes. Allocating Tobacco Settlement funds to enhance the VPCCN’s Integrated Grant will enable PCCs to reach over 3,000 parents and 3,000 children who are currently at risk.

LEAD ORGANIZATION: Vermont Parent Child Center Network

DATA POINT: An unacceptable rate of 13.1% of all live births in 2023 were affected by cigarette use.

PERINATAL LOSS: Funding to Expand Peer Support for Pregnancy & Infant Loss

BACKGROUND: Empty Arms Vermont provides free, statewide, peer support for families who have experienced pregnancy and infant loss. About 1 in 4 pregnancies end in loss, yet historically, perinatal loss has been a hidden or disenfranchised grief, and thus not adequately supported by the community. Parents facing perinatal loss are at much greater risk for perinatal mood and anxiety disorders compared to non-bereaved parents. Empty Arms Vermont is the only statewide organization that provides peer support for any family in Vermont facing pregnancy or infant loss.

PROPOSAL: The Alliance supports the Empty Arms effort to secure \$40,000 for two years (\$80,000 total) in state funding in order to develop a long-term, sustainable plan to strengthen internal capacity and scale up programs.

LEAD ORGANIZATION: Empty Arms Vermont

DATA POINT: Bereaved birthing parents have four times greater odds of major depression and seven times increased odds of post-traumatic stress disorder than non-bereaved birthing parents.

REACH UP: Ending Child Poverty is Within Our Reach

BACKGROUND: Reach Up is Vermont's safety net program to prevent children from experiencing deep poverty, which we know is harmful to their health and development. Stipends are meant to meet basic needs while parents work towards economic stability. Currently, the program bases family stipends on a 2001 housing cost estimate and a 2019 "other basic needs" estimate. Then, the state cuts that number in half with a formula called the "ratable reduction." This means that a family of four is expected to meet most of their basic needs, often including housing, with about \$1000 per month. We know this is impossible and forces families to spend time seeking crisis support such as emergency housing, food pantries, and emergency transportation for medical needs rather than being able to focus on their long-term economic security goals. Persistent poverty also increases the chance that children are separated from their families and placed in foster care, which is both costly and traumatic.

PROPOSAL: The Alliance supports Voices for Vermont's Children in their request that the Legislature ensure that Reach Up grants fulfill their intended purpose of bringing eligible families' income up to the poverty line by: (1) eliminating the "ratable reduction" that reduces the Reach Up benefit by about 50%; (2) using current cost of living estimates to create the annual base Reach Up grant; and (3) prioritizing making permanently affordable housing accessible.

LEAD ORGANIZATION: Voices for Vermont's Children for the Vermont Reach Up Coalition

DATA POINT: The Reach Up benefit for a family of three is currently just \$880 per month, far short of what is needed to cover basic needs.

INFORMATION AND REFERRAL: Ensuring a Strong, Adequately Funded Vermont 211

BACKGROUND: For many years, nonprofit service providers throughout Vermont have promoted Vermont 211 as the one phone number to remember, and as the reliable, trusted place where someone will always answer and always try to help with services and referrals. Vermont 211 is supported largely by a state contract through the Department of Children and Families. The program had been level funded for many years even as the actual cost of running the

program has grown. Full-time, 24 hour/day operations in FY25 are only possible because of one-time funding included by the Legislature.

PROPOSAL: The Alliance supports the United Ways of Vermont's request for a total of \$1.6 million in base funding for Vermont 211 to maintain current 24/7 operations readiness for emergency and disaster response and recovery as needed.

LEAD ORGANIZATION: United Ways of Vermont

DATA POINT: Vermont 211 received 50,157 contacts in FY23 via calls and text, resulting in 23,792 referrals for benefits and services.

ANTI-POVERTY TAX CREDITS: Increase Financial Stability for Vermont Families

BACKGROUND: The Child Tax Credit (CTC) and Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) help Vermont families with the lowest incomes fill the gap between income and expenses by providing cash when they file their taxes. During the pandemic, temporarily expanded federal tax credits helped bring 10,000 people out of poverty. Unfortunately, when these credits ended, many Vermont families with children were worse off. Vermont has been a leader in state-level anti-poverty tax credits, but restrictions on who qualifies, as well as systemic barriers to access, leave out many Vermont families who would benefit from the credits.

PROPOSAL: The Alliance supports the efforts of the Anti-Poverty Tax Credit Coalition to expand the Vermont EITC from matching 38% of the federal EITC for families with children to 55%, and to expand access to the Vermont EITC and CTC for families with low income who need them most. These changes will reduce poverty, improve family financial stability, and allow Vermonters to meet needs specific to their families.

LEAD ORGANIZATION: Public Assets Institute on behalf of the Vermont Anti-Poverty Tax Credit Coalition

DATA POINT: Increasing Vermont's EITC would help 20,000 families with children close the gap between their earnings and what they need to make ends meet.