

Children's Justice Act Task Force monthly meeting 7/9/26

Present: Kristin Gozzi, Larry Crist, Tracey Wagner, Ariel Beaulac, Matt Bernstein, Lauren Higbee, Britaney Watson, Rob Post, Jen Harris, Nancy Miller, Lindsay Barron

CJA Annual Report review

Nancy shared a brief PowerPoint presentation orienting members to the annual report, which was submitted at the end of May

Purpose of annual report:

The report serves three primary purposes:

- Documents that Vermont has established and maintains a Children's Justice Act State Task Force, as required under the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act.
- Provides an annual program performance report to federal partners.
- Serves as Vermont's application for the following year's CJA grant allocation.

Vermont receives approximately \$72,000 annually through the CJA grant.

Contents of the report

The annual report includes:

- Task Force membership and member biographies.
- The Task Force's structure, roles, and functions.
- Meeting content and activities from the prior year.
- Information about special meetings, workgroups, and conferences.
- Prior-year performance reports from the three current CJA-funded programs:
 - Vermont Guardian ad Litem Program
 - Vermont Network Against Domestic and Sexual Violence
 - Vermont Children's Alliance
- The prior-year line-item budget.
- Proposed activities and budgets for the upcoming grant year.

Looking ahead to the 2027 Three-Year Assessment

Nancy shared clarification received during the national CJA meeting regarding the scope of the required Three-Year Assessment. The assessment does not need to constitute a comprehensive evaluation of Vermont's entire child protection system. It may instead describe the Task Force's work, accomplishments, remaining needs, and planned areas of focus.

The 2027 assessment is expected to include:

- Accomplishments and next steps associated with Act 154 and Child Protection Registry reform.
- The groundwork and accomplishments associated with Act 108 and the Mandatory Reporting Working Group.
- An assessment of continued needs and funding priorities.
- Task Force discussion and agreement regarding whether to continue funding the three existing subgrantees or initiate a new request-for-proposals process.

The current grantee programs generally present their annual reports to the Task Force in the late fall. Those presentations will help inform grant recommendations for the next three-year period.

Task Force Membership

Feedback from federal partners focused on filling the required Task Force seat previously held by Mark Redmond. The CJA membership requirements include an individual with experience serving homeless youth.

Several potential candidates have been identified. Jen has contacted Stefanie Comstock, Director of Basic Needs Programs at Spectrum Youth and Family Services St. Albans Drop-In Center, who has expressed interest in joining the Task Force.

Other membership needs include:

- Filling the role previously held by Melanie Hall, representing children with disabilities or special health care needs.
- Identifying a successor for Larry Crist's seat following his retirement and the closure of Vermont Parent Representation Center.

Task Force Member Larry Crist's retirement

Larry announced that he is retiring after ten years as Executive Director of the Vermont Parent Representation Center and that VPRC will be closing after 19 years of service in Vermont. He reflected on the organization's accomplishments and described his service on the CJA Task Force as an honor and a privilege.

Task Force members acknowledged Larry's significant contributions and the evolution of the partnership between VPRC, Family Services, and the Task Force. Although the work sometimes involved strongly differing perspectives and difficult conversations, that engagement ultimately supported greater collaboration, mutual learning, and meaningful system reform. Larry's advocacy and willingness to remain at the table were especially important to the work that led to Act 154 and changes to Vermont's Child Protection Registry system.

Members expressed appreciation for Larry's years of service and wished him well in retirement. A virtual retirement card will be shared with Task Force members.

Act 154 status check and updates:

The Task Force previously helped develop:

- A framework for distinguishing internal findings from findings that result in placement on the Child Protection Registry.
- Additional detail regarding Child Protection Levels and registry-related timeframes.
- Broader recommendations related to Child Protection Registry reform.

Information about the reform work is available on the Department's Child Protection Registry Reform webpage

<https://dcf.vermont.gov/registry/child-protection/reform>

Centralized Substantiation Review

Act 154 requires the Department to establish a centralized oversight process for substantiation decisions to promote greater consistency across districts.

The Department has completed two time studies using closed cases. Reviewers from Residential Licensing and Special Investigations, Centralized Intake and Emergency Services, and several districts worked in pairs to test the review process and provide feedback. Depending on the complexity of the case, reviews took from approximately two hours to nearly a full workday.

The pilot is helping the Department determine:

- What information reviewers need to examine.
- How to balance thoroughness with available staffing and timely case closure.
- How the process can support both quality assurance and professional learning.

The next phase is expected to use open cases volunteered by districts so the process can be tested in real time with input from workers and supervisors.

Larry emphasized the importance of making accurate and consistent decisions at the outset, noting that substantiation appeals can continue for years and create significant financial and personal consequences for families.

Rulemaking and Policy Development

Matthew asked for an update regarding the timeline for rulemaking and public comment.

The work is somewhat delayed from the original timeline and is now more likely to move forward in the fall or winter.

The Department is simultaneously revising:

- Policy 56 to incorporate the centralized substantiation review process and related procedures.
- Rules 2000 and 3000.

The policy and rule drafts are being developed together, with side-by-side consideration of statutory requirements, matters that should be addressed in rule and practice guidance that belongs in policy.

Before formally filing the proposed rules and beginning the public-comment process, the Department plans to conduct another round of stakeholder review. This will allow stakeholders, including the CJA Task Force and the Office of Child, Youth and Family Advocate Advisory Council, to provide feedback through meetings and dialogue before the more formal rulemaking stage.

Foster Parent Engagement

The Department recently presented an overview of Act 154 to the Foster Parent Workgroup.

The discussion acknowledged that licensed caregivers may be more likely than other members of the public to be the subject of allegations because they frequently care for children with significant needs and complex histories.

Caregivers discussed:

- What foster parents should expect when allegations are made.
- Communication and timelines during an investigation.
- Role clarity among Residential Licensing and Special Investigations, district staff, and resource coordinators.
- What support can appropriately be provided without interfering with an investigation.
- The effect of isolation and uncertainty on caregivers during an investigation.

The Department is developing an informational brochure or infographic explaining what foster parents can expect when an allegation is made against them. The next Foster Parent Workgroup meeting will include review of a draft.

Foster parents also provided feedback regarding the use of aggravating and mitigating factors and how those considerations may apply throughout an investigation, not only at the final decision point.

Larry noted that some of the foster parents who faced substantiation were also those who had accepted especially difficult placements and had previously been recognized as exemplary caregivers. He thanked the Department for bringing this group directly into the reform process.

Centralized Substantiation Case Review tool

Nancy reviewed the draft review tool, which is aligned with the existing Case Determination structure.

The Department hopes to place the tool in an ADS-approved digital platform that can:

- Capture individual case feedback.
- Aggregate quality-assurance information.
- Identify statewide trends.
- Inform future policy clarification, training, and practice support.

The draft tool includes:

- Review of intake acceptance and whether another allegation category should have been considered.
- Consideration of unaccepted reports received after the current investigation began and whether appropriate follow-up occurred.
- Timeliness and manner of commencement.
- Interviews completed, attempted, or not completed.
- Evidence obtained
- Quality of documentation.
- Whether the key information relied upon for the determination is clearly and concisely identified.
- Whether the correct policy categories were selected.
- Whether the evidence is clearly connected to policy.
- Whether the documentation explains how the preponderance-of-the-evidence standard was met.
- Whether the documentation explains why the case resulted in substantiation rather than an internal finding.
- Whether the correct substantiation categories were selected

Members recommended clarifying that the review of unaccepted reports applies to reports received after the current investigation was accepted. Members also noted the importance of documenting why a report was not accepted and whether it was forwarded to an existing worker for follow-up.

A companion definitions and examples guide may be developed to support consistent use of the tool, particularly for rating terms such as clearly documented, partially documented, or insufficiently documented.

Act 108 Child Abuse and Neglect Reporting Working Group

Act 108 identifies the CJA Task Force as an advisory body to the Mandatory Reporting Working Group.

Given the volume of work anticipated, Lindsay initially raised the possibility of establishing optional meetings outside the regular CJA schedule for members who wish to participate more directly.

Next CJATF meeting: Monday August 3rd 12:00-1:00 - virtual Teams meeting

The next CJA meeting will provide:

- An orientation to Act 108 and the responsibilities established in the legislation.
- An overview of the CJA Task Force's advisory role.
- An update on additional partners invited to participate.
- Discussion of whether any important perspectives or organizations are missing.
- Initial identification and prioritization of topics the Task Force recommends that the statutory Working Group address.