



# **Vermont Citizens Advisory Board (VCAB)**

**to the VT Department for Children and Families**

## **FY20-21 Annual Report**

### **FY20-21 VCAB Meetings**

#### **A. Vermont Citizen's Advisory Board held four meetings in FY 2020-2021**

- September 2, 2020
- December 2, 2020
- March 3, 2021
- June 2, 2021

#### **B. COVID-19**

- VCAB continued to meet throughout this year, shifting to on-line videoconference meetings starting in June 2020 and continuing through June 2021. VCAB plans to resume meeting in person in September 2021.

### **VCAB Operations and Leadership**

#### **A. VCAB Co-Chairs and Membership**

- VCAB Co-Chairs serve two-year terms, with elections scheduled biannually in March. In December 2020, Dr. James Metz was elected Co-Chair to fill the vacancy left by the departure of Dr. Debra Taylor in June 2020. Co-Chairs Dr. James Metz and Sally Borden were re-elected in March 2021 to a two-year term.
- VCAB membership is staggered so that approximately half of the members are up for re-election for two-year terms each year in March. Attached is a list of members re-elected in March 2021, as well as those whose terms continue until March 2022. An average of 21 members, 28 individuals, attended VCAB meetings in FY20-21.

#### **B. VT Department for Children and Families (DCF)**

- VCAB welcomed new DCF Commissioner Sean Brown in September 2020.
- VCAB thanked and bid farewell to Deputy Commissioner for Family Services Christine Johnson in March 2021. VCAB welcomed new Deputy Commissioner Aryka Radke, who started her position in February 2021, at the March 2021 meeting.

#### **C. Operations**

- VCAB is empaneled under the provisions of 33VSA4917. Annual (re)empanelment was submitted and authorized effective October 1, 2020.

- VCAB administrative and operational support is provided by KidSafe Collaborative, Inc. per a grant from the VT Department for Children and Families.
- VCAB’s webpage, established in 2018 and maintained on the VT DCF website, provides the public with information about and access to VCAB. <https://dcf.vermont.gov/boards-councils/VCAB>

## **Key Issues and Actions**

VCAB focused on two primary issues this year: (1) The COVID-19 pandemic and response, and (2) racism and racial justice. Additional issues were also addressed, however a significant of time at each meeting was spent on these two vitally important issues.

### **A. COVID-19**

- VCAB requested updates from DCF at each meeting about key issues, challenges, and changes to policy and practice in response to the pandemic. DCF set up **guiding principles** during COVID, shared regularly with VCAB and partner organizations. Key areas of concern:
  - Parent-child contact restrictions and modifications
  - Face to face vs. virtual client contact
  - Child safety investigations/assessments
  - Decreased number of child maltreatment reports
  - Child and youth placements, COVID+ concerns
  - Staff safety. PPE; workplace/remote work guidelines
  - Family Court closures, delays; community organizations – virtual, telehealth services
  - Child/youth challenges: mental health, health care, education and child care
- *VCAB Statement: VCAB appreciates the difficult job of DCF frontline workers navigating COVID challenges; commends DCF for quick response when COVID began and for working to maintain contact with families throughout while at the same time attending to staff safety.*

### **B. Racism and Racial Justice**

- VCAB continued significant discussion of the importance of addressing systemic racism, VCAB’s role, and developing a public anti-racism statement. VCAB committed to including this issue on VCAB meeting agendas, and to work toward increasing diversity of VCAB membership.
- DCF Family Services developed an internal Racial Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Workgroup, with strong staff participation. Focus on: policies and practices, data collection, hiring and retention and staff training. Staff of color established an affinity group, has been meeting regularly. Engaged Casey Family Programs for technical assistance. “Listening Sessions” held in each district.
- Voices for Vermont’s Children convened Child Protection Listening Series, 4 sessions on-line, to help to create a context for discussion of bias and racism in child welfare. Broad participation.

#### **Action:**

- VCAB vote to issue **Statement on Anti-Racism** (*Approved March 3, 2021; attached*).

Included in the Statement are the following action items:

- VCAB will make this a priority on every VCAB agenda.
- VCAB calls upon DCF to start by doing the following: examine policies and practices in the context of racial bias; collect and analyze data that informs us about racial disparities; listen to Black families and People of Color in our state about their experiences of racism; support People of Color in having a strong leadership voice within our systems; and commit to changing our system to be sure it is fair, equitable and just.
- VCAB acknowledges that this work, and this statement, is a “work in progress;” commitment to continue to include more voices and broaden our own knowledge as we move forward with our anti-racism efforts.
- VCAB commended DCF Family Services for initiating and supporting this work; expressed appreciation for VCAB members’ diligence and effort developing our Anti-Racism Statement.

## C. IT System

- DCF Information System/Technology: urgent need. DCF uses multiple systems, very outdated, inefficient; major issue affecting every aspect of DCF Family Services operations.
- Needed: 22M; 50% federal match, state commitment of 11M needed to address IT system inadequacy issues.
- DCF IT challenges adversely affect children and families, as Family Services workers cannot access case information quickly, must enter duplicative information in multiple locations, increasing likelihood of error and which takes away from time with children and families.
- Families First Act implementation will require data collection and reporting, bringing DCF’s serious IT inadequacy to the forefront.

### Action:

- Request Commissioner Brown and Deputy Commissioner Radke to provide VCAB with specifics regarding IT system needs, proposal and funding.
- VCAB will draft a letter to Commissioner Brown and VT Agency of Human Services Secretary Smith, strongly advocating for funding for an IT system to meet DCF’s needs.

## D. State Budget

Commissioner Brown provided VCAB with an overview of key budget issues at each meeting.

- Received Federal Coronavirus and relief funds and Block Grants
- Facilities: development of secure facility for small number of youth unable to be safely maintained in existing residential sites, to replace Woodside. DCF front-end investment, Legislature has allocated initial \$1.4M
- Budget impacts: the raised age of youth served by juvenile justice system coming into care of DCF Commissioner, requiring additional services and supports. Increase funding for adoptions, foster care, youth transition to adulthood.
- Information System/Technology: urgent need; Federal match 11M available, state commitment needed to address IT system inadequacy issues.

### Action:

- VCAB offered to help DCF strategize funding advocacy for IT improvements.
- VCAB drafted a letter in March 2020 to the Governor and legislative leaders regarding the DCF budget. It was not sent due to the COVID-19 crisis. VCAB requested communication from DCF Commissioner and Deputy on how VCAB can be helpful currently regarding the budget and legislative advocacy.

## E. Juvenile Justice

- Woodside Juvenile Rehabilitation Center: closed in October 2020. Controversial. Low census, inadequate facility; DCF worked to meet needs for youth requiring secure site by using current system of care and beds made available by designated residential facilities. RFP process for development of new site, working with Becket Family of Services.
- New DCF adolescent services unit, clinical director to better address needs of adolescents in youth justice system as well as those aging out of custody.

## F. Child Placement, Prevention Services

- **Diligent Recruitment (DR)** implementation: Recruitment and retention of foster families is key for placement stability; every placement change is a source of setback for children/youth. Looking at system improvements, ways to empower primary caregivers, connect them to peer support and to provide training. Youth of Color are disproportionately represented in congregate care settings; need for improving and supporting diversity of families providing care.
- **Families First Prevention Services Act:** significant federal child welfare legislation, shifts focus from intervention lens to prevention; goal is to reduce custody. Numerous community partner organizations involved in planning; implementation plan deadline: October 2021.

## G. Legislation

- **Office of Child, Youth and Family Advocate (OCYFA)**
  - VT House passed H265 to establish an Office of Child Youth and Family Advocate, after extensive hearings in House Human Services Committee. Senate process resumes in January.
  - VCAB role, included in initial legislation, was not included in final House version.
    - Action:** Advocate for VCAB role on oversight committee, selection of Advocate. Follow up with Voices for Vermont's Children regarding relationship between VCAB and OCYFA.
- **Youth Justice:** Age of jurisdiction, phasing in 18-19 year-olds for all but most serious offenses.
- **S99:** Elimination of statute of limitations for child physical abuse, passed, signed into law.
- **DCF proposed legislation: Interstate Compact (ICPC):** Bring VT into compliance, require judicial approval to place children out of state. **Offender Registry Review:** address technical issues, move the backlog of expungement hearings since all in-person hearings are currently on hold.

# Case Review

- Case Review is conducted under the empanelment provisions of 33VSA4917.
- VCAB worked with DCF to determine cases for review, in conjunction with key systems issues discussed. Continued discussion about case review process in VCAB and legislatively mandated Child Fatality Review Team (CFRT).
- Case Review minutes are maintained separately from regular meeting minutes to ensure confidentiality and are encrypted before sending electronically.
- **Safe Systems Learning Review (SSLR):**

DCF Family Services is participating in National Safety Partnership, implemented SSLR in-depth review process using Safe Systems Review Tool. Looking at the case story through lens of systems, multiple layers, focus on using process for targeted system improvement efforts. VCAB case review June 2020 was presented using SSLR process and SSR tool.
- **VCAB conducted five Case Reviews in FY20-21. Topic areas covered:**
  - *Racial and cultural considerations:*
    1. Complex New American family with multiple children, language and cultural barriers, disabled parent. Numerous allegations of abuse over extended time period. Discussion regarding importance of family history, cultural considerations, views of parenting role, and partnering with community organizations serving that community.
    2. *Registry review:* past substantiation; New American family, language, cultural and religious considerations, views of corporal punishment. DCF: balance safety concerns with trauma of removal, inability to secure appropriate placement for children; safety planning; partner with relevant community organization serving refugee populations.
  - *COVID-19: Infant fatality,* significant child health issues and high needs, parent caretaking concerns, determined to not be child abuse/neglect. Challenge of response with COVID safety protocols; how to best support family. Concern re possible lack of access to mental health and other services due to COVID-related closures.
  - *SSLR: Infant fatality,* long history of DCF involvement; safety planning, conditional custody order, cross-district coordination, policy re ongoing family work and new baby. Concern for mental health, post-partum depression.
  - *Youth placement, high needs:* youth in DCF custody, hard to place due to developmental disabilities, significant behaviors, mental health needs; unavailable intensive supports and services. Funding waiver; multi-department coordination at direct service and leadership levels, meet weekly, unable to find appropriate placement in or out of state.

**The Vermont Citizens Advisory Board to the Department for Children and Families:  
Statement on Anti-Racism** Approved March 3, 2021

The Vermont Citizens Advisory Board to the Department for Children and Families stands in solidarity with all those in our state, throughout our country and the world speaking out against racism and racial violence and standing up for racial justice.

The tragic murders of Black people over the past year, and throughout our history, call on us to not only condemn horrific racial violence but also to make a strong commitment to recognize, address, and work to end systemic racism and bias that affects children, youth and families in Vermont.

Our role as the Vermont Citizens Advisory Board is to advise DCF Family Services, whose mission is to “make sure children and youth are safe from abuse, their basic needs are met, they abide by the law, and their families are supported to achieve these goals.” Anti-racism must be part and parcel of this work because children cannot be safe, protected from harm, and have stable and permanent homes and families if we don’t address systemic racism.

As the state child welfare and juvenile justice agency, DCF has a tremendous responsibility and at the same time there must be accountability. Like many other institutions, DCF wields great power in the lives of children and families. Where there has been a history of mistrust, DCF must take critical steps to build confidence to carry out their role with fairness and respect. Where DCF has made a positive difference in the lives of children and youth, they must ensure that these practices are the rule not the exception, and are carried out fairly and equitably with all families.

We at VCAB share the same commitment to being actively anti-racist as we strive to improve our child welfare and juvenile justice systems. VCAB will make this a priority on every VCAB agenda. We will call upon DCF to start by doing the following: examine their policies and practices in the context of racial bias; collect and analyze data that informs us about racial disparities; listen to Black families and People of Color in our state about their experiences of racism; support People of Color in having a strong leadership voice within our systems; and commit to changing our system to be sure it is fair, equitable and just. Vermont’s children and youth deserve no less.

*VCAB acknowledges that this work, and this statement, is a “work in progress;” we hold a commitment to continue to include more voices and broaden our own knowledge as we move forward with our anti-racism efforts.*

## VCAB Membership and Terms - FY20-21

updated 6/2021

<b>Co-Chairs:</b>		Title	Org. / Affiliation	Current Term	alternate/notes
Sally	Borden	Executive Director	KidSafe Collaborative	2021-2023	
Dr. James	Metz	MD, Board Certified Child Abuse Pediatrician	ChildSafe Program, UVMChildren's Hospital	2020-2022	
<b>Members</b>		Title	Org. / Affiliation	Current Term	
Stephen G.	Berry	Foster/Adoptive Parent; Pastor; Bus Driver	First Presbyterian Church	2020-2022	
Amy	Brady	Policy Associate	Voices for Vermont's Children	2020-2022	
Kara	Casey	Director of Economic Empowerment	Vermont Network Against Domestic and Sexual Violence	2021-2023	
Kelly	Dougherty	Deputy Division Director	Vermont Health Dept. ADAP	2020-2022	Alt to C.Seivwright
Tom	Fontana	LCMHC, LADC, BASICS Program Coordinator	University of Vermont, Center for Health and Wellbeing	2020-2022	
Dr. Joseph F.	Hagan	MD FAAP, Pediatrician	Lakeside Pediatrics/UVM Children's Hospital	2021-2023	
Linda E.	Johnson	Executive Director	Prevent Child Abuse Vermont	2020-2022	
Patiance	Johnson	Community Member/DCF Experience		2020-2022	
Raenetta	Liberty	RN, SANE-A,P, SANE Coordinator	Forensic Nursing, UVM Medical Center (Alt)	2021-2023	alt to Tracey Wagner
Wendy	Loomis	Executive Director	Vermont Children's Alliance (Alt)	2021-2023	alt to Jen Poehlmann
Judge Kathleen	Manley	Superior Court Judge (Retired)	Vermont Judiciary	2021-2023	
Laurel	Omland	MS, NCC, Director	Child, Adolescent & Family Unit, VT Dept of Mental Health	2020-2022	
Jennifer	Poehlmann	Public Policy and Outreach Director	Vermont Children's Alliance	2021-2023	
Rep. Ann	Pugh	State Representative	VT Legislature	2021-2023	
Dana	Robson	LICSW, Children's Mental Health Operations Chief	Department of Mental Health (Alt)	2021-2023	alt to Laurel Omland
Erinn	Rolland-Forky	Foster Parent	Member, VFAFA	2020-2022	
Laura	Schaller	GAL	Vermont Judiciary/GAL Program	2021-2023	
Cynthia	Seivwright (Thomas)	Division Director	Vermont Health Dept. ADAP	2020-2022	
Edward	Soychak	Sgt., Prevention Services Division	South Burlington Police Department	2020-2022	
Lt. Michael	Studin	Bureau of Criminal Investigations	Vermont State Police, Vermont Dept. of Public Safety	2021-2023	
Kim	Swartz	Maternal Child Health	VT Department of Health	2021-2023	alt for Sally Kerschner
Tracey	Wagner	MSN, RN, SANE-P, VT Forensic Nursing Program	Child Safe Program, UVM Children's Hospital	2020-2022	alt/ R. Liberty
<b>Removed:</b>					
Sally	Kerschner	RN, MSN, Coord. MCH Injury Prevention	VT Dept. of Health, Maternal Child Health	2021-2023	Retired May2021
Lt. Jason	Letourneau	Bureau of Criminal Investigations, Troop A West	Vermont State Police, Vermont Dept. of Public Safety	2019-2021	Resigned Dec2021