



Vermont Citizens Advisory Board to the VT Department for Children and Families

FY23-24 Report

July 1 2023 – June 30 2024*

** This report is prepared for the VT Department for Children and Families for inclusion in their federally required report, demonstrating compliance with and activities of the mandated citizens advisory board.*

I. FY23-24 VCAB Meetings

A. Vermont Citizen’s Advisory Board held four quarterly meetings:

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|----------------------|------------------|
| 1. September 6, 2023 | 3. March 6, 2024 |
| 2. December 6, 2023 | 4. June 5, 2024 |

B. Meeting Location and Times:

VCAB’s quarterly meetings were held from 9:00 a.m. to 12 noon, via on-line videoconference. The September 2023 meeting was a hybrid meeting of on-line videoconference and in person attendance at the state office complex in Waterbury, VT.

II. VCAB Operations and Leadership

A. VCAB Co-Chairs and Membership

1. VCAB Co-Chairs serve two-year terms, with elections scheduled in March for each on alternating years. Co-Chair James Metz continues his current term until 2025. Sally Borden stepped down from the role of co-chair in March 2024, having served in that role for 10 years. Co-Chair Erinn Rolland-Forkey was elected in June 2024 to a two-year term following a continued vote from March 2024.
2. VCAB membership is staggered so that approximately half of the members are up for re-appointment for two-year terms each year in March. 6 new members joined VCAB this year. Anne Ward (Mosaic) joined in September 2023, Mandy Courtier (Harwood Unified School District) Britaney Watson (VT Community Broadband Board) and Kelly Woodward (NUSI) joined in December 2023, Meghan Masterson (KidSafe Collaborative) and Patti Randall (VT Children’s Alliance) joined in March 2024. A list of members re-appointed in March 2024, as well as those whose terms continue until March 2025 is *attached*.

Action: VCAB will establish a workgroup to review recruitment with focus on adding racially diverse members and members who represent a broad background including those with lived experience, working relationships with other entities, and the membership appointment process.

3. An average of 19 empaneled members attended FY23-24 VCAB meetings. Additionally, from 4 to 7 Vermont Department for Children and Families (DCF) staff attended, including the Commissioner and/or Deputy Commissioner for the Family Services Division. KidSafe Collaborative staff attended to take minutes and provide administrative support. 23 to 29 individuals, an average of 27, attended VCAB meetings in FY23-24.

B. VCAB Process and Operations

1. VCAB operates in accordance with the Board's approved by-laws, per the federal Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Reauthorization Act of 2010, provisions for community advisory panels (§106(c)(4)).
2. VCAB is empaneled under the provisions of Vermont law: 33VSA49§17. Annual (re)empanelment was submitted and authorized by the Department for Children and Families Commissioner effective October 1, 2023.
3. VCAB administrative and operational support is provided by KidSafe Collaborative, Inc. per a grant from the VT Department for Children and Families.
4. Vermont Department for Children and Families Commissioner Winters and/or Deputy Commissioner Aryka Radke participated in all VCAB meetings, along with Operations Director Brenda Gooley and/or Child Safety Manager Nancy Miller. Other DCF staff attended the meetings relevant to particular discussions or presentations.
5. An agenda for each meeting is sent to all members and to the DCF regular participants prior to each meeting. Meeting minutes/notes are taken at each meeting by KidSafe Collaborative staff, and sent to all members with the subsequent meeting agenda.
6. 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>
7. *Discussion:* VCAB deliberated on whether its operations, except for confidential case reviews, fall under the jurisdiction of public open meeting laws

C. VCAB Role and Relationship to DCF

1. *Discussion* regarding the Seven Days investigative article "The Loss of Grace" published in October 2023. Discourse from previous conversations about the Woodside Juvenile Facility continued, including the need for further transparency and accountability and acknowledgement of harm. Members expressed continued disappointment with a perceived lack of transparency from DCF during the time Woodside was operating through the present. Members indicated that with more transparency and information they may have been better able to fulfill the mandate of the Board to provide feedback. The Board continues to recognize the need for further clarification of what VCAB's advisory and oversight responsibilities are according to the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (CAPTA) and in accordance with the VCAB By-Laws. Members

considered the use of VCAB as a body for conducting an analysis of what occurred at Woodside based on the published article and publicly available lawsuit information.

Action: VCAB requested to receive continued regular updates from the Commissioner regarding any new information available about Woodside

Action: Co-chairs commit to a renewed effort to bring forth challenging issues and conversations.

Suggestion: Allow OCYFA to have direct access to records, without needing to request them, as a method of transparency.

Suggestion: include VCAB on any root cause analysis that occurs

Suggestion: ask the Governor to hold a press conference calling for Vermonters who can step up and be part of a network for child safety and wellbeing.

III. Key Issues and Actions FY23-24: Summary

A. System of Care: Secure Facility for Youth

1. DCF continues to work to develop secure facilities in multiple locations meeting different needs for the high-end system of care. A temporary facility will be established while a permanent facility is designed and built. DCF discussion: committed to ensuring that any facility will provide developmentally appropriate, holistic, trauma-informed care. Working with DOC, juvenile justice stakeholder group, those with lived experience, and professionals to ensure plan is comprehensive.
2. Department finalized a contract for an “emergency system of care team” which includes contracted services staff available for high end system staffing in partnership with FSW’s. Contracted staff oversight will be managed by a DCF employee coordinator.

Suggestion: A third party provider for secure residential care may provide a degree of staff management, which is not possible if state run, as well as qualification and licensure.

Action: VCAB requests DCF provide regular updates regarding steps taken in development of the high end system of care, specifically including information about how the Department will oversee operations at any new facilities.

Action: Add RFP updates as standing agenda item, and discuss potential role for VCAB in the RFP process

Action: VCAB requested to view marketing materials, including video and written, of the permanent facility vision and plan.

Action: VCAB members were invited to join the Justice Involved Facility Workgroup and the High End System of Care Task Force

B. IT System

1. DCF provided regular updates on the status of the CCWIS purchase and IT system project implementation.

Action: VCAB advocated for inclusion in DCF’s budget priorities, and for provisions that are inclusive of youth access to their own case information.

Action: Request for continued updates, funding implications, opportunity for VCAB advocacy.

C. Budget and Legislation Advocacy

1. Budget priorities for DCF Family Services: staffing hiring and retention; IT System implementation. Other budget priorities included funding for post permanency services, a new youth shelter,

Action: VCAB requests DCF provide budget updates timely and regularly during budget development, so VCAB has opportunity to advocate as Board sees fit.

2. Legislative issues and priorities:

VCAB and DCF discussed numerous legislative initiatives, with VCAB members Amy Rose, Voices for Vermont's Children, Jennifer Poehlmann, and former Representative Ann Pugh as well as DCF staff providing information and updates.

- H.169 and H.327, bills related to the child abuse registry and substantiation process. DCF and VPRC introduced bills that ultimately lead to workgroups and discussions to create the development of H.661. The bill demonstrates points of agreement between DCF and VPRC on these issues. Legislature has taken a great amount of testimony in addition to indicating general agreement with what was initially put forth. More conversations and research are needed, but do expect to shift from "reasonable person" to "preponderance of evidence" standard, and compromise for expanding timeframes for requesting reviews.

Action: Some members of VCAB participated in a day-long work session convened by DCF Family Services with other stakeholders regarding reforms for Vermont's Child Protection Registry.

- H.644, a bill related to access to records by individuals who were in foster care
- S.190, a bill related to statements made by a child victim of an offense involving serious bodily injury. Bill has a direct connection with child death review which VCAB was part of. Some current VCAB members were part of the original work of the child death review process and provided advocacy and letters of support for this legislation.
- H.696, a proposal to establish a critical incident review team and process, unlikely to be picked up this year, but hopeful for progress next year.

Action: VCAB to update information and consider advocacy regarding these and other legislation in next session of biennium.

- As a result of the Trafficking Victims Prevention and Protection Reauthorization Act of 2022, DCF communicated changes related to their policy including expansion of the policy to include all children and youth with division involvement broadly and restructuring of the policy regarding reporting and additional requirements.

Action: VCAB requests DCF provide a presentation to the Board on its work in this area including data and trends.

D. Anti-Racism, Justice, Diversity, Equity and Inclusion

1. Statewide Family Services Division workgroup is reorganizing sub-committees to support FSW involvement by having meetings at the district level to create efficiency and availability for staff.

Action: invite Rachel Edens, Director of Race, Gender, Equity and Access within Commissioner’s office to present.

2. Rachel Edens, Director of Race, Gender, Equity and Accessibility presented at the December 2023 meeting, providing an overview of her position and current scope of work. Priorities include recruitment, retention and support of current staff, examining current policies and procedures, organizing information and feedback provided by staff at district office listening sessions.

Action: invite Rachel back to a future meeting to present on data and information gathered

3. Board discussed a lawsuit related to Policy 76, a policy for supporting and affirming LGBTQ+ children youth. The lawsuit has resulted in close examination of this policy and the Department’s belief that children and youth must have safe, affirming, and welcoming foster placements.

Action: Board passed a motion to issue strong support of the Department to affirm and protect LGBTQ+ youth in out of home care and to encourage DCF to continue their work in this area.

Action: VCAB will also make public comment in support through signing on to the Voices for Vermont’s Children statement and/or crafting a separate statement to be signed by the co-chairs.

E. Office of Child Youth and Family Advocate

1. VCAB received a presentation from the Office of the Child, Youth and Family Advocate regarding staffing, office processes, and current data.

Action: request that OCYFA identify and share how VCAB could be helpful in their work.

Action: request that OCYFA forward completed **legislative report** for review and discussion.

2. Report provided to members during March 2024 meeting. Report is very comprehensive and well done. Members are encouraged to read it as there are recommendations on topics VCAB has also focused on, including the IT system. Page 27 is the start of the summary of VT children in care. An executive summary is on the OCYFA website.

<https://childadvocate.vermont.gov/sites/ocyf/files/documents/2023%20OCYFA%20Report%20FINAL.pdf>

F. Additional Key Issues/Discussion:

1. **Foster and kinship families:**

- a. Questions regarding the differences in reimbursement rate between kinship care and licensed foster care, as well as challenges that kinship providers experience in working with DCF.

Action: Deputy Commissioner Radke is willing to meet with the Foster Parent workgroup to discuss issues, concerns and recommendations.

Action: Kinship care concerns including rate disparity question placed on VCAB agenda.

- b. Presentation from DCF to VCAB, March 2024, regarding work to increase foster care kinship placement. Rate of kinship placement is slightly higher in VT than national rate, but does vary between districts. Reimbursement rates depend on a variety of factors and are set by the legislature and there is a discrepancy between the child only grant rate and licensed foster care reimbursement rate.

Discussion: Families feel challenged with communication with DCF. Differences in rate

reimbursement, differences in paperwork requirements and other requirements are frustrating.

Action Item: Consider a presentation to VCAB from ESD about the child only grant, including how rates are determined, legislative updates to rates, and other relevant items

2. **Workforce: Staffing and Safety**

- a. Commissioner Winters created a “virtual suggestion box” which has elicited a lot of feedback, including from front line ESD and FSD workers. Common theme that the work is consistent crisis management leading to an unsustainable work effort.
- b. Workforce health, safety, and wellbeing continue to be a focus of the Commissioner’s office, including a workgroup and hiring of a Workforce Development Director

Action: Commissioner or designee identify how VCAB can support workforce wellbeing efforts, including potential advocacy

Action: invite Workforce Development Director to present to VCAB, tentatively scheduled for the September 2024 meeting.

3. **Families Come First Presentation**

- a. Beth Sausville, Director of Policy and Planning, presented on Vermont’s work to implement the FFSPA legislation in combination with ongoing internal and external work to support families. The combination of these initiatives are called “Families Come First”.
- b. Highlights of the submitted prevention plan, including selected interventions and processes were delivered to the Board.

IV. Case Reviews

Case Reviews: Issues Summary

- A. **High-End Staffing:** case presentation where placement could not be identified resulting in emergency staffing by DCF staff

Discussion:

1. Circumstances of this case including mental health, developmental disabilities, physical health, medical needs, and religious beliefs made it especially complicated. Developmental Services are challenged statewide and are highlighted in this case.
2. Daytime support was done through staffing by DCF workers with more limited experience and training of the needs of this child. There were increased incidents of harm to staff.
3. The need for staffing for a child this age is a departure from previous trends.
4. The Structured Decision Making SDM Tool used by Family Services has an item related to the risk of family leaving the area without necessary care, and was critical in the decision to seek court intervention.

Action: contact VCAB co-chairs if there are specific advocacy/action items that VCAB can take to support the DS systems to better meet needs for children and youth in DCF care.

VCAB Members FY 23-24

Chair and Member Terms: 2 yrs./staggered

Co-Chairs:		Title	Org	Joined	Current Term	Ended	Alt	Officer Term
Sally	Borden	Volunteer	KidSafe Collaborative	2009	2023-2025			2014-16; 2016-18; 2018-20; 2020-22; 2022 - 2024
Dr. James	Metz	MD, Child Abuse Pediatrician	ChildSafe Program, UVMChildren's Hospital	2018	2022-2024			2020-21; 2021-23; 2023-2025
Erinn	Rolland-Forkey	Foster Parent		2018	2022-2024			2024-2026
Members		Title	Org	Joined	Current Term	Ended	Alt	Officer Term
Stephen G.	Berry	Foster/Adoptive Parent; Pastor	First Presbyterian Church	1998	2022-2024	Mar-24		
Sally	Borden	Volunteer	KidSafe Collaborative	2009	2023-2025			2014-16; 2016-18; 2018-20; 2020-22; 2022 - 2024
Kara	Casey	Director of Economic Empowerment	Vermont Network Against Domestic and Sexual Violence	2020	2023-2025			
Mandy	Couturier	Director of Multi-tiered Systems of Support	Harwood Unified Union School District	Dec 2023	2024-2026			
Tom	Fontana	LCMHC, LADC, BASICS Program Coordinator	University of Vermont, Center for Health and Wellbeing	2016	2022-2024	Mar-24		
Emily	Fredette	Maternal Child Health/Inj Prev.	VT Dept. of Health	2021	2023-2025			
Linda E.	Johnson	Executive Director	Prevent Child Abuse Vermont	1998	2024-2026			
Patiance	Johnson	Community Member/Former DCF Client		2016	2024-2026			
Wendy	Loomis	Executive Director	Vermont Children's Alliance	2017	2023-2025			
Judge Kathleen	Manley	Superior Court Judge (Retired)	Vermont Judiciary	2019	2023-2025			
Meghan	Masterson	Executive Director	KidSafe Collaborative	Mar-24	2024-2025			
Lynn	Messier	Peer Kinship Coordinator	Vermont Kin As Parents	Dec 2022	2024-2026			
Dr. James	Metz	MD, Child Abuse Pediatrician	ChildSafe Program, UVMChildren's Hospital	2018	2024-2026			2020-21; 2021-2023
Mariah	Ogden	Women's Services Coordinator	Vermont Health Dept. DSU	2022	2024-2026			
Laurel	Omland	MS, NCC, Director Child, Adolescent & Family Unit	Child, Adolescent & Family Unit, VT Dept of Mental Health	2018	2024-2026			
Jennifer	Poehlmann	Executive Director	Center for Crime Victim Services	2017	2023-2025			
Ann	Pugh	Retired	VT Legislature; University of VT	2021	2023-2025			
Patti	Randall	Executive Director	VT Children's Alliance	March 2024	2024-2025			
Dana	Robson	LICSW, Children's Mental Health Operations Chief	Department of Mental Health	2019	2023-2025		alt to Laurel Omland	

VCAB Members FY 23-24 cont.

Chair and Member Terms: 2 yrs./staggered

Members cont.		Title	Org	Joined	Current Term	Ended	Alt	Officer Term
Erinn	Rolland-Forkey	Foster Parent		2018	2024-2026			2024-2026
Amy	Rose	Policy Director	Voices for Vermont's Children	2018	2024-2026			
Laura	Schaller	GAL Coordinator	Vermont Judiciary/GAL Program	2019	2023-2025			
Lt. Michael	Studin	Bureau of Criminal Investigations	Vermont State Police, Vermont Dept. of Public Safety	2020	2023-2025			
Tracey	Wagner	MSN, RN, SANE-P, VT Forensic Nursing Program	Child Safe Program, UVM Children's Hospital	2018	2024-2026			
Anne	Ward	Executive Director	Mosaic	Sept 2023	2024-2026			
Britaney	Watson	Digital Equity Officer	VT Community Broadband Board	Dec 2023	2024-2026			
Kelly	Woodward	Victim Advocate	Franklin Co. State's Attorney's Office/NUSI	Dec 2023	2024-2026			

DCF Staff		Title		Joined
Chris	Winters	Commissioner, DCF	VT Dept. for Children & Families	2023
Aryka	Radke	Deputy Commissioner, FSD	VT Dept. for Children & Families	Feb 2021
Brenda	Gooley	Operations Director	DCF Family Services Division	2019
Nancy	Miller	Child Safety Manager	DCF Family Services Division	2019

KidSafe Collaborative Staff		Title		Joined
Marysol	Newton	Assistant Director	KidSafe Collaborative	2024