



Vermont's Reach First Program

*Findings of an analysis of families
participating in the program in 2010-2012*

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Summary of findings

- Sixty-six percent of families that enrolled in Reach First had no history of Reach Up assistance.
- Families that had received Reach Up prior to Reach First had relatively short prior Reach Up enrollments, on average. The short prior Reach Up stays suggest that these families had less severe or more transient problems that made them good candidates for Reach First.
- Most enrollments in Reach First (58%) were for fewer than four months.
- Most families that left Reach First (70%) subsequently enrolled in Reach Up.
- Families that enrolled in Reach Up after Reach First had somewhat shorter subsequent Reach Up stays than families with no Reach First experience.
- Losing a job was identified as a crisis by more than half of the Reach First enrollees—more than any other crisis type.
- Using limited data on the crises leading to Reach First enrollment, and comparing families who cited losing a job as a crisis with families citing other crises, we found no difference in the percent of families enrolling in Reach Up within six months of leaving Reach First.
- Families with certain characteristics are slightly less likely to proceed to Reach Up after Reach First: those with some wages, some education beyond a high school diploma, age of 35 or more, and/or no previous receipt of Reach Up.

Objectives, Scope and Methodology

The objective of this project was to gather and analyze data and prepare a report that provides information needed to help the Vermont Department for Children and Families (DCF) understand more about the crises that bring families into the Reach First program, families' experiences while in the program, and the types of program outcomes that have resulted since Reach First was implemented. To the extent possible, the analysis compares Reach First case outcomes over time. The analysis also compares outcomes for Reach First cases with Reach Up cases as appropriate.

Using DCF monthly extract data files from January 2010 through October 2012, we created a longitudinal file showing, for each case, the monthly pattern of participation in either Reach Up or Reach First. We then examined Reach First cases in the context of any previous or subsequent Reach Up enrollment.

DCF supplied a sample of Reach First enrollment forms for families that enrolled in 2011 and 2012 that contained information on the crisis or crises reported by families. After electronically coding the responses on these forms, we tabulated the percentage of cases that indicated each of the possible crises. We then merged these crises data with the longitudinal file matching the Social Security Number on the enrollment form with the case ID in the Reach First data. That allowed us to tabulate the relationship between type of crisis and subsequent participation in Reach Up.

We also merged selected DCF monthly Reach Up extract data for the month of exit from Reach First with the longitudinal and crisis data. The extract data describe the family in terms of variables like age, education, income, and family composition. We used logistic regression to show how success in Reach First varies for different kinds of families.

This analysis focused on families receiving Reach First in 2010, 2011, and 2012 (through October). During this time period, 3,803 families received Reach First assistance. Of those, 2,658 (70%) also received Reach Up assistance.¹ We also analyzed the experience of all families leaving Reach First in 2010, 2011 and 2012 (through October).² 3,469 families exited the program during this period.

Most families had only one exit from Reach First during 2010-2012. Of the 3,633 Reach First exits during this period, 3,307 (91%) were families with only one exit. One hundred sixty families had two exits. Two families had 3 exits.

How long did families stay on Reach First?

Reach First is a diversion program designed to enable families with limited, short-term needs to get the help they need without enrolling in the Reach Up program and possibly decreasing its work participation rate. One way to assess how well the Reach First program is working is to look at the number of months of Reach First assistance families receive. Families are allowed to participate in the Reach First program for a maximum of four months at a time. The following table shows that more than half of the Reach First families (58% in 2010-2012) left Reach First after fewer than four months of Reach First assistance.

Figure 1. Percentage of families leaving Reach First by length of stay in program

Months of receipt of Reach First	Reach First exit year			
	2010	2011	2012	Total
1	14%	4%	4%	7%
2	21%	14%	16%	17%
3	30%	36%	34%	33%
4	35%	46%	46%	42%
Total³	100%	100%	100%	100%

¹ For this count, Reach Ahead, Reach First, and “child-only” cases were excluded. Reach Up enrollment at any time during the January 2010 – October 2012 period, regardless of whether it was before or after a family’s Reach First participation was considered.

² If a family had more than one exit from Reach First in this time period, we focused on the family’s most recent exit.

³ The percentages in the “Total” column in this and subsequent tables may not sum to exactly 100% due to rounding of the percentages that are summed.

In terms of length of time on Reach First, Reach First appears to be working in the way that it was designed. Families are spending relatively small amounts of time in Reach First.

Receiving Reach Up assistance before Reach First

Approximately a third of families participating in Reach First had received prior Reach Up assistance. Of the 2,362 families that exited Reach First in January 2011- October 2012, 813 (34%) had received Reach Up assistance at an earlier point since January 2010. This percentage would be higher if we had included months prior to 2010 in our analysis.

Figure 2. Reach Up assistance prior to enrollment in Reach First

	Number of families	Percent of families
None	1,549	66%
1 – 6 months	364	15%
7 – 12 months	265	11%
13 + months	184	8%
Total	2,362	100%

**Includes all months of Reach Up assistance received between January 2010 and October 2012 prior to Reach First enrollment among families exiting Reach First in 2011-2012*

Although a third of the families leaving Reach First in 2011-2012 had already received Reach Up, these earlier Reach Up stays were shorter than average. Close to 80% of the families received 12 or fewer months of Reach Up assistance. By comparison, 66% of the Reach Up families with no Reach First experience received 12 or fewer months of Reach Up assistance in the January 2010 – October 2012 period.

Receiving Reach Up assistance after leaving Reach First

Another way of measuring the success of Reach First is to look at the prevalence of entering Reach Up after leaving Reach First. The most successful Reach First families would not need to subsequently enroll in Reach Up. Indeed, part of the rationale for Reach First is to provide a way for some families to get the help they need without enrolling in Reach Up.

As shown in Figure 3, the percentage of Reach First cases subsequently receiving Reach Up is similar in each of the three years we examined, although the 2012 cases have slightly lower rates than the earlier years.

Figure 3. Percentage of families entering Reach Up after leaving Reach First

Timing of subsequent Reach Up enrollment	Year of leaving Reach First		
	2010	2011	2012
Immediately after leaving Reach First	51%	54%	50%
In first 6 months after leaving Reach First	60%	63%	58%
In first 12 months after leaving Reach First	66%	69%	n/a

The last row in Figure 3 shows that approximately two thirds of the Reach First leavers enroll in Reach Up at some point in the 12 months after leaving Reach First. The figure's first row shows that about half of the Reach First leavers enrolled in Reach Up *immediately* after leaving Reach First. About a third of the families exited from Reach First and did not need further assistance in the 12 months after leaving Reach First.

Effect of Reach First on the length of any subsequent enrollment in Reach Up

Although it would be ideal for families to resolve their need for assistance while in the Reach First program, those families that did need subsequent Reach Up assistance experienced shorter stays on average than those that never participated in Reach First.

Figure 4 shows the somewhat shorter Reach Up stays for families that participated in Reach First. Among families that participated in Reach First and later in Reach Up, 27% had 13 or more months of Reach Up benefits as compared with 34% of the families with no previous Reach First experience.

Figure 4. Comparing months of Reach Up used by families with and without prior Reach First experience

Months of Reach Up received in January 2010-October 2012	Cases that participated in Reach First and then Reach Up		Cases entering Reach Up with no prior Reach First experience	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
1 – 6 months	763	44%	1,286	41%
7 – 12 months	505	29%	815	26%
13 or more months	468	27%	1,069	34%
Total	1,736	100%	3,170	100%

Note: Includes cases that used Reach First in 2010-2011 and cases that entered Reach Up (with no prior Reach First experience) in 2010-2011. Cases that were “child-only” or in Reach Ahead were excluded from this analysis.

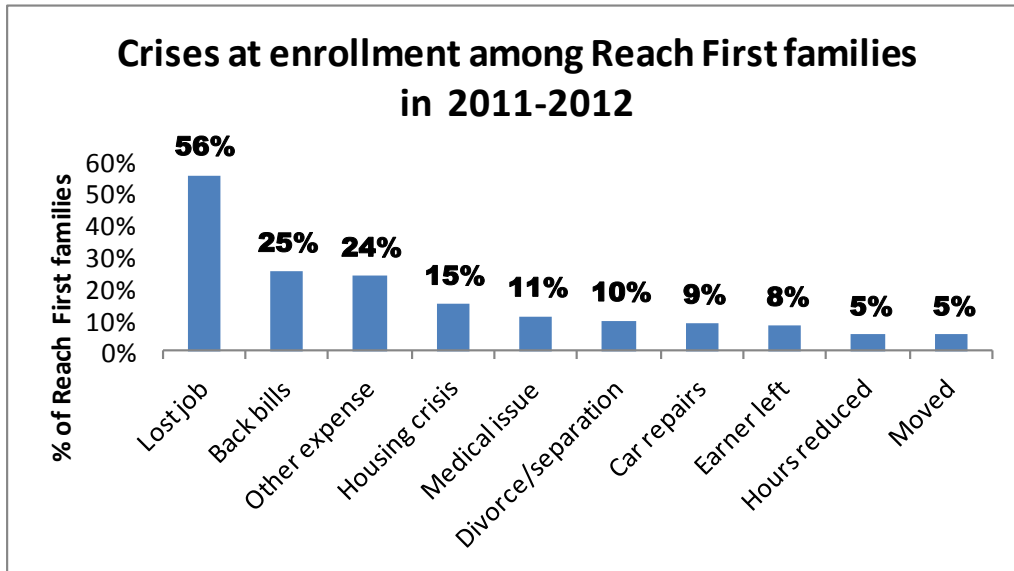
What crises brought families to Reach First?

When a family enters Reach First they fill out an enrollment form that provides details about their situation including the crises that brought them to Reach First.

Figure 5 shows all reasons offered as options on the enrollment form and the percentage of applicants in 2011-2012 selecting each option, based on the sample of enrollment forms we analyzed.⁴ More than half of the families (56%) identified “lost job” as a crisis.

⁴ Since families could choose more than one crisis, the percentages do not sum to 100%.

Figure 5. Crises at enrollment among Reach First families in 2011-2012



Do families with some types of crises do better in Reach First than families with other kinds of crises?

By merging Reach First enrollment form responses with a longitudinal file of case program use patterns, we computed that 57% of the cases that identified “lost job” as a crisis went to Reach Up within six months of exiting Reach First. For cases that identified other crises (not lost job), the same percentage—57%—went to Reach Up within six months of exiting Reach First. On the basis of this analysis, we cannot say that the presenting crisis is associated with the probability of going to Reach Up after leaving Reach First.

Family characteristics associated with Reach First success

We also assessed the impact of family characteristics on whether or not a family had any enrollment in Reach Up in the 12 months after exiting Reach First. For this analysis we included all cases that had their most recent Reach First exit within the period January 2010 through October 2011. The October 2011 cut-off was needed so that we could tabulate which cases enrolled in Reach Up 12 months after exit from Reach First. Family characteristic information was taken from extracts for the month in which each case exited Reach First.

We found that families with no wages, little education, a young case head, or previous Reach Up assistance were more likely to enroll in Reach Up in the 12 months after Reach First ended than their counterparts.

The methodology for producing this analysis was logistic regression. It is uniquely appropriate for situations in which one is predicting whether or not something will happen – in this case will

a family enroll in Reach Up in the 12 months after leaving Reach First? The findings from a logistic regression are best understood in terms of odds ratios. The odds ratio is the increased odds of a family enrolling in Reach Up in the 12 months after leaving Reach First if it has certain characteristics. Figure 6 lists the family characteristics associated with more frequent enrollment in Reach Up in the 12 months after exiting from Reach First. The odds ratio for a given characteristics quantifies the effect of that characteristic holding all other characteristics are constant.

Figure 6. Family characteristics associated with greater odds of enrollment in Reach Up in the 12 months following exit from Reach First

	Characteristic	Odds Ratio
Wages	No wages (in contrast to some wages)	2.6
Education (highest grade completed)	Less than grade 12 (as compared with more than 12 grades)	1.8
	Grade 12 (as compared with more than 12 grades)	1.5
Age	Less than age 27 (as compared with age 35 or more)	1.6
	Ages 27-34 (as compared with age 35 or more)	1.3
Previous Reach Up assistance	Previous Reach Up assistance (as compared with no previous Reach Up assistance)	1.1

Note: All variables shown above had impacts statistically significant at the 95% level. Our logistic regression analysis included variables representing the number of children under age 6 and the type of family (single parent or two parents). Neither of these variables had a significant impact on the odds of receiving Reach Up in the 12 months after exit from Reach First.

While knowledge of the potential effects of these characteristics is important for predicting success in the Reach First program, such knowledge explains a relatively small part (7%) of the variation in whether or not a family enrolls in Reach Up after exiting from Reach First. In other words, although the characteristics above provide general guidance about which families will be more or less likely to succeed in Reach First without needing subsequent enrollment in Reach Up, individual family circumstances and case worker evaluations will always be more important than a rigid use of the odds shown above.

Use of Reach Ahead after Reach Up

After exiting Reach First, 60 families enrolled in Reach Ahead. One family did this immediately after leaving Reach First. Fifty nine families enrolled in Reach Ahead at some time in 2010-2012 after leaving Reach First.

Conclusions

For some families--the more successful Reach First enrollees--the Reach First program is a valuable experience with desirable outcomes. For these families, Reach First constituted their first experience with welfare benefits, their stay in the program was brief, and they did not

subsequently enroll in Reach Up.

The rest of the Reach First caseload, the majority of families, might be considered the less successful because one or more of the above statements was not true for them.

Our analysis of the crises that led families to Reach First did not show any way to use the type of crisis to discriminate between families that would be more or less successful Reach First families. Specifically, the type of crisis identified by Reach First families did not appear to affect the likelihood of subsequently enrolling in Reach Up. A different coding of the family's crisis, perhaps based on a caseworker's analysis instead of the family's statement on the enrollment form, might render different results.

Our analysis of family characteristics revealed that more successful families (at least in terms of not enrolling in Reach Up in the 12 months after leaving Reach First) had more wages, a better education, or were somewhat older when they left Reach First than the families who did wind up in Reach Up. Perhaps these characteristics indicate more social and economic capital and a greater resilience among these families.

With regard to the less successful Reach First families, it is important to remember that these families did have tangible benefits of participation in Reach First. Reach First families with previous and/or subsequent enrollments in Reach Up had relatively short Reach Up stays.

This analysis provides some guidelines about which families are likely to do well in Reach First. It also shows that families not meeting all the hopes of the Reach First program still reap significant benefits from participation in the program. Given that, at this point, we cannot recommend a wholly successful algorithm for selecting "successful" families, it seems that DCF might continue to do close to what it is currently doing. The current DCF practice of selecting families for Reach First is producing substantial gains for both the families we have identified as more successful as well as those identified as less successful.