



**Building Bright Futures State Advisory Council (BBF SAC)
Meeting Minutes
February 24, 2025 (Via Zoom)**

SAC Members Present: Amber Hewston, Becca Webb, Carlie Thibault, Carol Lang-Godin, Cheryle Wilcox, Christy Swenson, Debra Hartswick, Dimitri Garder, Eddie Gale, Flor Diaz Smith, Janet McLaughlin, Representative Ray Garofano, Tammy Bates, Xusana Davis, Renee Kelly, Erica McLaughlin, Kiona Heath

Absent: Ilisa Stalberg, Danielle Mitchell, Jessica Vintinner, Monica Ogelby, Libby Daghljan, Sharron Harrington, Zoie Saunders, Miranda Gray, Senator Martine Gulick, Monica Hutt

Community Partners/Guests: Alyssa Mullan, Amy Rose, Anore Horton, Emily Smith, Ginger Driscoll, Dareen Abukwaik, Jocelyn Emilo, Julie Lowell, Krista Siringo, Kristen Wood, Lauren Eicher, Lee Lauber, Lisa Maynes, LouAnn Beninati, Matt Levin, Melinda Pearson, Nora Sabo, Rebecca Baruzzi, Valerie Valcour, Anthony Jackson-Miller

Staff present: Morgan Crossman, Beth Truzansky, Anna Broulliette, Dora Levinson, Ali Dieng, Courtney Hillhouse, Kelly Hayes, Kitty Foster, Tanya LaChapelle, Michelle Kersey, Martha Braithwaite, Darla Senecal, Linda Michniewicz

Typically we record SAC meetings. February's meeting was **NOT recorded** with the hope that attendees might feel more comfortable sharing openly about their experiences. Comments were documented to be able to share and elevate with leaders not able to attend the meeting.

Welcome & Introductions

1. Welcome, mindful moment, review agenda

2. SAC General Business

a. January 2025 SAC Meeting Minutes

Motion to approve the January 27, 2025, minutes was made by Janet McLaughlin, with a second from Christy Swenson. Any opposed? No. Any abstentions? No. All members voted in favor of approving January 27, 2025 minutes.

3. Public Forum: Needs and Challenges Impacting Children and Families

- BBF staff introduced Quorum, a tool used to support our monitoring efforts, and the monitoring efforts and ease of access to information of our partners. Our team's tracking via Quorum allows us and partners to get a real time look of what legislation is being considered in Montpelier related to the SAC-endorsed policy recommendations, or the VECAP more broadly.
 - Insert link to our Quorum page in the chat:
<https://www.buildingbrightfutures.org/data-page/quorum-legislative-tracker/>

- Prompts offered for the public forum section of the meeting:
 - What is one thing you see working for children and families?
 - What is a part of the system that is not working for children and families?
 - How have you or your organization been impacted by the change in Federal administration and recent Executive Orders? And how can BBF play a role in supporting Vermont's early childhood system amidst uncertainty?
- Rebecca Baruzzi, United Way - Working Bridges: We have been working with families with barriers to working. Universal Meals and child care subsidies have both been working and are making an impact.
- Anore Horton, Hunger Free Vermont - Universal School Meals are really working, however, the Governor is proposing to repeal this highly effective and cost effective program. Now is the time to advocate for the program. Our biggest concern is the food security of families in the state - big cuts to nutrition programs are potentially threatened at federal level. We are working to strengthen and expand access to meals in child care (CACFP), but it is not working sufficiently.
 - Here are step-by-step instructions for how to support Universal School Meals: <https://www.hungerfreevt.org/protect-universal-school-meals>
- Amy Rose, Voices for Vermont's Children: Something that has been working is Reach Up - Vermont's safety net program for children and their families. We think of it as TANF program, but very few of the federal funds go towards Reach Up. The budget is based on 2001 housing costs and then cuts estimated costs in rateable reduction. Governor's BAA and FY26 budget propose further cuts to Reach Up. When we cut these programs, we further entrench poverty and families experiencing deep poverty cannot access other programs like child care.
- Julie Lowell, Public Assets Institute: State fiscal policy to improve the economic well-being of all VTers has been working. Anti-poverty tax credits continue to provide families with flexible cash benefits - refundable tax credits support families who don't owe taxes in particular. There is a proposal to increase EITC to 50% of the federal credit. People's budget language - the budget should work towards health, wellness, and dignified work for everyone in the state. We need a focus on raising revenues to meet these goals.
- Carol Lang-Godin, Lamoille Family Center: Families are coming to our program and elevating their concerns/challenges. Families not having these critical programs in the future is a major concern, and the stress of the unknown is only furthering challenges. We need to think on how we can encourage the legislature and Governor to really think about families when decisions are made.
- Janet McLaughlin, Child Development Division, Department for Children and Families: We have been receiving a lot of questions about what impact the federal Executive Orders have on the services child care programs are providing to families, etc. Concerns relating to immigration, access to data on families/programs, federal funding and the potential impact of losing funds. There are a lot of emotional energy impacts, etc. and we are considering how we can focus on the practical plan in absence of limited information.
- Amber Hewston, Family Representative: Families are feeling really uncertain, and stressed by that uncertainty right now, based on visits in homes with families. Thinking about how we can focus on supporting the early childhood workforce, who are pulling heavy weight right now and feeling burnt out and unsure of how to support families with these unprecedented amounts of stress.
- Carlie Thilabult, Department for Children and Families: Something that is working well is collaboration within and outside the agency; we have great working relationships in the community right now. Supports for foster parents and kinship providers is a gap. There

are impacts to service delivery from FSD right now because the needs of foster families are greater. Not seeing any significant federal impacts yet - but some that are anticipated; technical bulletins are coming out, and we are waiting in anticipation for what is expected to come. Regional contact for federal work is no longer working for the feds - a loss for their team in their consistent liaison.

- Courtney Hillhouse, Building Bright Futures: I just attended a CIS meeting where staff capacity (or lack thereof) was mentioned specifically regarding early childcare programs and children with significant needs. Staff burnout is significant and the ability of families to engage is more limited. SUD, mental health, working hours, etc, are all challenging circumstances, and we see challenging behaviors happening with children.
- Ali Dieng, Building Bright Futures: There are multiple issues we are seeing across the state, some localized and some statewide. These include reading proficiency; lack of nutritious food (acutely a need in Franklin/Grand Isle); mental health challenges/service needs in Chittenden county; and gun violence concerns.
- Krista Siringo, Vermont Family Network: We are feeling uncertainty at the state level with restructuring, as well as at the federal level. We have been thinking about the ways our system provides critical support to children with disabilities and their families and the ways that could be threatened in the future; many staff also have children with disabilities. We have been thinking about how we can continue to advocate at the state and federal levels.
- Flor Diaz Smith - With all the Executive Orders coming out, we have been thinking largely about those that are affecting trans people, in particular trans youth; and about schools needing to quickly become sanctuary spaces. We need to consider whether the things we are doing are for the kids or for us. Thinking about trying not to jeopardize funding while still staying true to principals. It is important for us to be involved in conversations around funding programs that benefit children (such as universal school meals). How do we all work together and support each other during this challenging time?
- Cheryle Wilcox, Department of Mental Health: One example of something that is working well is a few years of tuition repayment assistance for MH/SUD providers. Seeing less turnover for folks who have been able to take advantage of these programs - really encouraging, more data is coming. So many families and children need these supports, and this is a highlight of one strategy to support/recruit/retain this workforce. The Department of Mental Health has been supporting grants/funding for people who have come here as refugees/asylum seekers, etc. How are we pushing back where we can to ensure people are treated with compassion and kindness here in Vermont?

Discussion:

- Prompts
 - Any reflections on what you have heard?
 - What can you do with the issues that were elevated today?
 - As a leader, what is your priority in order to show up for children and families in our state?
- Christy Swenson, Capstone Community Action/Head Start: Several families have unenrolled in Head Start in the past two months. They are welcome here but they feel unsafe being enrolled in a federally funded program. There are underlying feelings of fear and uncertainty. Due to a shifting stance/information, it is hard to advise. Currently, Christy feels confident saying that families should feel safe being enrolled regardless of immigration status, but 6-12 months from now, things could be different.

- Eddie - It's good to hear how well we are doing for children and families, but sad to have to keep saying how everything the federal government is doing is so clearly bad for children and families.
- Kiona Heath, Vermont Network Against Domestic and Sexual Violence: For the current SHIP ([State Health Improvement Plan](#)), there are four major categories that are intended to be addressed this year; reflecting on how a lot of what has been said today fits well in those four categories. This aligns nicely with the plan right now to create a road map and figure out what strategies align best across the state.
- Representative Rey Garfano: Being on the House Human Services Committee, in the climate we have this biennium, it has been challenging to prioritize the most vulnerable Vermonters. It is my priority to ensure we support those who are in deep poverty, struggling with housing, struggling with cuts to Reach Up, etc. Those families are at risk of being pushed further and further into poverty; how can we educate other lawmakers on the importance of direct assistance?
- Christy Swenson: As Kiona was talking about SHIP, one thing that came to mind from on the ground experience that we may be missing is the childcare subsidy. Due to having to complete a Needs Assessment, which makes it challenging for children to access care and for parents to access respite; those who qualify for the Needs Assessment aren't able to take advantage if they aren't in school, and should be getting a note from a physician, but due to bandwidth, stigma, etc. many don't do this; many people who could benefit from services are missing out.
- Amber Hewston: The bright spots mentioned today make me grateful to be in Vermont, despite challenges at the federal level. We need to keep children and families at the heart of our work, and try not to get distracted with other priorities. How can we focus on the things that are going to be the most effective to harness our collective impact?
- Janet McLaughlin - We all have to show up right now with a lot of compassion and curiosity, and almost everyone is feeling on edge. I'm coming up on 2 years in this role, and I can say that what is special about working in Vermont is people really are all here to do what is best for children and families.

Resources shared:

- from Anore Horton, Hunger Free Vermont
 - "Here are step-by-step instructions for how to support Universal School Meals: <https://www.hungerfreevt.org/protect-universal-school-meals>"
- from Julie Lowell, Public Assets Institute
 - "More info is here about tax credits - what they are and how to file. Families with the lowest incomes with kids under 6 should make sure to file so they receive the \$1,000 Child Tax Credit. TaxCreditsVT.org" <https://www.taxcreditsvt.org/>
- From Amy Rose, Voices for Vermont's Children
 - "The FY 26 Unfunded Budget Priorities Report is not out yet, but here is the one from FY25: <https://lifo.vermont.gov/assets/Uploads/3ac9b6b42f/WAdam-GreshinUnfunded-Budget-Pressures-Report-FY20251-29-2024.pdf>"
- State Health Improvement Plan
 - <https://www.healthvermont.gov/about/plans-reports/state-health-assessment-improvement-plan>

4. Adjourn

The meeting adjourned at 3:00 p.m.

Next Meeting- Monday March 24, 2024 1:30-3:00 | [via zoom](#)