

# DRAFT 2026 Policy Recommendations of Vermont's Early Childhood State Advisory Council Network

Vermont's Early Childhood State Advisory Council (SAC) is the Governor-appointed advisory body on the well-being of children from the prenatal period through age 8 and their families. Each year, in partnership with the Early Childhood Strategic Plan Committees (formerly Vermont's Early Childhood Action Plan, or VECAP, Committees) and Regional Councils, the SAC identifies priorities and sets strategic direction for statewide initiatives by endorsing a series of Policy Recommendations.

These annual Policy Recommendations are developed using the Early Childhood Strategic Plan (formerly known as the VECAP) as a guiding framework, alongside current data and the most pressing feedback and challenges emerging from Vermont's early childhood system. Together, they highlight gaps and needs in policy, promote coordinated action in strategic areas, and aim to be both responsive and measurable.

Given ongoing uncertainty at the federal level, the State Advisory Council and Building Bright Futures may revisit these recommendations when a federal budget is passed to ensure continued alignment with available resources and emerging priorities.

## **Goal 1: All Children and Families Have Their Basic Needs Met**

### **Ensure Child and Family Food Security Needs Are Met:**

In the face of potential federal funding cuts, protect Vermont children and families by maintaining current eligibility and benefit levels for food security programs, including 3SquaresVT, WIC, and Universal School Meals. Continue to strengthen access to the Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) so all children have reliable access to healthy meals. Ensure access is preserved for all Vermonters, regardless of citizenship or immigration status.

### **Strengthen Housing Stability for Vermont Families:**

Ensure that housing policy decisions are proactive, coordinated, and centered on family well-being. Last-minute or reactionary shifts in housing programs, such as changes to emergency shelter or rental assistance, can retraumatize families already experiencing instability. Expand and sustain Family Supportive Housing and rental assistance programs that integrate housing with wraparound supports for families with complex needs. Recognize the heightened vulnerability of children living in emergency or domestic violence shelters and prioritize stable non-congregate, community-based housing options that allow families to stay connected to schools and supports.

## **Goal 2: All Children Are Raised in Safe, Healthy, and Healing Environments**

### **Ensure Health and Mental Health Care Access:**

Ensure that Vermont's health care delivery system can continue to meet the needs of children and families in the face of federal funding cuts to Medicaid, paying special attention to health care access in rural areas. Monitor the implementation of Vermont's 1115 Global Commitment waiver (a federal demonstration project that allows Vermont to test new ways to improve and expand Medicaid to better serve children and families) to ensure it continues to advance a holistic approach to supporting children's and families' health and well-being needs, including health-related social needs. Maintain access to essential and equitable care, including gender-affirming services, reproductive health care, and other supports that ensure all Vermonters can thrive, regardless of citizenship or immigration status.

### **Sustain Access to Mental Health Consultation and Support:**

Support ongoing state funding for the Vermont Consultation and Psychiatry Access Programs (VTCPAP) to sustain pediatric, perinatal, and early childhood mental health consultation services when federal HRSA funding ends in September 2026. This model fills critical gaps in psychiatric expertise across Vermont, ensuring young children and families have timely access to care and reducing strain on the mental health system.

### **Invest in Trauma-Informed and Child-Centered Supervised Visitation for Families Statewide:**

Supervised visitation provides a safe setting for a parent to have monitored visits with their child and is ordered by courts or DCF in cases for the safety of a child or non-abusive parent. There is currently inequitable access to non-profit supervised visitation programs across Vermont, leaving many families without a program in their area. To ensure statewide access, the state must sustainably fund supervised visitation programs and support them in providing high quality services. Creating consistent access statewide would promote safety of children and protective parents.

## **Goal 3: All Children and Families Have Access to High-Quality Opportunities That Promote Child Development and Well-Being**

### **Streamline Fingerprinting-Supported Background Checks:**

The Vermont Crime Information Center (VCIC)'s current capacity for and processing of fingerprinting-supported background checks prevent timely hiring for early childhood programs. This is especially challenging for Head Start programs, which are under stricter federal requirements. An interagency sprint team is exploring immediate interim solutions alongside longer-term needs for technology upgrades, staffing, and transparency. Legislative

and budgetary leaders should explore options to modernize VCIC capacity and advance interim solutions to ensure families can access child care without disruption.

**Advance Prekindergarten Education in Vermont's Education Transformation:**

As Vermont implements Act 73, ensure that prekindergarten expansion maintains access for 3-year-olds while exploring increased hours for 4-year-olds within a mixed-delivery model, consistent with recommendations from the Prekindergarten Education Implementation Committee (PEIC). As part of broader education transformation efforts, establish appropriate pre-K weighting within the state's funding formula to support universal access to high-quality, developmentally appropriate programs that reflect the true cost of early learning, inclusion, and family engagement. To ensure access is truly universal, special consideration must be given to the unique local context and needs of rural and border communities.

**Protect Child Care Investments:**

Protect the progress made for Vermont families and providers by sustaining Act 76 investments in child care. In the face of federal uncertainty, maintain funding levels for the Child Care Financial Assistance Program (CCFAP) and infant/toddler rate increases that have expanded access and affordability. Continue to address challenges such as high family shares and the benefit cliff, ensuring the system works smoothly for families, providers, and children.

## **Goal 4: All Children Are Supported by a Well-Prepared, Well-Supported Early Childhood Workforce**

**Advance Early Childhood Educator Licensure:**

Implement a licensure system for Vermont's early childhood educators to strengthen accountability through clear quality benchmarks, consistent with recommendations from the National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER). Recognize and address concerns from the field by ensuring the transition is gradual, well-supported, and aligned across agencies. Monitor workforce data to assess impacts, guide implementation, and ensure the pipeline of new early educators remains strong and sustainable. Identify strategies to help early education programs cover licensure costs for their staff to ensure accessibility and equity.

## **Goal 5: Our System Centers Children and Families and Is Coordinated, Well-Resourced, and Data-Driven**

### **Protect Vermonters' Data and Privacy:**

Protect the privacy of Vermont children and families by setting clear rules for how early childhood data is collected, stored, and shared. Ensure families know how their information is being used, put safeguards in place like consent and data minimization, and use secure technology to prevent harm or misuse.

### **Strengthen Children's Integrated Services (CIS):**

Strengthen Vermont's Children's Integrated Services (CIS) system to ensure it can meet the growing needs of families and communities. Design a funding formula that reflects the true cost of program implementation in every region and can be easily updated. Reevaluate systems that support administration and billing, including the approach to "encounter billing," to improve efficiency, reduce administrative burden, and enable programs to be more responsive. Establish a statewide CIS data system to streamline data collection, support monitoring and continuous quality improvement, and make it easier for families to access coordinated services.

### **Listen to Families and Use Qualitative Data in Times of Change:**

Vermont's human services system is complex, and the families who rely on it know best how it really works. With state and federal budgets uncertain, legislators will soon be making tough decisions about how to meet Vermonters' basic needs. To make informed choices, leaders must be in direct conversation with families most affected and integrate qualitative data, such as findings from surveys, forums, and community partners, into fiscal and policy deliberations. Establish formal mechanisms to elevate family voice, such as routine legislative hearings, advisory input, or inclusion of qualitative data in budget analyses, to ensure decisions reflect lived experience and the real impact of potential changes.