

Vermont Department for Children and Families



Five-Year Strategic Plan 2007 - 2012

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Message from the Commissioner

The Department for Children and Families (DCF) was created in 2004 as part of a significant reorganization of the Agency of Human Services. Reorganization was designed to bring together the efforts of all human services to serve Vermonters more holistically and help them achieve their greatest potential.

The new Department brings together a wide array of programs that affect the well-being of Vermonters. Each program is driven by significant requirements specified in federal or state law. Vermont has an excellent track record of operating sound programs according to these required standards, which we must continue to meet. At the same time, the new department structure brings with it a mandate to integrate programs and operations to improve overall effectiveness.

This strategic plan spells out our vision for the future and our strategic directions for the next five years. It also provides a blueprint for action featuring five major themes:

1. We are passionate about prevention! This includes effectively addressing poverty and homelessness, making sure children arrive at school ready to learn, and ensuring children are safe and have lifelong supportive connections.
2. We are committed to developing strong, engaged relationships with those we serve, especially individuals and families with significant needs. This will require restructuring the use of our resources.
3. We are committed to making it easier for people to apply for benefits and to making eligibility determination processes as efficient as possible. This will require significant improvements in our information technology systems.
4. We are committed to being the most responsive organization in State government; providing excellent customer service and decision-making processes that are inclusive, fair, and open.
5. We are committed to investing in our staff. This includes ensuring ongoing staff development, building the next generation of leaders, and improving our information technology supports.

DCF touches the lives of one in four Vermonters. We are excited to embark on this effort on their behalf — and in the interest of all Vermonters. And we are committed to working in partnership with other departments and offices within the Agency, our many community partners, and the individuals and families we serve.



Our Mission

The Department for Children and Families, as part of an integrated Agency of Human Services, fosters the healthy development, safety, well-being, and self-sufficiency of Vermonters.

We are passionate about prevention and will:

- Reduce poverty and homelessness;
- Improve the safety and well-being of children and families;
- Create permanent connections for children and youth; and
- Provide timely and accurate financial supports for children, individuals, and families.

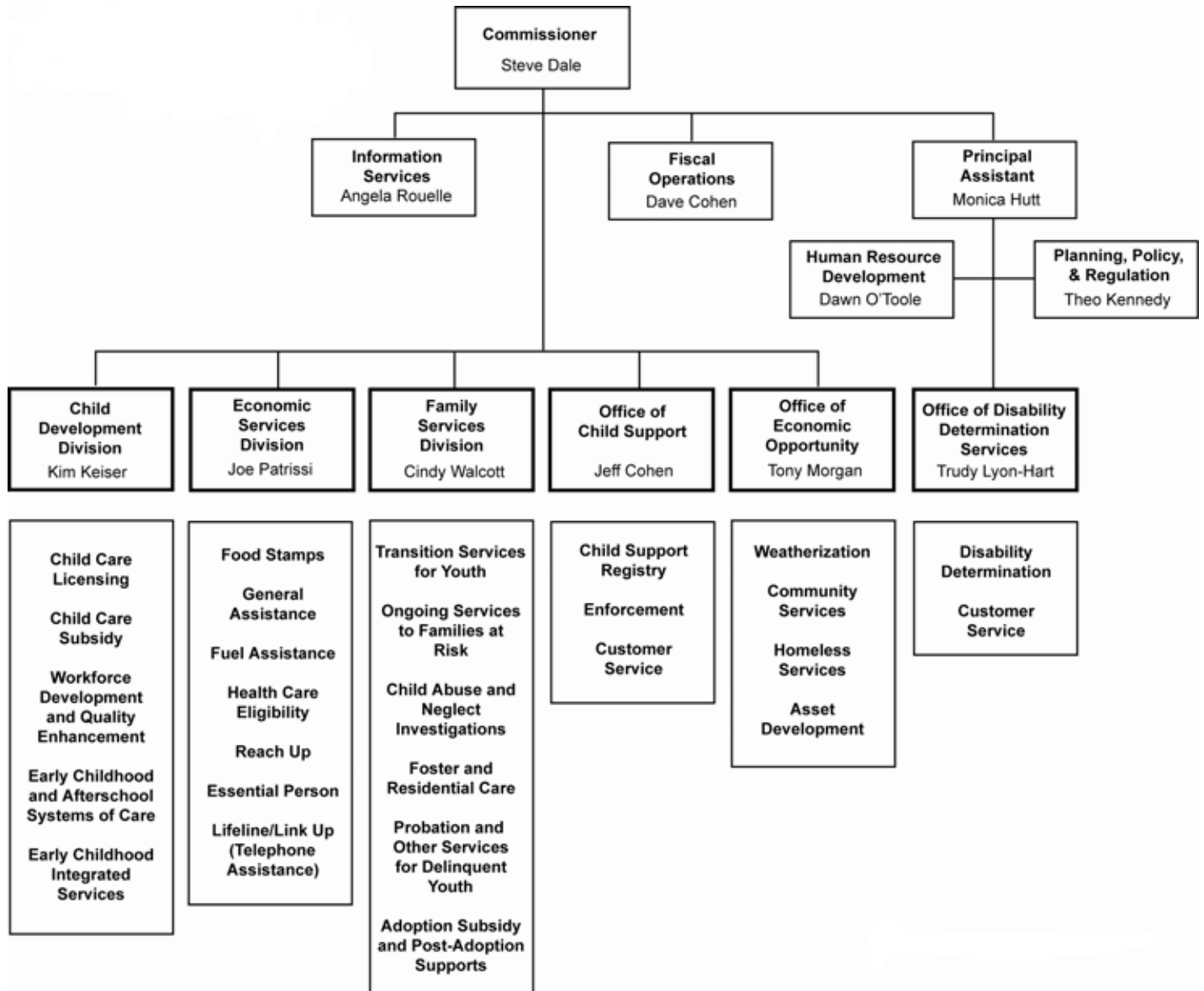
Our Vision

Vermont is a place where people prosper; children and families are safe and have strong, loving connections; and individuals have the opportunity to fully develop their potential.

Our Commitments

- To be exceptional collaborators with schools, community partners, businesses, service providers, the justice system, and most of all, those we serve.
- To be open, responsive, and fair in our decision-making.
- To develop highly trained and motivated staff.
- To embrace the four key practices of the Agency of Human Services:
 - Customer Service;
 - Holistic Service;
 - Strength-Based Service; and
 - Results-Oriented Service.

Organizational Chart for the Department for Children and Families



DCF Divisions & Offices

Child Development Division (CDD)

The Child Development Division improves the well-being of Vermont children by ensuring access to high quality, economically viable child development services. Working in partnership with a network of community-based providers, CDD ensures that a continuum of early childhood and after-school services are available throughout Vermont. Direct services for children and families include regulated early childhood and after-school programs, early intervention services for at-risk children, resource and referral for families, and parent education and family support services. CDD also provides technical assistance and professional development opportunities to Vermont's early childhood and after-school workforce.

Programs include:

- Child Care Licensing
- Child Care Subsidy Program
- Early Childhood Integrated Services (e.g., Healthy Babies, Kids & Families)
- Early Childhood and After-School Systems of Care (e.g., Parent Child Centers and Success by Six)
- Workforce Development and Quality Enhancement (e.g., Northern Lights Career Development Center and the Step Ahead Recognition System or STARS Program)

Economic Services Division (ESD)

The Economic Services Division administers programs that help meet the basic needs of Vermonters who are unable to support themselves and their dependents. Contributing factors include unemployment, part-time or low-wage employment, family breakup, single parenthood, aging, temporary or permanent disability, death of a family member, or other life-changing event. Programs such as assistance-to-work services, health care coverage, cash assistance, and food support provide a safety net for these individuals and families.

Programs include:

- Essential Person Program
- Food & Nutrition Program (known as *food stamps*)
- General and Emergency Assistance
- Home Heating Fuel Assistance
- Lifeline/Link Up Telephone Assistance
- Health Care Eligibility
- Reach Up Program

More than one in five Vermonters will receive benefits or services from these programs.

Family Services Division (FSD)

The Family Services Division partners with families and communities to protect children and strengthen families. Every year, FSD works with approximately 3,000 of Vermont's most vulnerable children and families; about 1,400 are children in DCF custody. These families are struggling and need help to keep their children safe.

Family Service's work is guided by the following core practice principles: 1) Children are safe from abuse; 2) Children have enduring relationships with healthy, nurturing families; 3) Children are successful in family, school and community; 4) Youth are free from criminal behavior; and 5) Staff are supported, valued, and receive ongoing training.

Programs/Services include:

- Adoption Subsidy and Post-Adoption Supports for Adoptees with Special Needs
- Child Abuse and Neglect Investigations
- Ongoing Services to Families at Risk
- Probation and Other Restorative Justice Services for Delinquent Youth
- Substitute Care, Treatment, and Permanency Planning Services for Children in State Custody
- Transition Services for Youth

Office of Child Support (OCS)

The Office of Child Support improves the economic well-being of children by establishing, collecting, enforcing, and modifying child support orders for children living in divided homes. OCS also establishes and enforces medical insurance provisions in court orders, helping to ensure children receive the private health insurance coverage to which they are entitled.

Programs/Services include:

- Establishing, modifying, or enforcing Vermont child support orders
- Establishing and enforcing medical support orders
- Collecting, processing, and distributing child support payments to custodial parents
- Helping to enforce or change another state's support order
- Locating non-custodial parents
- Establishing parentage if the parents were not married when their children were born
- Safeguarding identifying information about the child and parent in cases involving family violence

Office of Disability Determination Services (DDS)

The Office of Disability Determination Services serves Vermonters who apply for disability benefits under the following programs:

- Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI)
- Supplemental Security Income (SSI)
- Medicaid

Its mission is to provide applicants with accurate decisions as quickly as possible—as governed by Social Security statutes, regulations, and policy; with full and fair consideration of each applicant's situation; and with respect and concern for the individual's well-being and legal rights.

Through partnerships with the health care community and social agencies of Vermont, DDS strives to quickly and cost-effectively obtain the detailed medical and functional information that is legally required to document each disability claim. Highly trained, impartial adjudicators, hearing officers, and medical and psychological consultants make determinations of medical eligibility.

Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO)

The Office of Economic Opportunity works in partnership with the private sector, community-based organizations, and other groups to increase the self-sufficiency of Vermonters, strengthen Vermont communities, and eliminate the causes and symptoms of poverty.

OEO manages programs and grants; identifies and develops resources; provides training and technical assistance; advocates for community-based organizations; and connects communities to resources within government and the private sector.

OEO's programs include:

- Asset Development (e.g., Individual Development Account and Micro Business Development Program)
- Community Services
- Homeless Services
- Weatherization Services

Current Assessment of DCF

Strengths

- Caring and dedicated staff
- Significant financial resources to deploy
- Exceptional programs in many areas
- Recent alignment of multiple services within single department

Weaknesses

- Heavy workloads for many employees
- Serious shortcomings in information technology, automation, and access to information
- Internal structures and program requirements that continue to promote program-specific focus rather than more holistic service

Opportunities

- Leadership willing to make change happen
- Governor's call for an E-state
- AHS and State focus on improved business processes and IT systems
- Many employees asking for radical change
- Ability to reconfigure dollar expenditures

Threats

- Upcoming retirement of knowledgeable staff and loss of leadership
- Aging computer equipment and IT systems
- External financial pressures (e.g., continued loss of federal funds)

Strategic Directions for 2007 to 2012 – A Summary

To achieve the vision and mission of DCF and the broader Agency of Human Services over the next five years, DCF will prioritize actions in the following areas:

Programmatic Areas for Emphasis: We are passionate about prevention!

- Reduce poverty and homelessness
- Promote the safety, nurturance, health, and optimal development of young children
- Ensure children are safe and have meaningful lifelong connections
- Intervene effectively with juvenile offenders

Organizational Improvements: We are committed to being the most responsive, effective operation in State Government!

- Create engaged relationships
- Provide exceptional customer service
- Address leadership needs and human resources development
- Redesign business processes to efficiently and effectively support the work, including radical improvements in information technology
- Strengthen privately provided services



Strategic Directions - Programmatic Focus



Reduce Poverty and Homelessness

With the broader Agency of Human Services, the Vermont Child Poverty Council, and the Interagency Council on Homelessness, DCF will design and implement specific strategies to reduce poverty and homelessness in Vermont.

Actions

At a minimum, DCF will:

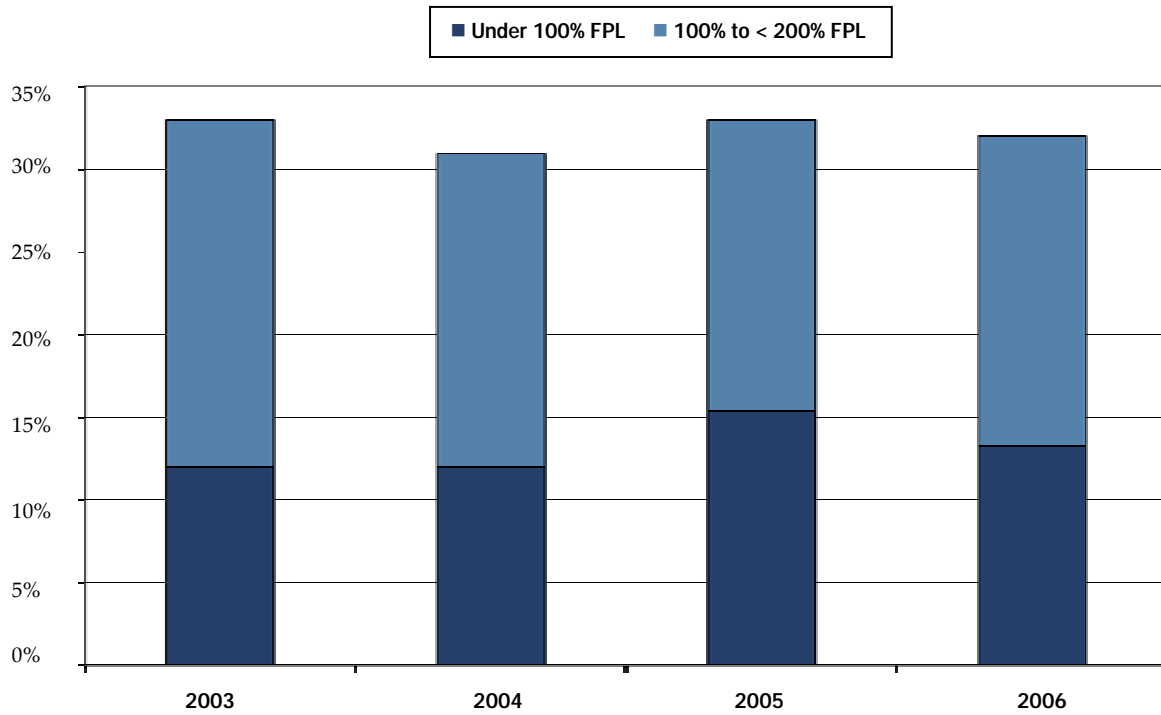
- Train all DCF staff and contractors to help improve work toward moving families out of poverty. All Divisions will identify policy, procedure, and practice changes, which will help move families out of poverty, including addressing issues related to domestic violence.
- Implement changes in the Reach Up program to increase Vermont's work participation rate.
- Increase the number of Vermonters receiving food stamps to help stabilize the financial status of families.
- In the context of the AHS Housing Now Initiative, support the expansion of supportive housing services statewide, including redesigning the General Assistance Program.

A number of additional actions will be identified over the next year through the Interagency Council on Homelessness and the Vermont Child Poverty Council.

Key Indicators

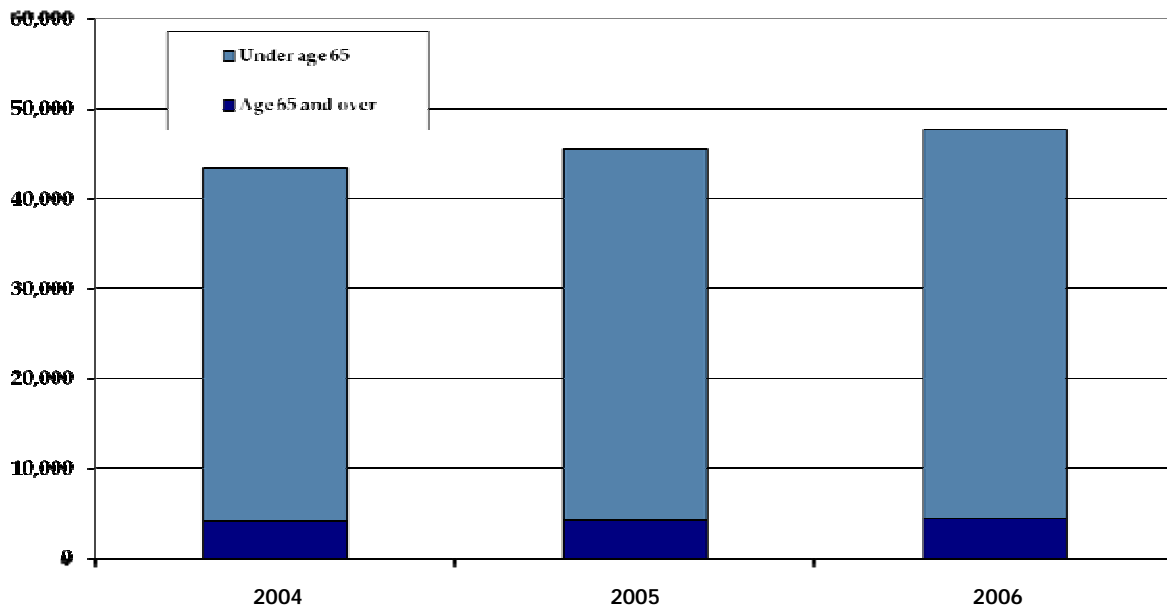
- Graph 1: Percent of Vermont Children in Poverty
- Graph 2: Average Number of Vermonters Enrolled in Food Stamps
- Graph 3: Number of Vermonters Enrolled in Medicaid
- Graph 4: Average TANF (Temporary Aid to Needy Families) Work Participation Rates
- Graph 5: One Night Count of Homeless Adults & Children

Graph 1 – Percent of Vermont Children in Poverty



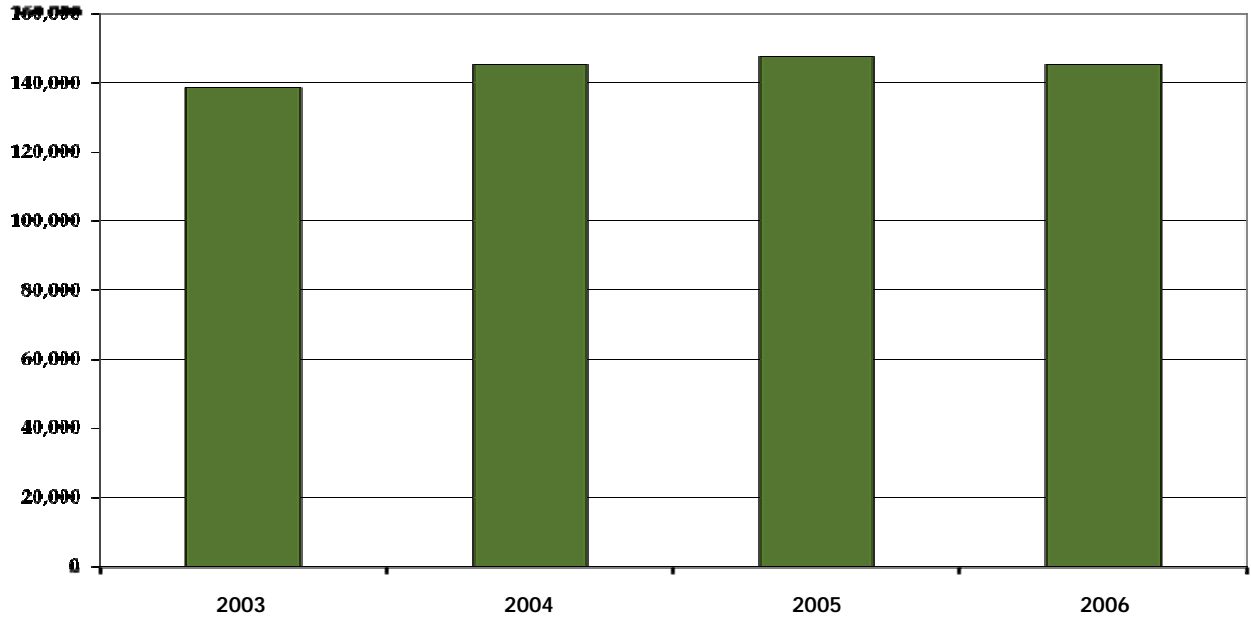
Source: U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey. These sample estimates with margins of error so differences among years should be interpreted with care. For example using a 95% confidence interval, the 2006 percentage is between 28%

Graph 2 – Average Number of Vermonters Enrolled in Food Stamps



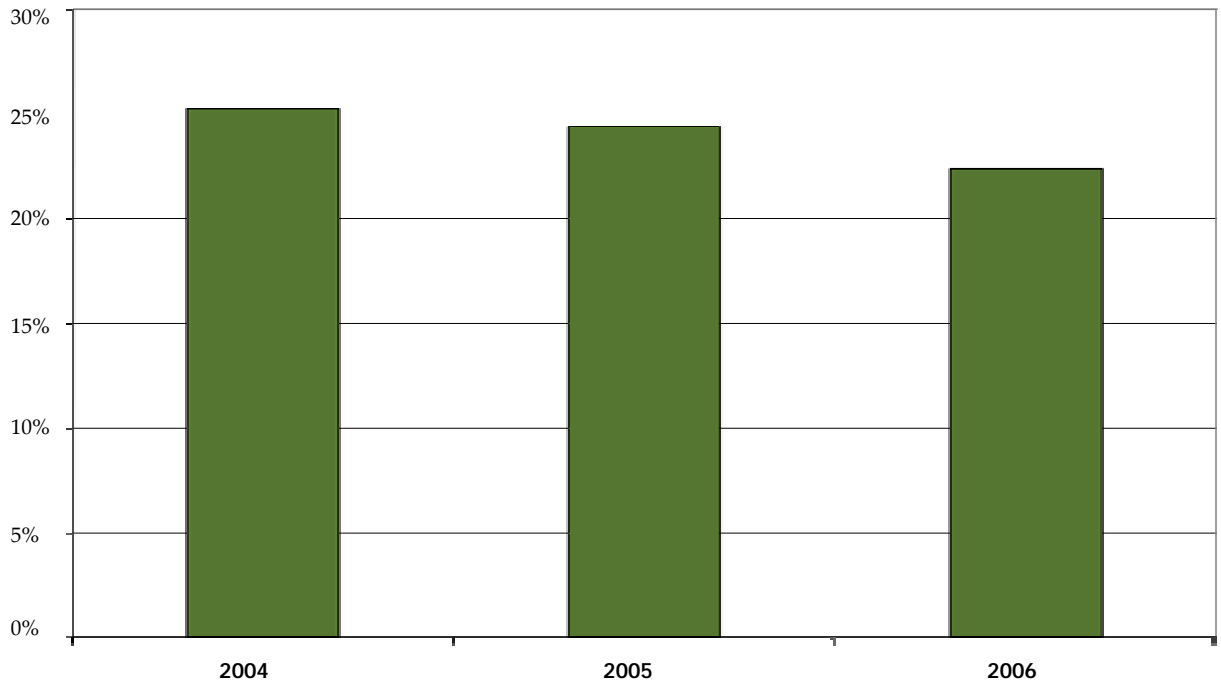
Source: Department for Children and Families, Economic Services Division

Graph 3 – Number of Vermonters Enrolled in Medicaid, by State Fiscal Year



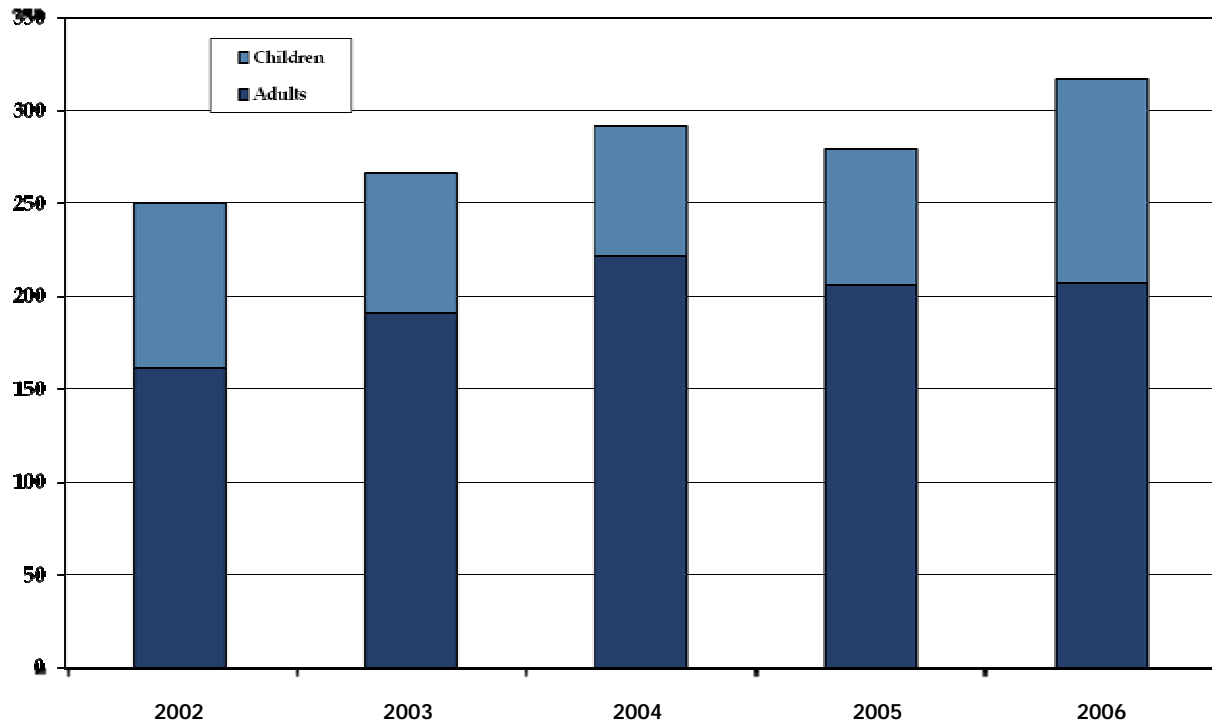
Source: Office of Vermont Health Access

Graph 4 - Average TANF All Families Work Participation Rate



Source: Department for Children and Families, Economic Services Division
TANF = Temporary Aid to Needy Families

Graph 5 - One Night Count of Homeless Adults & Children



Source: Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO) annual November one night count of homeless people in shelters funded by OEO.

Promote the Safety, Nurturance, Health, and Optimal Development of Young Children

DCF will improve the consistency with which children, their families, and their communities have access to needed supports and, working through Building Bright Futures, will urge Vermont to embrace sound public policy that ensures children are healthy, nurtured, safe, and successful in school.*

Actions

At a minimum, DCF will:

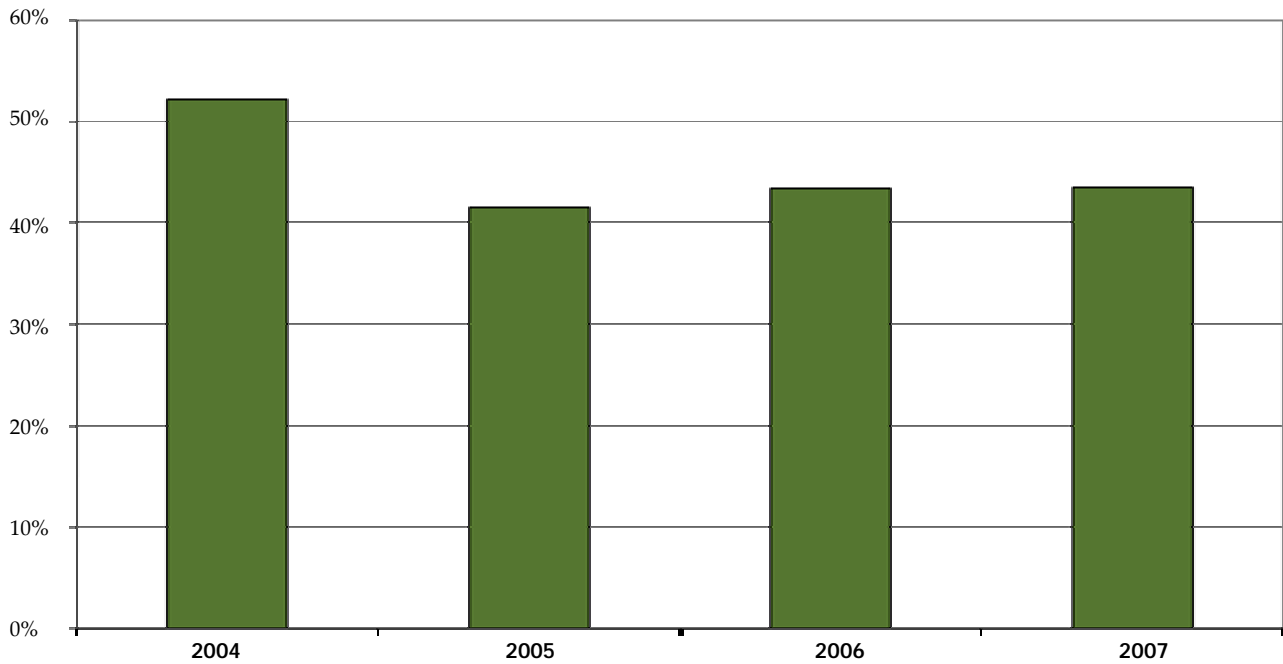
- Design and implement integrated services for young children that improve access for families and reduce duplication.
- Implement a comprehensive effort to increase the percentage of children in quality childhood environments, including working with the Department of Education to implement Pre-Kindergarten regulations, correcting fundamental weaknesses in the Child Care Subsidy Program, and continuing to enhance the Step Ahead Recognition System (STARS) and professional development programs.
- Design and implement additional indicators and strategies through Building Bright Futures*.

Key Indicators

- Graph 6: Percent of Kindergarten Students Ready for School
- Graph 7: Percent of Child Care Facilities that meet Quality Standards

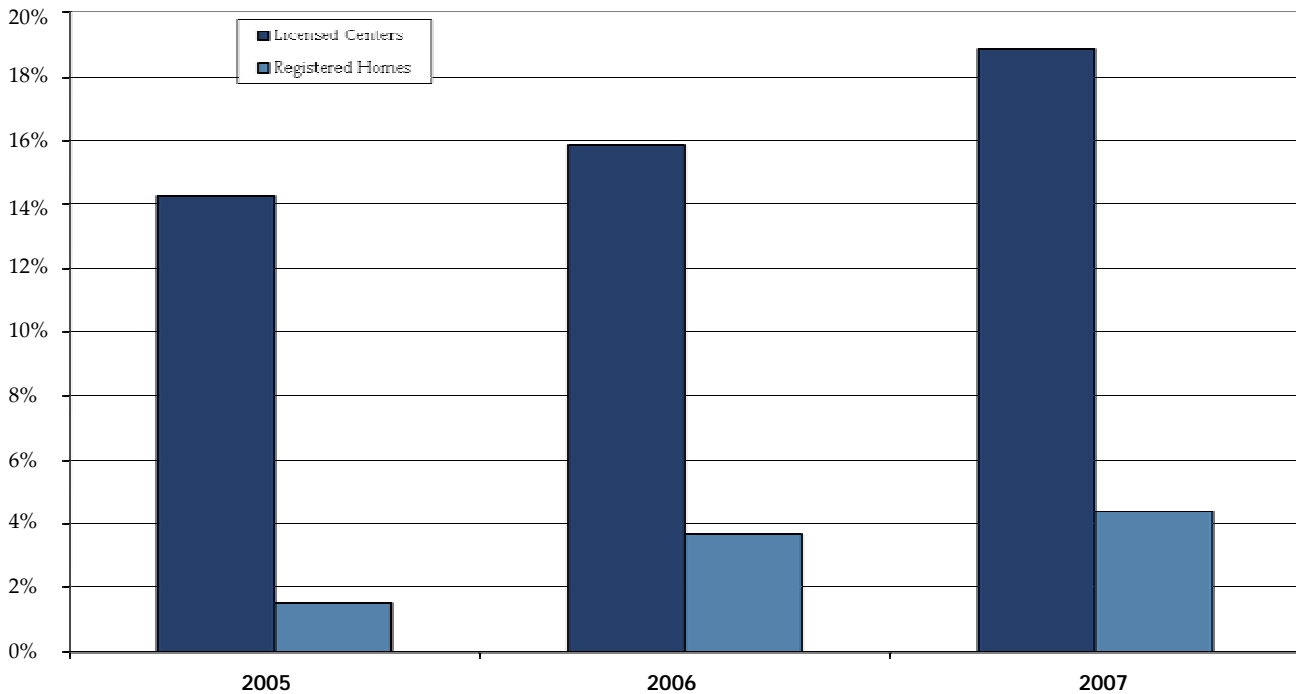
* *Building Bright Futures* is an innovative public-private partnership that coordinates and oversees Vermont's early childhood care, health, and education system. It is comprised of private sector providers, families, business leaders, community members, and state government decision-makers.

Graph 6 - Percent of Kindergarten Students Ready for School, all Five Domains



Source: VT Agency of Human Services and VT Department of Education, School Readiness Assessment Initiative. The year is the academic year ending in the year specified. Readiness domains include social-emotional development, approaches to learning, communication, cognitive development & general knowledge, and health and physical well-being.

Graph 7 - Percent of Child Care Facilities that meet Quality Standards



Source: Department for Children and Families, Child Development Division. High Quality is defined as having a rating of three or more stars or being accredited.

Ensure Children are Safe and Have Meaningful Lifelong Connections

DCF will improve the consistency of its child safety response and will work within the AHS field services structure to further formalize child safety intervention protocols. Simultaneously, the Department will put equal focus on ensuring that youth in or leaving the state's custody have lifelong connections.

Actions

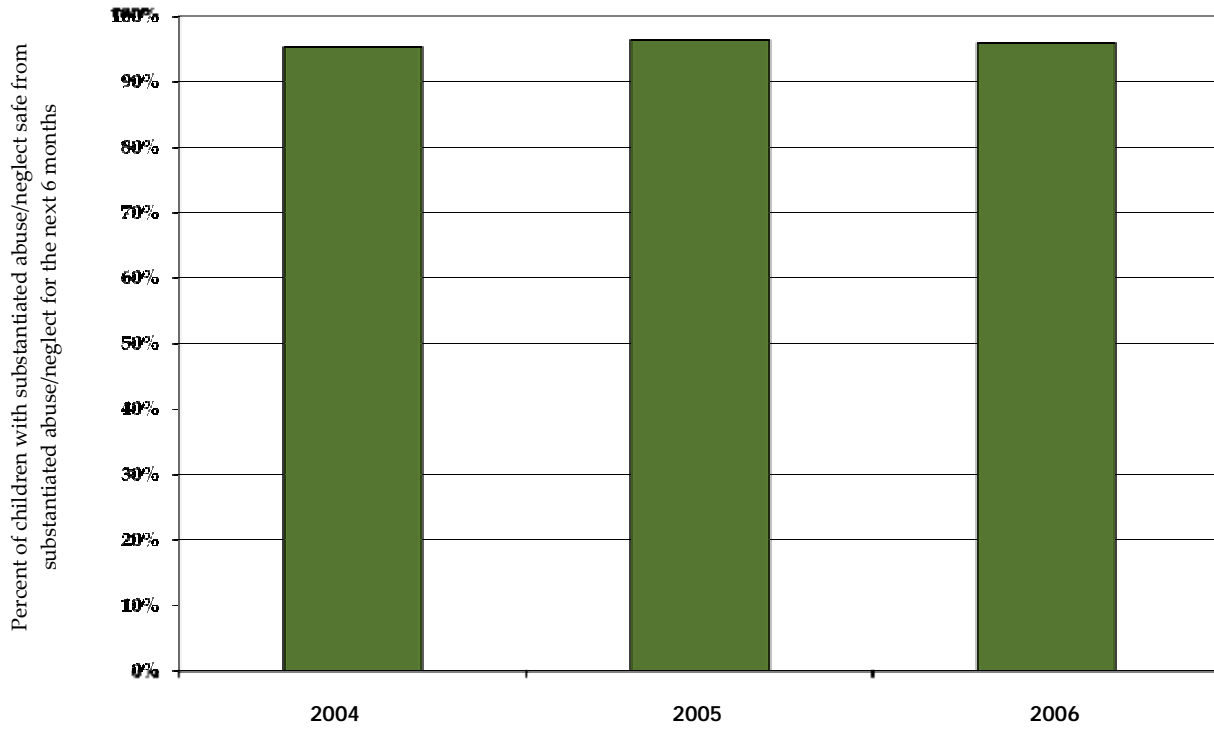
DCF will implement the following:

- DCF-wide training around child protection, intervention, and balancing safety and lifelong connections. All Divisions will assess operations and modify policy, procedure, and practice accordingly.
- A centralized intake for child abuse and neglect reports.
- “Differential response” to child abuse reports.
- Steps to increase placement stability in Family Services through continued attention to permanent connections, including expanding the use of Signs of Safety and Family Group Decision-Making strategies and increasing the use of kinship care.
- The Transitioning Youth Initiative.

Key Indicators

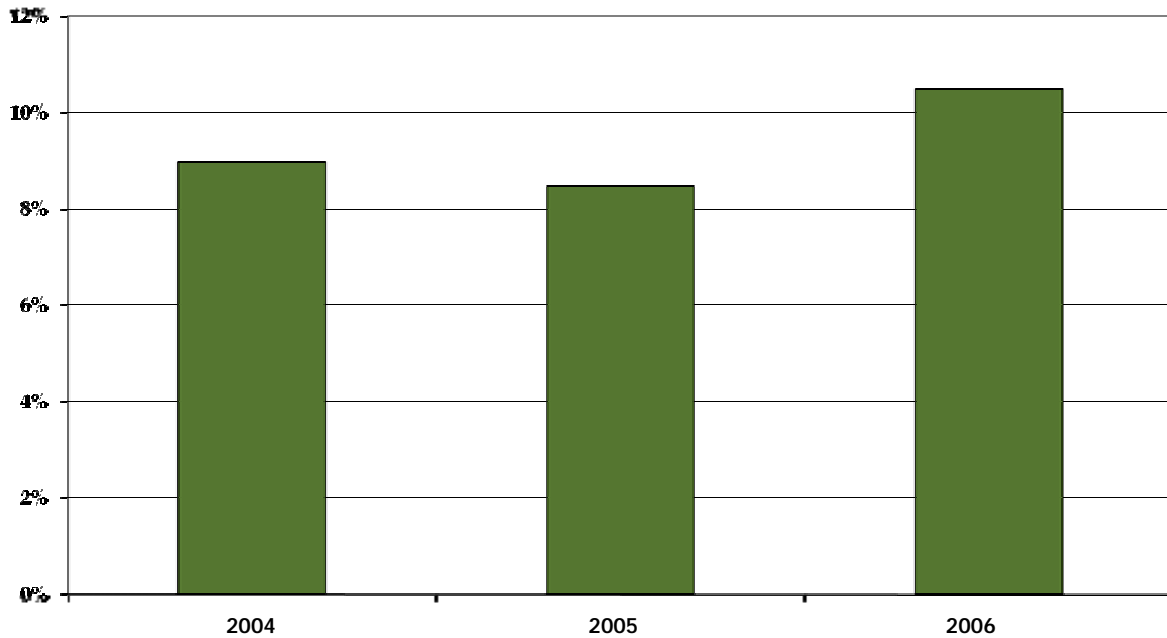
- Graph 8: Children in DCF Custody, Safe from Repeat Maltreatment
- Graph 9: Percent of Children in DCF Custody Living with Relatives
- Graph 10: Placement Stability of Children in DCF Custody
- Graph 11: Exits from DCF Custody into Permanent Settings

Graph 8 – Children in DCF Custody, Safe from Repeat Maltreatment



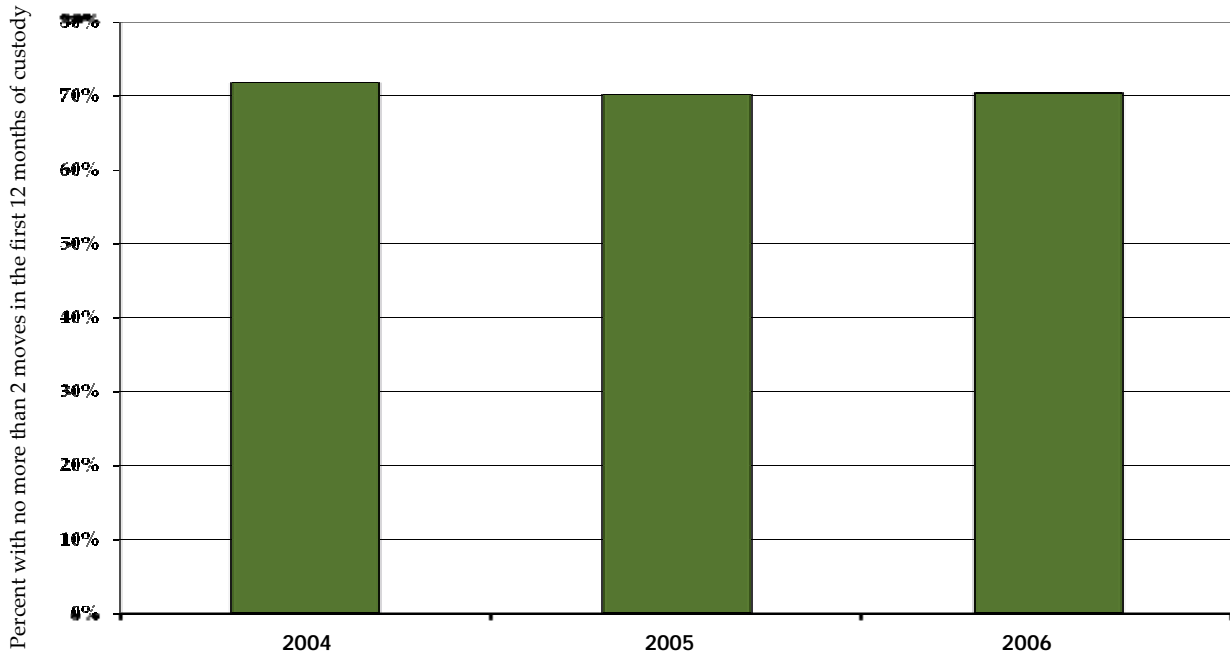
Source: Department for Children and Families, Family Services Division

Graph 9 - Percent of Children in DCF Custody Living with Relatives



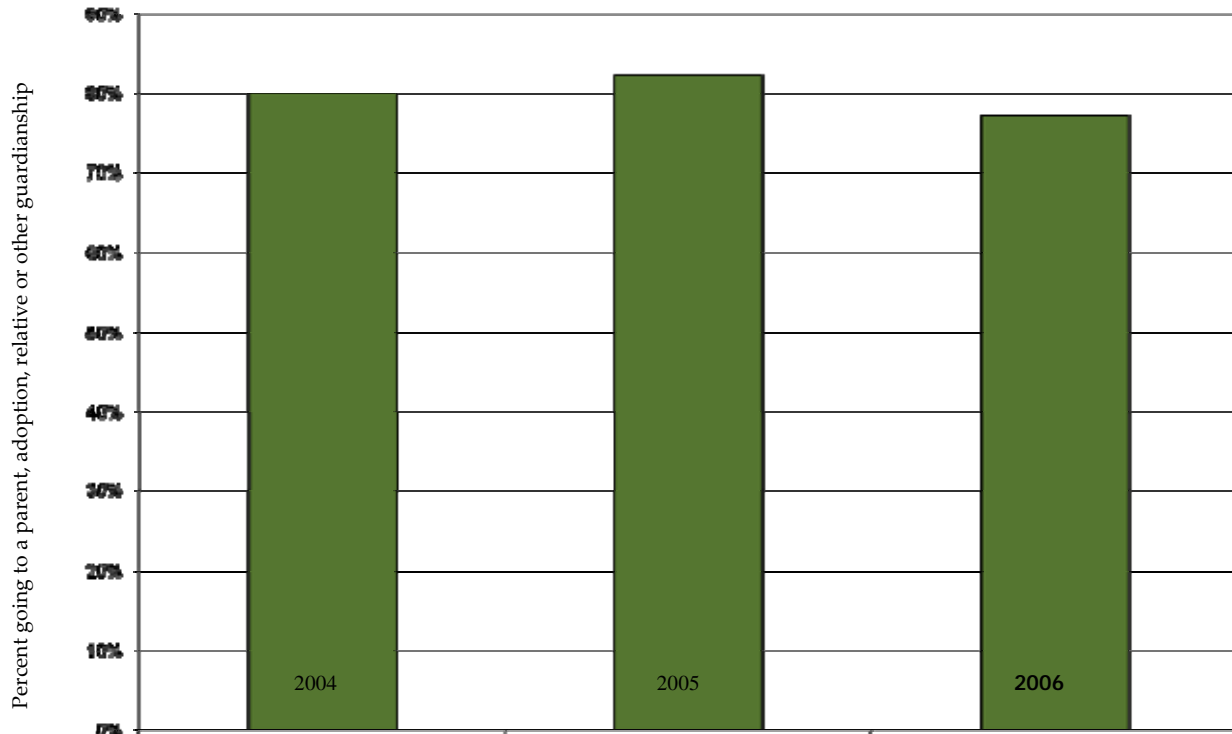
Source: Department for Children and Families, Family Services Division

Graph 10 - Placement Stability of Children in DCF Custody



Source: Department for Children and Families, Family Services Division

Graph 11 – Exits from DCF Custody to Permanent Settings



Source: Department for Children and Families, Family Services Division

Intervene Effectively with Juvenile Offenders

DCF will continue to develop a strong juvenile justice program based on principles for balanced and restorative justice. The program will promote public protection, restoration of youth to a positive relationship with the community, and healthy youth development. This work will be done in concert with the Juvenile Justice Commission.

Actions

- Develop a long-term plan for strengthening Vermont's approach to all juvenile offenders. The plan will include a review of the handling of 16- and 17-year-old offenders to provide long-term guidance for policy and program planning.
- Continue to strengthen our Balanced and Restorative Justice approach to juvenile offenders.
- Continue to strengthen our adolescent treatment programs including adolescent sex offender treatment programs.
- Continue to implement the Youth Assessment and Screening Instrument (YASI) risk and needs assessment and case planning model.

Key Indicators

- Percent reduction in the risk level of juvenile offenders who are in the DCF system *

* Baseline and initial comparative data will be available in early 2009.

Strategic Directions – Organizational Improvements



Create Engaged Relationships

DCF will redeploy staff and contracted resources to ensure that care coordinators and social workers have the time, role focus, and supervisory support to develop engaged relationships with those served, especially those with multiple needs, consistent with the AHS 4 key practices. DCF will work across its Divisions and within the broader AHS structure to better connect families with a primary service coordinator who works within the context of a team.

Actions

At a minimum, DCF will:

- Re-deploy staff in the Reach Up Program to ensure community-based, rather than office-based work.
- Re-design the Family Services Division to create an intensive relationship-based focus.
- Create and pilot an integrated, cross-division model for families involved in Reach Up, Family Services, and Early Childhood Integrated Services.
- Integrate professional development approaches through SUNY and UVM into a single program, promoting a common model of casework.
- Develop and pilot a team model that increases staff support and consumer choice.

Provide Exceptional Customer Service

DCF will be known as the most open and responsive organization in state government. We will create an organizational culture and internal mechanisms to ensure that customers experience excellent service.

Actions

At a minimum, DCF will:

- Implement DCF-wide training in customer service.
- Continue to improve customer service tracking system.
- Ensure availability of clearly articulated avenues to address customer concerns or appeal rights. Review and revise practices within each division and departmentally.
- Implement vehicles to ensure regular customer feedback and input.
- Create strong processes to follow up on opportunities for improvement.

Address Leadership Needs and Human Resources Development

The DCF workforce is the essential department asset. DCF will prioritize two areas in the human resources arena. First, it must address the needs of new leaders as the current workforce ages and nears retirement. Second, it must ensure that employees are valued, trained, motivated, and productive. These efforts will be conducted in concert with the full Agency of Human Services.

Actions

At a minimum, DCF will:

- Within the AHS structure, develop succession and leadership planning strategies, such as incorporating career planning for employees who exhibit leadership potential.
- Enhance current professional development program to create more consistency in approach and increased cross-division mobility.
- Develop and implement a DCF-wide rewards and recognition policy.
- Improve internal communications to ensure staff better understand the scope of the Department's operation, know the resources available to families, and better serve as a customer service representative of both DCF and AHS.



Redesign Business Processes to Efficiently and Effectively Support the Work, Including Radical Improvements in Information Technology

DCF will modify key business processes to maximize customer access and ensure that high-volume activities are carried out as efficiently as possible. Information technology will support the work of both office-based and field-based staff. DCF will have state-of-the-art data retrieval and reporting technologies that will support leadership and staff in implementing and evaluating programs.

Actions

At a minimum, DCF will:

- Create an Enterprise Architecture for growth and sustainability of current and future IT systems.
- Use enterprise business analysis to define how our systems can be integrated.
- Redesign high-volume activities to make them more efficient, reduce staff time, and increase self-service applications.
- Provide field staff with proper equipment to effectively and efficiently do their job in a non-office setting.
- Take specific actions to reduce risk with current legacy systems.



Strengthen Privately Provided Services

DCF will work with AHS Field Services and with the private sector to strengthen contracts and grants management, to reduce duplication and fragmentation of service delivery, to align contracted services with Department priorities, and to promote quality and sustainability of services.

Actions

At a minimum, DCF will:

- Consolidate contract and grant management processes to reduce complexity and increase integration.
- Work with the private sector to adapt services to align with all of DCF's strategic directions.
- Address the sustainability of contracted services.



Department for Children and Families

Commissioner's Office

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Waterbury, VT 05671-5920
(802) 241-2100

Child Development Division

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Waterbury, VT 05671-5500
1-800-649-2642 or (802) 241-3110

Disability Determination Services

93 Pilgrim Park Road, Suite 6
Waterbury, VT 05676
1-800-734-2463 or (802) 241-2463

Economic Services Division

103 South Main Street, A Bldg.
Waterbury, VT 05671-1201
1-800-287-0589 or (802) 241-2800

Family Services Division

103 South Main Street, Osgood 3
Waterbury, VT 05671-2401
(802) 241-2131

Office of Child Support

103 South Main Street, A Bldg.
Waterbury, VT 05671-1901
1-800-786-3214 or (802) 241-2319

Office of Economic Opportunity

103 South Main Street, Osgood 2
Waterbury, VT 05671-1801
(802) 241-2450

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