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FAMILY MATTERS

How are Vermont's Young Children and Families?

By Chloe Learey

The fourth edition of Building Bright Futures' annual report "How are Vermont's Young Children and Families," released in December, included two additional features – recommendations for action and regional profiles.

The recommendations are taken from the Blue Ribbon Commission on Financing High Quality, Affordable Child Care released in November 2016. While the Commission focused specifically on the early care and learning part of the early childhood system, Building Bright Futures is charged with bringing together multiple stakeholders, from education to health care to state services and families, to identify what we can do to make Vermont a better place to raise our youngest citizens. The report covers data from all aspects of life: Family and Social Relationships, Health and Development, Safety, Early Care and Learning, and Family Economic Well-being. Four indicators that our young children and families are doing well include: (1) most children in the state have health insurance, (2) the rate of poverty has decreased, (3) more early education providers are participating in the quality rating system, and (4) more children are getting vaccinations. These accomplishments should be celebrated.

However, significant challenges remain. While poverty has decreased in our region, we still see children and families struggle with making sure they have basic needs such as housing and food. The average length of stay in shelters has increased to 39 days, a record high. Sadly, more students are eligible for free-and-reduced lunch than ever before. In southeast Vermont, the rate of children under age 9 who are in state's custody is almost 15 per 1000, one of the highest in the state. And, that number is rising. This is one of the greatest challenges in our community because it impacts us all. Children who are taken into the custody of the state are experiencing trauma in multiple ways, leading to increased risk for adverse childhood experiences or ACEs. The more ACEs a person experiences the greater likelihood they have of developing health problems, even into adulthood. While nurturing relationships can counter the negative effects of this trauma, the system is strained and can inadvertently contribute to the problem. Ultimately our community suffers when our children and families are not thriving.

One of the strongest assets of "How are Vermont's Young Children and Families" is that it gives us data over time which can help inform decisions about where to invest our resources – time, energy and money – to make a positive difference. The issues families face are complicated and interconnected. If we are going to make progress on some of our most challenging problems it requires people across sectors and generations coming together in a collaborative way to design solutions which are multi-faceted and touch many aspects of our lives. This is why a focus on integrating systems, such as Children's Integrated Services and Integrating Family Services, are so important.

The next episode of "Family Matters", the award-winning talk show about topics of interest to families with young children, will feature Building Bright Futures Coordinator Chad Simmons who will share highlights that are especially relevant in our community. You can read the report by visiting <http://buildingbrightfutures.org/initiatives/how-are-vermonts-children/>. Chloe Learey is the executive director of Winston Prouty Center for Child and Family Development in Brattleboro. She served on the "Blue Ribbon Commission on Financing High-Quality, Affordable Child Care." You can learn more by visiting <http://winstonprouty.org/>

<http://www.reformer.com/stories/family-matters-how-are-vermonts-young-children-and-families,499449?>