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Voices for Vermont's Children



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AGENCY OF HUMAN SERVICES ADDRESSES PROBLEMS WITH CHILD WELFARE SYSTEM.

Secretary Racine and Commissioner Yacavone Ask for Immediate Relief Through Adjustment of This Year's Budget

AHS Secretary Doug Racine and DCF Commissioner Dave Yacavone testified before the House Appropriations Committee hearings on the Budget Adjustment bill, and they both stated that there are problems with the Vermont child welfare system.

First, Secretary Racine filled the committee in on the move by DCF employees to the IBM complex, which he described as 'stressful and expensive'. He said that AHS lost two months of work after Tropical Storm Irene. Among other problems, they have lost employees due to the move. It is also difficult to hire when the location of the future workplace is unknown. Workload has increased and cuts have affected their ability to respond.

The Secretary requested the funding of nine new social worker positions for DCF to start during the second half of FY 2012. He stated that Vermont is under threat of federal sanctions due to our failure to meet required numbers of contacts between foster children and their social workers. According to Secretary Racine, it is imperative that this situation be addressed immediately, not only because of threats of federal sanctions, but for moral reasons. He stated, "Child protection is a fundamental function of state government. At some point we need sufficient one-on-one contact between social workers and foster children."

The Secretary also stated that AHS is having a 'difficult time making differential response real'. (Differential response, adopted in July 2009, is the state's new system of response to reports of child abuse and neglect. If the state determines that children are 'at-risk' but cannot substantiate abuse or neglect, it provides an assessment of the family's situation and offers services to children and their families on a volunteer basis. Services are intended to strengthen parents and keep them and their children out of the child welfare system.) Secretary Racine was told by two workers that it is a 'great idea, but we don't have enough time'

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About Voices

Voices is a statewide child advocacy organization whose mission is to promote public policy that enhances the lives of children and youth in Vermont.

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He also stated, "It is not just throwing positions at problems either. Some people around me think we should be looking at how we do investigations, but, right now, we need positions. We end up with some situations that could be bad situations."

Commissioner Yacovone echoed the Secretary in his testimony. He stated that they are under extreme pressure to 'make sure we do the job adequately'. According to the Commissioner, Vermont is second worst in the nation for rate of social worker contacts with foster children. He stated that our target in the statute is one worker to twelve children. Last year the rate was 1 to 19. Even with nine new social workers, the offices that receive positions will have a ratio higher than 1 to 16. He noted that it is unusual to come to the Budget Adjustment process with a policy change request. He also noted that the governor supports this proposal.

BUDGET ADJUSTMENT BILL PASSES HOUSE AND HEADS FOR THE SENATE

The Budget Adjustment bill, H. 558, passed the House on Friday, January 20th and will be taken up by the Senate this week. During the budget adjustment process changes are made mid fiscal year to address unanticipated budgetary issues. Normally, the process consists of simple ups and downs due to line item expenditures that turn out to be more or less than anticipated. This year, though, the Administration used the budget adjustment process to request the increase of nine social workers in the Department for Children and Families and 17 employees in the Department of Vermont Health Access. Both agencies felt that understaffing was at crisis levels and should not wait until the FY13 budget process to be put into effect.

The position increases were controversial among those in the House who do not believe that policy should be made during the budget adjustment process. The House Appropriations Committee had two dissenters, but passed the requested positions with nine yeas, as long as they are filled from the vacant position pool.

VERMONT LEGISLATURE PASSES SCHOOL "GREEN" CLEANING BILL

Thanks to VPIRG for the following excerpts from their news release:

Safer products to be sold to schools

On Thursday, January 12th, the Senate gave final approval to S.92, a bill that requires manufacturers and distributors of cleaning products to only sell environmentally preferable cleaning products to schools. The bill will now make its way to the Governor's desk for his signature.

"This legislation will create safer and healthier learning environments in our schools," said Charity Carbine-March, environmental health advocate for Vermont Public Interest Research Group (VPIRG). "Children in classrooms across Vermont will soon be breathing easier."

linked to asthma, cancer, and other negative health effects. These chemicals can pollute indoor air and impact the health of students and staff. Advocates and other experts agree that environmentally preferable cleaning products are just as effective and affordable as conventional supplies. In fact, Vermont's state buildings have already transitioned to "green" cleaning products as a result of the Clean State Program created by an executive order signed by Governor Douglas in 2004. In addition, many schools in Vermont have voluntarily made the switch to safer products.

"This bill will protect generations of Vermont children from the effects of toxic chemicals. With asthma at epidemic proportions, any actions we can take to remove asthma triggers from our schools will make a difference," said Cindy Murphy, a school nurse at Main Street Middle School in Montpelier. "It's a community's responsibility to provide optimal health and safety for school age children whose bodies are not fully developed and, therefore, are most effected by toxic chemicals. Green cleaning policies serve as a strong educational tool for staff and students."

CHILD CARE CENTERS REQUEST EMERGENCY HELP FROM THE LEGISLATURE

Two child care centers, both who operate in high poverty areas of the state, have asked for emergency help from the legislature in order to continue operation. Both are 4 to 5 STAR programs, meaning they have met the state's criteria for high quality. The programs, located in Franklin and Orleans Counties, state that without additional state assistance they will be unable to continue. According to the centers, they do not make enough from fees and subsidies to stay afloat and maintain high quality programs.

In an effort to help without violating its anti-earmark policy, the House added \$100,000 to its Strengthening Families Fund. Language was inserted to mandate that the money go to centers at risk of closing who are operating in low-income, high-risk areas; however, the centers will be required to compete for the money with any other interested applicants.

In contrast, the Senate is looking into granting extraordinary relief to the two centers in question. If such relief is granted it will go directly to the centers without a competitive grant process. A decision will be made this week.

PUBLIC HEARING ON FY2013 STATE BUDGET

Monday, February 13, 2011, 4:00 - 6:30 p.m. – The House and Senate Committees on Appropriations will hold a joint public hearing on Vermont Interactive Television (V.I.T.) to give Vermonters throughout the state an opportunity to express their views about the state budget for fiscal year 2013. All 14 V.I.T. sites will be available for the hearing: Bennington, Brattleboro, Castleton, Johnson, Lyndonville, Middlebury, Montpelier, Newport, Randolph Center, Rutland, Springfield, St. Albans, White River Junction and Williston. V.I.T.'s web site has an up-to-date location listing, including driving directions,

The Governor's budget proposal can be viewed at the Department of Finance's website: http://finance.vermont.gov/state_budget/rec. For information about the format of this event or to submit written testimony, call the House Appropriations Committee office at [802/828-5767](tel:8028285767) or email tutton@leg.state.vt.us. Requests for interpreters should be made to the office by 12:00 noon on Monday, January 30, 2011.

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