

Pathways from Poverty Council

July 17, 2014

Hon. Peter Shumlin
Governor
State of Vermont
109 State Street, Pavilion
Montpelier, VT 05609

Dear Governor Shumlin,

Thank you for your continued efforts to assist low-income Vermonters. Your Executive Order EO 09-13 established a “Pathways from Poverty” Council to “determine the nature and primary causes of poverty in Vermont, review the extent to which public and private agencies are addressing poverty in Vermont, and make recommendations on action that should be taken to respond to poverty in Vermont.”¹ We write to you today in our capacity as co-Chairs of your Pathways from Poverty Council representing that body and in the context of the charge you have given to us. **The purpose of this letter is to request a process for public participation from your Administration prior to making major changes within the Agency of Human Services.**

All Vermonters share the concern and heartbreak over recent infant/toddler deaths that occurred in our state not long ago. The mission of the Agency of Human Services is to “improve the conditions and well-being of Vermonters and protect those who cannot protect themselves.” The nexus between the tragedy of the deaths of these children and the question of the efficacy of the structure, policy, and procedures of the Agency of Human Services in the context of its critical mission cannot be overlooked. There is no question that the protection of Vermont’s children is urgent and paramount. We are pleased that your administration is responding quickly to these tragedies and that you have requested recommendations from the Secretary of the Agency to address those essential questions.

We are also aware of, and welcome, action by the legislative child protection committee established to look into these and related questions. The legislative panel has held several public hearings on these questions to solicit input from the public, from affected families, and from service providers and law enforcement, among other interested parties.

As you know, many low-income families engage with the Agency in multiple settings. The family engaged with child protective services may also be engaged with a Reach Up case manager, be in receipt of 3SquaresVT benefits, or receiving child care financial assistance that goes through a parent-child center – or all of the above. Any recommendations or changes related to provision of child protective services has broad implications for families who avail themselves of multiple programs or services of the Agency of Human Services.

We strongly urge your administration to swiftly engage in a public process to provide information to, and solicit information from the public, lawmakers, service providers, advocates and other interested parties about how any recommendations or action plans may affect Vermonters that the agency serves.

¹ <http://governor.vermont.gov/sites/governor/files/EO%2009-13%20Govs%20Council%20on%20Pathways%20From%20Poverty.pdf>

Any recommendations or action plan must be carefully crafted, well thought out, and take into consideration the myriad perspectives of affected Vermonters, the agencies and providers who serve them, and legislators. Proposed changes are likely to require planning, staff time and training, and proper allocation of resources prior to implementation. That will take some time. A process that lacks the benefit of stakeholder involvement may cause delay in implementation resulting from confusion, resistance, and/or unanticipated ripple effects throughout the Agency.

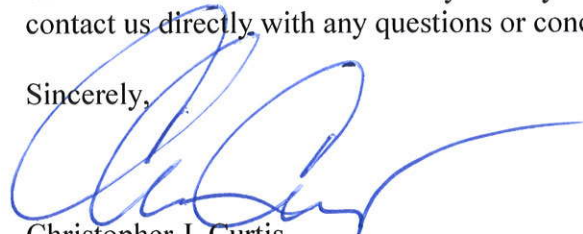
Our request is that your administration act immediately to engage in a collaborative process involving concerned Vermonters, community agencies, and legislators in order to make substantive recommendations on best practices and delivery of the Agency's core mission in addition to the charge you have given to the Secretary of the Agency. To that end the Pathways from Poverty Council offers two recommendations for your immediate consideration:

- 1) **Extend the Agency's deadline for providing written recommendations on structural, policy, or procedure reforms for sixty (60) days** to solicit and incorporate feedback from concerned citizens and stakeholders; and
- 2) Appoint a member of the Administration and/or a point person within the Agency of Human Services to **meet with the Pathways from Poverty Council (or designees) and other interested citizens, organizations, and legislators directly and regularly as part of a broader public participation process.**

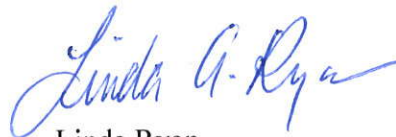
Soliciting feedback and information from concerned citizens, community leaders, and service providers will inform your efforts and provide your administration an opportunity to consider all aspects of proposed reforms in advance to better understand their efficacy. **Creating an opportunity for public participation will speed whatever reform may be necessary and create favorable conditions for proposed reforms and their implementation.**

We appreciate the spirit of communication and collaboration with which you established this Council. Engaging in a public participation process is in harmony with that spirit and will only serve to deepen our shared understanding of poverty and how best to address it – in this case through the effective use of resources and services provided by the Agency of Human Services resulting in better outcomes for Vermonters. Thank you for your consideration of this request. Please feel free to contact us directly with any questions or concerns about these recommendations.

Sincerely,



Christopher J. Curtis
Co-Chair
Pathways from Poverty Council



Linda Ryan
Co-Chair
Pathways from Poverty Council

Cc: Douglas A. Racine, Secretary, Agency of Human Services
Sen. Claire Ayer, Co-Chair, Committee on Child Protection
Sen. Richard Sears, Co-Chair, Committee on Child Protection
Sen. Virginia Lyons, Chair, Health Care Oversight Committee
Rep. Jill Krowinski, Chair, Vermont Child Poverty Council