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Acting AHS Secretary Harry Chen & DCF Commissioner Ken Schatz Release Results of a Systems Review Conducted by Casey Family Programs

Williston, VT-- Acting Secretary of the Agency of Human Services (AHS) Harry Chen and Department for Children and Families (DCF) Commissioner Ken Schatz today made public a report that DCF received from Casey Family Programs: *Assessment of Family Services Division Safety Decision Making*.

Former DCF Commissioner Dave Yacovone asked Casey Family Programs to help the department conduct a thorough review of its child safety practices following the tragic deaths of Dezirae Sheldon and Peighton Geraw. This review was to include an assessment of the Family Services Division's strengths and challenges and to recommend actions that could improve child safety outcomes in abuse and neglect cases. Casey Family Programs, a nationally-renowned child welfare foundation with decades of experience and expertise, agreed to conduct this review at no cost to the state.

"We are grateful to Casey Family Programs for their very thorough review," said Acting AHS Secretary Harry Chen. "Many of the findings are similar to those in our agency's report to the Governor on actions to strengthen DCF and the recent report from the Vermont Citizen's Advisory Board. These similarities reinforce the fact that the issues and concerns identified are valid and merit our immediate attention."

The report includes five priority recommendations that the assessment team felt were essential first steps in improving child safety that could be implemented quickly. Specific recommendations were provided in each of the following priority areas:

1. **Strengthening the child protection workforce** by transferring secondary duties to paraprofessional staff and developing a workforce council of front-line staff;
2. **Improving safety and risk assessments and safety planning practices** by providing additional training and guidance for social workers ;
3. **Strengthening the use of assessments as an alternative to investigations** (*differential response*) by implementing clear decision-making processes and improving monitoring;

4. **Working more effectively with substance abusing families** by expanding access to substance abuse expertise by social workers; and
5. **Improving outcomes measurement and reporting** by making state-specific data available online and implementing a Results Oriented Management system.

Preliminary DCF actions to respond to this report's recommendations include:

- Reviewing safety and risk assessment tools currently in use for key decisions, and updating as needed to reflect current research;
- Providing updated training to all social work staff and supervisors on safety and risk assessment tools;
- Continuing technical assistance with the National Center on Substance Abuse and Child Welfare focused on improving decision-making in cases in which parental abuse of opiates is an element;
- Implementing universal screening for substance use disorders as part of an AHS-wide effort;
- Refining measurement methods to communicate a more accurate picture of the workloads carried by DCF social workers; and
- Improving DCF's public web page to share information about statues, policies, and data regarding key outcomes for the children and families we serve.

"We'd like to thank DCF and the more than 220 Vermont stakeholders who shared their knowledge, views and ideas for improving Vermont's child welfare system with us," said David Sanders, executive vice president of systems improvement at Casey Family Programs. "This report is an important step in identifying opportunities for the entire community to work together with a shared sense of responsibility for ensuring the safety of vulnerable children and their families."

"As this report highlights, child protection is a shared responsibility requiring the collective efforts of not only this Department, but also many other stakeholders," said DCF Commissioner Ken Schatz. "We look forward to working with Casey Family Programs and all of our partners to proactively improve our child protection system, keep vulnerable children safe from harm, and strengthen families."

The report is available on the DCF website at <http://dcf.vt.gov/strengtheningDCF>.

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