



COMMONWEALTH of VIRGINIA
DEPARTMENT OF SOCIAL SERVICES
Office of the Commissioner

Danny TK Avula MD, MPH
Commissioner

May 8, 2023


MEMORANDUM

TO: The Honorable Glenn Youngkin
Governor of Virginia

The Honorable Barry D. Knight
Chair, House Appropriations Committee

The Honorable Janet D. Howell
Chair, Senate Finance & Appropriations Committee

Michael Maul, Director
Department of Planning & Budget

FROM: Danny TK Avula MD, MPH 

SUBJECT: Annual Report on Adoption of Special Needs Children

This report is submitted in compliance with Item 354 F.1 and 2 of the 2022 Appropriation Act, which states:

Items 354 (F.1.) and (F.2.) of the 2021 Appropriation Act provides:

- (1) *“Out of this appropriation, \$1,500,000 the first year and \$1,500,000 the second year from the general fund shall be provided to implement pilot programs that increase the number of foster care children adopted.”*
- (2) *“Beginning July 1, 2017, the department shall provide an annual report, not later than 45 days after the end of the state fiscal year, on the use and effectiveness of this funding including, but not limited to, the additional number of special needs children adopted from foster care as a result of this effort and the types of ongoing supportive services provided, to the Governor, Chairmen of House*

(3) Appropriations and Senate Finance Committees, and the Director, Department of Planning and Budget.”

Please contact me if you have questions at (804) 726-7011.

DA:kc

Attachment

cc: The Honorable John Littel, Secretary of Health and Human Resources

**Virginia Department of Social Services
Annual Report on Special Needs Adoption
2022**

Report Mandate and Background

Items 354 (F.1.) and (F.2.) of the 2022 Appropriation Act provides:

- (4) “Out of this appropriation, \$1,500,000 the first year and \$1,500,000 the second year from the general fund shall be provided to implement pilot programs that increase the number of foster care children adopted.”
- (5) “Beginning July 1, 2017, the department shall provide an annual report, not later than 45 days after the end of the state fiscal year, on the use and effectiveness of this funding including, but not limited to, the additional number of special needs children adopted from foster care as a result of this effort and the types of ongoing supportive services provided, to the Governor, Chairmen of House Appropriations and Senate Finance Committees, and the Director, Department of Planning and Budget.”

The Virginia Department of Social Services (VDSS) uses appropriated general funds to increase the number of finalized adoptions of children and youth with special needs. These are children with significant behavioral or medical challenges who tend to be older, in care longer, and who have had multiple foster care placements.

SFY22 Funding Plan and Results

Due to the complexity of the new initiatives planned, the need for increased capacity to develop new and competitive solicitations for services in SFY22, and competing priorities, some of the proposed initiatives were unable to be implemented or had significant delays. Table 1 shows the initial allocation of appropriated funds to support each aspect of DSS’ funding plan for permanency, family recruitment, or support services for special needs children and youth in foster care versus the amount spent or not spent for each planned initiative in SFY22. Unfortunately, VDSS is unable to carry over any unexpended balances from SFY22.

Table 1: SFY22 Appropriated Funding Plan from July 1, 2021 – June 30, 2022

Type of Service	Allocated Amount	Amount Expended
Regional Cooperatives for Recruitment/Kinship Support	\$536,887	\$0
Expanded Recruitment Portal to families considering becoming foster or adoptive parents.	\$188,000	\$110
Family Recruitment Training Consultant	\$110,000	\$0
Family Recruitment Contractor Incentives	\$42,000	\$22,500
Foster Care Recruitment and Kinship Information Video	\$90,000	\$0
Adoption & Family Engagement Conferences	\$190,240	\$7,750
Adoption Promotions	\$77,597	\$59,589
Parent Advisory Council	\$65,276	\$8,014
AREVA Contract Workers (including Travel, Postage, and Supplies)	\$200,000	\$53,964
Total FY22 (July 1, 2021 – June 30, 2022)	\$1,500,000	\$151,927

VDSS initially proposed to use a large portion of the appropriated funds to implement Regional Cooperatives for Recruitment and Kinship Support. The agency planned to develop collaborative partnerships between local departments of social services (LDSS) to increase capacity to approve kinship caregivers and recruit, train and develop locally approved foster parents.

The Governor’s Safe and Sound initiative funds were used by VDSS to address the issue of high acuity and displaced youth by developing and implementing an Enhanced Treatment Foster Care (ETFC) pilot program serving the Central and Piedmont regions where licensed child-placing agencies (LCPA) would develop current therapeutic foster care families and supportive wrap-around services.

The Piedmont and Central regions were selected because they have been identified as having the highest percentage of children in foster care placed in a congregate care setting (as of December 2020). The TFC pilot program would provide a higher level of care for children in foster care who have behaviors that are more challenging and who would otherwise be served in a congregate care setting. Foster parents who provide this higher level of service could be paid a salary and their role would be a full-time job commitment. Children in this higher level of care would be placed for a transition period of time that would not exceed three to six months, as the purpose of the pilot program is to stabilize the child in a family-based setting and work towards the child functioning in a permanent home, whether through reunification, kinship placement and/or an adoptive placement.

The Pilot Program became effective January 2023. The funding is being utilized for LCPA start-up costs, recruitment, and training as well as to provide the monthly stipend to the professional foster parent. There are currently three LCPAs participating in this pilot program and there is a plan to extend the pilot phase through June 30, 2024 with options to renew the contract over a period of 5 years.

For SFY23, VDSS refocused priorities and is planning to hire five contracted workers to serve as Regional Family Engagement Coaches to assist LDSS in reinvesting in family engagement for children in foster care when termination of parental rights has already been achieved. Coaches will also support the development of effective relative discovery practices, the utilization of Family Partnership Meetings to facilitate family decision-making, and the utilization of relatives & natural supports to create wrap-around service plans for children and kinship foster parents. Coaches will host regional roundtable meetings to staff cases and provide consultation to support agency implementation of family centered practice and decision making and to collaborate with VDSS Regional Resource Family Consultants to provide practice assistance to agencies when needs are identified. Funds will be allocated to hire high Acuity Rapid Response Care Coordinators to support LDSS in their work to prevent children in foster care from being left without an acceptable and approved placement. Coordinators will engage multidisciplinary teams in order to assess the needs and provide technical support to LDSS related to care and planning for children and youth, including appropriate placement referrals, engaging family, locating funding, and in collaboration with various multidisciplinary processes.

Recruitment Portal

In April 2022, the agency entered into an agreement with Adoption-Share to implement its Family-Match Application for Recruitment. The *Faster Families Highway for Recruitment* portal will provide visibility into the quality of resource families recruited, trained, and licensed in Virginia and to provide the platform supporting an efficient process whereby the most qualified resource families are identified faster for mobilization and utilization to help Virginia's children in foster care. This initiative will

provide better insights into the barriers that impede the matching process and child and family relationships with the goal of enabling the LDSS to better match their response to prospective family inquiries with the recruitment efforts they deploy. The new statewide family recruitment initiative is currently being rolled out in the Piedmont and Western regions and should be operational in all regions by the end of SFY23. Adoption Share received \$50,000 of directly appropriated funds in SFY22 for the pilot which was spent along with a small amount of these funds. Adoption Share was directly appropriated another \$50,000 in SFY23 for the pilot. VDSS has allocated an additional \$188,000 of appropriated VAdopts Campaign funds to increase the number of foster care children adopted through this initiative in SFY23.

Family Recruitment Contractor Incentives

VDSS created an incentive opportunity for foster and adoptive family recruitment contractors (Virginia One Church, One Child, Jewish Family Services/Connecting Hearts, and Extra Special Parents) to provide more focused efforts to recruit foster families for youth residing in congregate care. A contractor will receive \$500 for each recruited family that attended three or more sessions of the Parent Resources for Information, Development, and Education (PRIDE) training. PRIDE is a curriculum developed and approved by the Child Welfare League of America, and is a required state curriculum to become a certified foster parent in Virginia. As of June 30, 2022, approximately 95 foster care families were matched to youth residing in congregate care in search of a LDSS or LCPA approved home-based foster care placement. Eighty-five foster care families were matched to youth whose parents' rights had been terminated and were residing in congregate care in search of an approved adoptive home placement. VDSS will continue the incentive program through the end of SFY23.

Parent Advisory Council

VDSS, with the assistance of Braxton and Associates, created a Parent Advisory Council. The creation of the Council is to ensure parent voices are included in shaping Virginia's child welfare programs, services, strategies and policies. VDSS is deeply committed to learning from and incorporating the unique experiences, perspectives and viewpoints of parents in decision-making through this Council. For this Council's purpose, "parent" is defined as someone who in a parental capacity, such as a child's biological parent, legal custodian or guardian, who was involved with child welfare while in a primary caretaking role and whose child may have been at risk for entering foster care or did enter foster care. VDSS, in collaboration with Braxton and Associates, provided ongoing support, training, coaching, and structure, to the Parent Advisory Council. VDSS is committed to ensure that Council members are leading the work and are the decision-makers so that they can provide meaningful input on the child welfare system.

Adoption and Family Engagement Conferences

Each year, during National Adoption Month in November, VDSS celebrates adoptive families and helps raise awareness for the hundreds of children and youth in foster care in Virginia who are waiting for permanent, loving families. Adoption Month incorporates various media campaigns to promote local community activities. VDSS hosts the annual

National Adoption Month conference for professionals, foster and adoptive families, LDSS caseworkers, and community partners. This year's virtual conference, held on November 17, 2021, focused on reducing the number of youth at risk for aging out of foster care or returning to foster care because of a failed adoption, and creating an understanding of why some older youth are opposed to adoption. Approximately 180 professionals, foster and adoptive families, LDSS caseworkers, and community partners attended the one-day conference. The *Adoption: A Shared Story* centered on services and supports available to pre and post adoptive families. Adoptive families, LDSS, and private agencies shared lived experiences and described the journey to permanency from recruitment, pre-adoption, adoption, and post-adoption. Conference attendees also participated in the workshop, *Every Conversation Matters: Unpacking the "No" of Teen Adoption*.

Interactive conversations with participants centered on teen opposition to the goal of adoption and how it is grounded in grief and loss, birth family loyalties, and miseducation about permanency. For youth in out-of-home placements, planning for permanency has to begin at entry into care, and be youth-driven, family-focused, culturally focused, culturally competent, continuous, and approached with the highest degree of urgency. Participants learned that the best way to get an older child or youth excited and engaged in the process of finding permanency is by creating opportunities where they can hear from other youth who have been adopted. These shared experiences, insights, and advice can help answer many of the youth's questions and eliminate their fears of the unknown.

Adoption Promotion

VDSS entered into agreements with three marketing and advertising companies to collaborate with the VDSS Office of Public Affairs to promote adoption through radio, digital billboards, and social media. Audacy, a multi-platform audio content and entertainment company based in Richmond, provided 30 second radio ads promoting adoptions to 353,800 households in Norfolk, Newport News and Virginia Beach (WVKL-FM, WWDE-FM) and an additional 113,900 households in the Richmond market (WTVR-FM, WRXL-FM HD2). Lamar Advertising Company, an outdoor advertising provider, posted digital billboards in Newport News, Chesapeake, Richmond, and Lynchburg with visual displays of Adopt a Sibling Group, Adopt a Teen, and Adopt a Relative. Over 161,390 plays were delivered throughout Adoption Month. Identika, an advertising company based in Ashburn, developed and posted 36 social marketing ads in VPS Print Network and Google Display around the Mother's Day, Father's Day, and Juneteenth holidays, and created two Tik Tok videos to promote adoptions to a younger audience.

AREVA

VDSS continued to support the Adoption Resource Exchange of Virginia (AREVA) using appropriated funds. AREVA is a service offered by VDSS that connects families with children who are available for adoption within Virginia. AREVA is one tool used to help LDSS reach the federal goal of permanency within 24 months, as mandated in § 471 of Title IV-E of the Social Security Act (42 USC § 671), and the requirement for LDSS

to file Adoption Progress Reports, as outlined in § 16.1-283 of the Code of Virginia. The purpose of AREVA is to increase opportunities for children waiting to be adopted by providing services to child-placing agencies having custody of these children.

SFY23 Funding Plan

For SFY23, VDSS has determined how best to use these appropriated funds to maximize resources and continue support of services for special needs youth in foster care and increase permanency for the more than 700 special needs youth legally free and in need of an adoptive home (Table 2). This includes VDSS allocating a portion of these funds to support foster parent respite. The number of families requesting respite were higher in SFY22 than in previous years. An additional \$60,000 is earmarked to meet the high demand for this service.

In the next state fiscal year, VDSS will more closely monitor and report expenditures bi-monthly to ensure funds are fully spent by the end of the fiscal year and the Permanency Team will meet weekly to discuss progress towards implementing SFY23 initiatives.

Table 2: SFY22 Appropriated Funding Plan from July 1, 2022 – June 30, 2023

Type of Service	Allocated Amount
Family Engagement Coaches/High Acuity Rapid Response Care Coordinators	\$516,238
Kin First/Family Recruitment Training	\$110,000
Public Affairs to support DFS Branding and Recruitment	\$90,000
Family Advisory Council - New RFP	\$89,038
Adoption Share, Inc. - Expanded Recruitment Portal to FC/Adoption Recruitment Portal	\$188,000
Foster and Adoptive Family Recruitment Contractor Incentives	\$42,000
Adoption Conference	\$90,000
Family Engagement Conference	\$90,000
Foster Care/Reunification Conference	\$90,000
AREVA Contract Workers	\$134,724

Respite Care Coverage	\$60,000
Total FY23 (July 1, 2022 – June 30, 2023)	\$1,500,000