



COMMONWEALTH of VIRGINIA

DEPARTMENT OF SOCIAL SERVICES

Office of the Commissioner

James Hunter Williams
Commissioner

December 9, 2024

MEMORANDUM

TO: The Honorable Glenn Youngkin
Governor of Virginia

The Honorable Luke E. Torian
Chair, House Appropriations Committee

The Honorable L. Louise Lucas
Chair, Senate Finance & Appropriations Committee

Michael Maul, Director
Department of Planning & Budget

FROM: James H. Williams *James Williams*

SUBJECT: Annual Report on Adoption of Special Needs Children

This report is submitted in compliance with Item 329 F.1 and 2 of the 2024 Appropriation Act, which states:

Items 329 (F.1.) and (F.2.) of the 2024 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 Appropriations and Senate Finance Committees, and the Director, Department of Planning and Budget.”*

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

JW:kc

Attachment

cc: The Honorable Janet V. Kelly, Secretary of Health and Human Resources



Annual Report on the Adoption of Children with Special Needs

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ANNUAL REPORT ON THE ADOPTION OF CHILDREN WITH SPECIAL NEEDS

A Report for the Virginia General Assembly

August 1, 2024

REPORT MANDATE

Items 329.F. of the 2024 Appropriation Act

F.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.

F.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 Appropriations and Senate Finance and Appropriations Committees, and the Director, Department of Planning and Budget.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The 2024 Appropriation Act, Item 329.F. provides funding 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 foster care longer, and who have had multiple foster care placements.

The Virginia Department of Social Services (VDSS) has implemented pilot programs focused on increasing the number adoptions of children in foster care. Faster Families Highway (“the Highway”), a recruitment portal project focusing on recruiting foster families, is demonstrating great success. Since its launch in SFY23, 120 Local Departments of Social Services (LDSS) have used the online portal to identify appropriate foster families for children in care. **As of March 31, 2024, 3,445 potential foster families have entered “the Highway”; of these, 735 were recruited and 93 were approved.**

Another pilot project, Weekend Miracles®, began in March 2024. VDSS entered a partnership with Kidsave International to introduce their evidence-informed program Weekend Miracles in Virginia. Weekend Miracles gives older kids in foster care, who have had multiple foster home placements or reside in congregate care, a say in their future by meeting with families at match events.

SFY 2024 appropriated funds were also used to host successful training conferences that continued to advance the work being completed with Adoption-Share and Adoption Resource Exchange of VA (AREVA). VDSS also utilized funding to support dedicated placement staff and hire a public relations and marketing expert to support the many Permanency promotional campaigns.

About VDSS and the Adoption of Children with Special Needs

VDSS partners with LDSS and community organizations to promote the well-being of children and families across the Commonwealth. VDSS proudly serves alongside nearly 13,000 state and local human services professionals throughout the state who ensure that thousands of Virginia's most vulnerable citizens have access to the best services and benefits available. Together, VDSS works each day to serve, empower, and create opportunities for brighter futures.

The Division of Family Services implements pilot programs to increase the number of children adopted out of foster care. These initiatives aim to identify a collaborative and focused approach to recruiting families and achieving adoptions for children and youth foster care, and to increase the number of adoptions of children ages six and older who are at risk of remaining in foster care due to special needs.

DEFINITIONS

AREVA

Adoption Resource Exchange of Virginia (AREVA) is a service offered by VDSS that connects families with children who are available for adoption within the Commonwealth. 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. Some services provided by AREVA include:

- Maintaining a registry of children awaiting adoption and a registry of approved parents waiting to adopt;
- Providing information and referral services for children who have special needs to link child-placing agencies with other adoption resources;
- Providing ongoing pointed and child-specific recruitment efforts for waiting children;
- Providing consultation and technical assistance on child-specific recruitment to child-placing agencies for waiting children; and

OnRamp

OnRamp is a prospective foster or adoptive parent's access to the Faster Families Highway for Recruitment where the parent learns the requirements for providing care, take readiness assessments, and have questions answered by an expert. This allows the family decide if fostering, emergency or respite care is a good fit.

OffRamp

OffRamp, a component of the Faster Families Highway for Recruitment, provides the pathway for prospective foster and adoptive families to enter the LDSS training and approval process. All LDSS have an opportunity to view prospective families, regardless of the OnRamp they came through, and make the decision to invite families to their pre-service training.

PROGRAM OVERVIEW

VDSS is committed to piloting and adopting the most effective foster and adoptive family recruitment strategies to place children and youth in safe, permanent relative, kin, or non-relative adoptive homes, to increase timely adoptions for these children that have been in care for 24 months or more, to increase the number of children and youth adopted over age 6, and to assist in finalizing adoptions within 24 months of entry into foster care.

CONTACTS

Division of Family Services

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Annual Report On The Adoption Of Children With Special Needs

SECTION 1: STATE FISCAL YEAR 2024 FUNDING PLAN AND RESULTS

Due to the complexity of the new initiatives planned and the need for increased capacity to develop new and competitive solicitations for services in state fiscal year (SFY) 2024, 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 the VDSS funding plan for permanency, family recruitment, or support services for children and youth with special needs in foster care versus the amount spent for each planned initiative in SFY 2024. VDSS is unable to carry over any unspent balances.

Table 1: SFY 2024 Funding Allocation and Spend by Program

TYPE OF SERVICE	ALLOCATED AMOUNT	OBLIGATED AMOUNT SPENT*	UNSPENT BALANCE
Dedicated Placement Staff: Family Engagement Coaches & High Acuity Rapid Response Care Coordinators	\$365,019	\$98,592	\$267,427
Kidsave – Weekend Family Miracles	\$249,119	\$35,359	\$213,760
Public Affairs to Support DFS Branding and Recruitment	\$90,000	\$42,083	\$47,917
Recruitment Portal – Faster Families Highway	\$246,100	\$246,100	\$0.00
Permanency Conference	\$142,000	\$117,690	\$24,306
Prevention and Protection Conference	\$142,000	\$142,000	\$0.00
Virginia Adoption Search Mutual Consent Registry Project	\$29,038	\$0.00	\$29,038
AREVA Contract Workers	\$176,724	\$55,597	\$121,127
Respite Care Coverage	\$60,000	\$0.00	\$60,000
TOTAL	\$1,500,000	\$737,421	\$763,575

**Invoices for May and June 2024 are pending and may not be included in the above totals at the time this report was submitted.*

Dedicated Placement Staff

Placement Support Specialists

Initially funded by Governor Youngkin's Safe and Sound Task Force, VDSS hired three Placement Support Specialists (previously referred to as High Acuity Rapid Response Care Coordinators). These Specialists support LDSS in their work to prevent children in foster care from having to stay in the offices of LDSS and finding appropriate placements for those children. As the Safe and Sound Task Force program and accompanying funding came to an end, VDSS prioritized these positions by utilizing these appropriated funds to continue their valuable work.

In SFY 2024, these 3 Placement Support Specialists supported 50 agencies in securing placements for over 85 youth. Many of these children had been in foster care for extended periods of time and are legally available for adoption. Through their work engaging multidisciplinary teams, Placement Support Specialists were able to ensure that these youth were placed with relatives, family-based homes, or in congregate care.

Family Engagement Coaches

VDSS continues to pursue filling five regional Family Engagement Coach positions, working in alignment with the Kin First Now effort. This is a specialized position that requires a high level of skill and experience. At the time of this report's submission, one of these positions has been filled. This Coach has worked to engage a team of individuals from the regional and home offices who support a Kin First Now approach in our LDSS. The Kin First Now method ensures families are engaged and empowered to make informed decisions about their family's welfare. This approach can be applied across the child welfare continuum including cases in which parental rights have been terminated and the child is without an adoptive placement.

The Family Engagement Coach and the supporting team engage a local agency and host an immersive two-day training to introduce and train the three practice elements that have led to an increase in kinship placements in other agencies. After completing this training, the Coach remains connected with the LDSS to support the agency's leadership in disrupting traditional practices and successfully transforming the agency culture. These specialized positions remain in an active recruitment phase. VDSS was able to utilize another funding stream for this initiative in FY2024. In conjunction with this and position vacancies, VDSS has reduced the appropriated funding for this initiative from the SFY 2025.

Kidsave Weekend Miracles®

In March 2024, the VDSS Division of Family Services (DFS) began a partnership with Kidsave International, a nonprofit organization that champions permanency for older kids in foster care, to implement their Virginia Kidsave Weekend Miracles program. Weekend Miracles is a unique hosting program connecting families who want to adopt a child, become legal guardians, or build lifelong mentorships with older kids in foster care (ages 9-17). Kidsave works with kids who often feel overlooked and are left to age out of care into the world alone.

The Weekend Miracles program includes fun and interactive Meet the Kids events, where families and older kids in foster care get to know each other in a relaxed and engaging environment. Best of all, the program gives the kids a voice and a choice in who they would like to spend more time with, helping create a more organic and meaningful connections. These opportunities allow them to develop bonds naturally over time. When both the child and the family are ready, they can move forward to hosting, which is a mentor-like relationship where the adults commit to spending dedicated time with the child twice a month for at least one year. For youth who are open and available for adoption, hosts can help them find a forever family; sometimes the host might be that family. Kidsave will collaborate directly with VDSS, community partners, and LDSS for referrals of youth that would benefit the most from participating in the evidence-informed model.

Since executing the contract, VDSS and Kidsave have developed a phased-in regional plan to introduce the model in Northern and Central regions; expansions to the Western, Piedmont, and Eastern regions are expected by the end of SFY 2025. The Kidsave and Adoption Program teams have begun work on the following deliverables:

- Creating training materials for staff involved in the implementation of the program.
- Hiring a program manager and coordinator for Virginia.
- Creating promotional campaigns and materials to find interested families to participate in the program.
- Building an interactive website for Virginia prospective families.
- Creating relationships with referring agencies to include Virginia's Kids Belong and VDSS' Adoption Through Collaborative Partnerships' pre-adoption community providers.
- Adapting the Kidsave Weekend Miracles model to work effectively with Virginia's child welfare system.
- Assigning an AREVA specialist to serve as the referral liaison between Kidsave, LDSS, and community partners.

Public Affairs to Support VDSS DFS Branding and Recruitment

In order to support the many VDSS Permanency Unit promotional campaigns (e.g. Foster Care Month, Adoption Month, the ongoing need for foster and adoptive parents, etc.), appropriated funds were used to hire a qualified and highly experienced public relations and marketing expert to assist the VDSS Division of Public Affairs in January 2023.

This position is focused on providing project management and oversight, and strategic recommendations for campaign objectives, messaging, and output and performance measures. This staff member oversaw the execution of a contract for implementing a statewide marketing and promotional targeted Foster Care Recruitment, Retention and Kin First Culture Multi-Media Marketing Campaign for the Faster Families Highway for Recruitment portal for SFY 2024. Currently, the staff member is working with the Permanency Team on adoption and foster care media campaign. The position is also providing project management and oversight of the research component of the targeted Foster Care Recruitment, Retention and Kin First Culture Multi-Media Marketing Campaign.

Recruitment Portal

The Faster Families Highway for Recruitment portal continues to be used in all regions of the Commonwealth to recruit, engage, and select families to increase the pool of prospective foster families. The online public facing portal, provided by Adoption-Share, facilitates the recruitment, training, and approval of resource families for children in foster care and manages inquiries from prospective foster parents in a more efficient and geographically organized way. All 120 LDSS across Virginia maintained their enrollment status in SFY 2024.

SFY 2024 program milestones of the Faster Families Highway for Recruitment are included in Table 2:

Table 2: Program Milestones



Adoption-Share continues to provide LDSS with multiple opportunities for training and support. In January, Adoption-Share hosted its 10th quarterly Check-In Forum in collaboration with VDSS Regional Resource Family Practice Consultants. During this quarterly forum, open to all localities across the Commonwealth, Adoption-Share focused on effective messaging for targeted recruitment and connecting the Faster Families Highway to media opportunities. Staff from Portsmouth LDSS, located in the Eastern Region, attended as guest speakers and spoke about their success with targeting their community via media opportunities; their call to action included their OnRamp web link and QR code. The group also answered questions and hosted an open discussion about ways they have incorporated these tools in their promotional materials, website, and more. This Check-In Forum was beneficial to LDSS as it presented an opportunity for peer-to-peer learning and problem solving in recruitment.

Family-Match Director

VDSS hired an Adoption-Share contracted employee to serve as the Family-Match Director, which is funded through appropriated funds. In February 2024, the Family-Match Director held a comprehensive Quarterly Training for LDSS. This training included an introduction to the Faster Families Highway recruitment tool, a full demonstration of how it works, and time for a Q&A. Though this quarterly training had few participants, Adoption-Share believes that facilitating quarterly trainings will continue to be beneficial for LDSS, especially in registering new hires for training on the Faster Families Highway.

The Family-Match Director continues to provide individualized support by phone, email and virtual meetings. To maximize efficiency, the Director began utilizing a Microsoft Booking link accessible to all users via email. This method allows LDSS staff to view the Director's availability and schedule an online one-on-one training session at their convenience. Throughout year, the Family-Match Director provided individualized trainings and consultations to 10-12 localities each quarter.

Capitalizing on a key program strength identified in the 2023 Strengths/Weakness/Opportunities/Threats (SWOT) analysis, the Family-Match Director continues to send weekly *Tool Kit Tuesday* emails to LDSS system users. This email announces new and existing resources that have been added to the SharePoint site, a web-based Microsoft platform, which is accessible to LDSS. In quarter three of SFY2024, Adoption-Share has provided localities with added resources including training schedules and registration, instructional videos, and quick guides for *Archiving and Restoring a Family* and *Accessing the FREE Family Training*.

Archived materials shared in this repository included: family account registration experience quick guides, OnRamp Links & QR codes, and updating logos and images. In addition, the following videos are included: Approving a Family, Regional Recruitment, & family filters and key word search.

Adoption And Family Engagement Conferences

In SFY 2024, VDSS continued to collaborate with the event management vendor, It's My Affair, to coordinate and manage two in-person conferences.

Kin First, Achieving Permanency Through Engaging and Empowering Families

The *Kin First, Achieving Permanency Through Engaging and Empowering Families* was a two-day conference held in Harrisonburg, Virginia on December 12-13, 2023. Attendees included employees who support or provide direct services to children and families affiliated with the child welfare system, community partners, and LDSS staff. The conference encompassed an array of workshops and resources to support both public and private community partners in the areas of family engagement, kinship, recruitment, foster care, pre and post adoption and Interstate Compact for Placement of Children (ICPC). Conference participants had the opportunity to choose from 11 various breakout sessions facilitated by 12 conference speakers and panelists. During lunch, a panel discussion was led by Chauncey Strong, a contracted Youth Development Specialist and Executive Director of Strong Training and Consulting, LLC. The panel discussion focused on experiences from the lens of two former foster youth. This was one of the most popular and well-received sessions at the Conference.

Post conference surveys indicated one hundred percent (100%) of respondents strongly agreed that Strong's panel discussion was useful, and the information presented will be used in their daily work. While eighty-three percent (83%) of respondents indicated they were either satisfied or extremely satisfied with the conference quality and topics presented. One participant summed up the overall experience that attendees expressed at the Conference:

"Dr. McDaniel was phenomenal, and the lunch panel was excellent! Both made me reflect on how I have practiced throughout the years, and how I really missed the mark with some cases, thinking that I was doing what was best at that time. Listening to Dr. McDaniel and the Winfrey brothers really inspired me to make sure that I am helping the agencies that I support to always actively look for and engage relatives and to assist the child in maintaining connections."

Prevention in Partnership: Building a Hopeful Future Together

The second conference *Prevention in Partnership: Building a Hopeful Future Together* was held on April 15-16, 2024, in Richmond, Virginia. Attendees included people who support or provide direct services to children and families affiliated with the child welfare system. The conference included an array of workshops and resources to support both public and private community partners by providing best practices in preventing child maltreatment and in fostering community partnerships. Prevention services support post-adoption families by reducing the risk of an adoptee's re-entry into foster care and preventing entry into foster care by reducing the number of children that will need adoptive families. Conference participants had the opportunity to choose from nine various sessions to discuss topics and develop recommendations.

From a post-conference survey of attendees, 96% responded as being satisfied or extremely satisfied with the conference quality and topics presented. One attendee commented "*Virginia has really made an effort to re-focus our work to prevention of child abuse and maintaining the family*". Another participant acknowledged that more needs to be done to "*financially and emotionally support kinship families when they often don't have access to resources that traditional foster families have.*"

Adoption Search Mutual Consent Registry Project

In SFY 2024, VDSS began exploring the possibility of creating an Adoption Registry that would help to improve the ability of VDSS to facilitate connections between adoptees and birth family members. Adoption Disclosure Services received an average of 350 applications in recent years from adoptees, adoptive parents, birth parents, adult birth siblings, and relatives to initiate this process. There are currently 181,120 adoption records being preserved by VDSS. Pursuant to the Virginia Code [§§ 63.2-1246](#) and [63.2-1247](#), eligible individuals may submit a request to the Commissioner of VDSS for the release of information from an adoption file. This may include non-identifying information and identifying information. VDSS would like to maximize the use of modern technology in an automated adoption registry which will dramatically improve our efficiency, allow timelier request fulfillment, and proactively promote future reunification.

In our exploration, VDSS discovered several barriers to designing and implementing an Adoption Registry which include overcoming IT data security challenges and drafting a new section of Virginia Code. Despite being unable to actualize this initiative forward in a tangible way for spending appropriated funds in SFY 2024, VDSS does plan to continue research and planning to be able to do so. As such, this project has not been included in SFY 2025 funding.

Adoption Resource Exchange of Virginia (AREVA)

VDSS continued to support AREVA using appropriated funds. More details about AREVA can be found in the 2023 report.

Through AREVA, VDSS continued to participate in Virginia's Kids Belong's "I Belong Project" (IBP) which is a joint initiative, diligent recruitment, and adoption program. IBP, in collaboration with Regional Resource Family and Permanency Practice Consultants, coordinated child specific video and photography events focused on children with finalized termination of parental rights and who were currently placed in congregate care. In SFY 2024 there were 5 IBP sessions that took place throughout the Commonwealth near congregate care facilities where these children were placed. VDSS regional Permanency Practice Consultants worked with LDSS to identify eligible children for video shoots and supported efforts to coordinate transportation to and from the locations of the sessions. In total, 51 children in need of adoptive families participated, which resulted in 1,143 family inquiries during calendar year 2023. This is a 31% increase in inquiries from 2022 to 2023.

AREVA also continued the annual promotion of recruitment campaigns in November's National Adoption Month. AREVA collaborates with LDSS, Virginia's Kids Belong, CBS Channel 6, and WSLC Channel 10 to promote recruitment initiatives for youth available for adoption. The 2023 campaign partners were Jewish Family Services and Connecting Heart of Virginia. In November 2023, over 500 inquiries were received. Results of these efforts include:

- one child has been placed in the custody and care of a relative,
- two children have pending Adoptive Placement Agreements, and
- two adoptive homes have been selected and are pending transition.

In calendar year 2023, there were a total of 2,415 inquiries from child and youth registrations completed or initiated by AREVA. AREVA continues to work collaboratively to expand promotional efforts for youth awaiting adoption and plans to develop and provide resources to increase LDSS responses when inquiries are received from the public. In May 2024, VDSS hired an AREVA contracted employee to serve as an AREVA liaison between LDSS, VDSS, and Kid-save Weekend Miracles for seamless referrals and family recruitment.

Respite Care Coverage

The VDSS Respite Care Program promotes and supports stability for children placed with resource families approved by LDSS by offering short-term relief to resource families caring for children through temporary, substitute care for the child on an emergency or planned basis.

Access to respite care also revitalizes resource parents; thus, strengthening their ability to continue caring for the child. Respite care supports efforts to achieve timely permanency by helping transition children from one resource family to their adoptive family, helping transition children from congregate care placement to a resource family, and relative respite care may also lead to relative adoption or transfer of custody of the child to a relative.

VDSS set aside appropriated funds in response to an anticipated increase for respite services in SFY 2024. However, these funds were not needed due to increased oversight and lower than anticipated demand for respite care. In future years, efforts will be made to identify additional ways to provide respite care to foster parents, including time-limited access to laundry services, housekeeping services or food delivery services on an as-needed basis.

SECTION 2: STATE FISCAL YEAR 2025 FUNDING PLAN

For SFY 2025, VDSS has determined how best to use these appropriated funds to maximize resources and continue the support of services for special needs youth in foster care and increase permanency for the more than 800 special needs youth in need of an adoptive home. Table 3 lists the specific initiatives VDSS will implement or continue in SFY 2025. VDSS will continue to explore innovative efforts to increase permanency for children in foster care. In the next state fiscal year, VDSS will continue to 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 SFY 2025 initiatives.

Table 3: SFY 2025 Appropriated Funding Plan

TYPE OF SERVICE	ALLOCATED AMOUNT
Family Engagement coaches/High Acuity Rapid Response Care Coordinators	\$293,297
Kidsave Weekend Miracles	\$443,379
Public Affairs to Support DFS Branding and Recruitment	\$90,000
Recruitment Portal – Faster Families Highway	\$338,600
AREVA Contract Workers	\$134,724
LDSS Collaboration to Share Foster Parents	\$200,000
TOTAL	\$1,500,000

APPENDIX A: LEGISLATIVE MANDATE ITEMS 329.F. OF THE 2024 APPROPRIATION ACT

Items 329.F. of the 2024 Appropriations Act

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