



ANNUAL REPORT 2018



**Empowering and supporting all Vermont families
of children with special needs.**

Dear VFN friends, colleagues, and supporters,

We are so excited to share the work that our organization has completed in the year ending June 30, 2018. Our staff and volunteers, with excellent support from our Board, have accomplished many things during this time using our unique family-to-family support, information, and training to reach 1123 families throughout Vermont, lifting family voices for positive change. Our Children's Integrated Services Early Intervention (CIS-EI) program gave a strong start to 575 Chittenden County infants and toddlers and their families. VFN's newest members, Puppets in Education (PiE), joined us last September and reached 12,652 people throughout New England, an all-time record for their work to help all children address difficult issues like bullying and abuse. We have been actively engaged in outreach to a variety of partners, striving to advance inclusive communities throughout Vermont and, thanks to PiE, beyond! As the state's Family Voices and Parent Training and Information Center, we have continued to be involved in advocacy efforts around early intervention programs, special education, and budget decisions that impact families of children with special needs.

We can't wait for you to delve into this Annual Report—you will be impressed by the impact Vermont Family Network has had over the last year! I invite your thoughts on our work, including new ideas for programs, collaborations, advocacy, and more! Please feel free to contact me at (802) 876-5315, ext. 207, or pam.mccarthy@vtn.org.

From the heart,



Pam McCarthy,
President/CEO



A few weeks ago my husband and I dropped off our daughter for the beginning of her fourth year of college. The long drive gave ample opportunity to reflect on our family's journey of the past 21 years. Vermont Family Network has been an important part of the journey, providing maps, wayfinding, and "road buddies" as we endeavored to find our way through detours, dead ends, and bumpy roads along our search for medical diagnosis, insurance coverage and educational equity.

The many touchpoints with Vermont Family Network throughout my daughter's life have been key to her successes and is why I continue to give back to this organization, to help it continue serving all families of children with disabilities throughout Vermont. Yet at this moment VFN faces threats to its ability to do the work its staff does so expertly and empathically. The number of families with complex needs in Vermont increases while funding from state and federal sources diminishes.

VFN's Board of Directors is undertaking a sustainable funding model that engages a wider community to learn and care about the impacts that this organization makes to improve the lives of individuals and families—and to enhance the quality of life in Vermont. You can help us widen our community of engagement by participating in one of our one-hour "Meet the Family" tours. These tours allow us to share the mission of Vermont Family Network in a very personal and inspirational way. I hope to see you soon at one of our "Meet the Family" events.

With Gratitude,



Ellen Zeman

Chair, VFN Board of Directors





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Family Support Program



VFN's Family Support Program is founded on the work of its highly experienced and dedicated employees who are all parents who have "walked the walk". Several staff members have been committed to this work for over 10 years and continue on a daily basis to support families who are navigating the complex health and special education systems. The complexity of these systems often leaves families in need of assistance with understanding laws, parental rights, and how to collaborate with a wide variety of professionals who are part of their child's team. Supported by federal grants as the Family-to-Family Health Information Center and the Parent Training and Information Center, our staff is skilled and ready to support Vermont families in this process.

Our grant funding provides families opportunities for respite, conference, and training experiences, and we collaborate with Children with Special Health Needs at Vermont Department of Health to pay for medically necessary services and products that are not otherwise covered. Funding through the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation (DVR) has enabled us to develop resources and supports for families and youth as they transition into adulthood and we work directly with DVR Transition Counselors to help facilitate that transition.

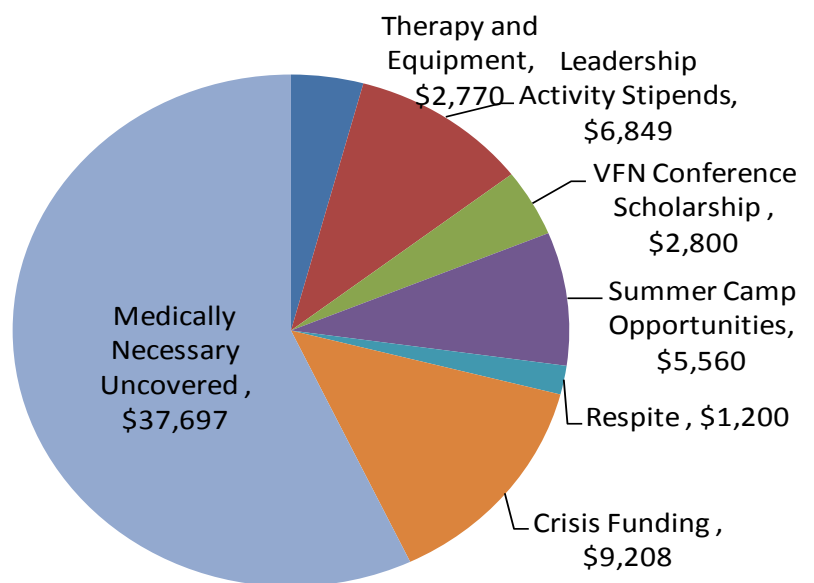
Family Support is a vital part of Vermont Family Network's mission. We listen to families and offer resources, support, and growth opportunities. We disseminate information to families through workshops, webinars, and printed materials. Families of children with special needs return to us several times throughout their children's lives and we are ready to assist however we can. Our goal is always to empower families with knowledge and experiences that will help them to move forward with confidence. As experienced parents of children with special needs, our employees are uniquely qualified to achieve this goal.

Top reasons
families contact
Family Support

- 1 Individualized Education Program (IEP)
- 2 Parent/Professional Communication
- 3 Parents' Rights
- 4 Funding
- 5 Special Education Evaluation



In FY18 we distributed \$62,458 to families for critical expenses associated with their lives as parents of children with extraordinary needs.



“VFN helped me navigate the complexities of Special Ed. They also connected me to other families who helped me make informed choices about services for my son who has autism.” - Parent

Family Story—The Stief Family

“We knew our lives were going to change in a way we had never prepared.”



Life is unpredictable and a world is naturally shaken up a bit when a baby is born. We had expected to experience some measure of unpredictability with our first child. However, when our daughter, Zoe, was born in the Fall of 2003 we knew our lives were going to change in a way we had never prepared. In some ways prenatal screening had prepared us for the physical differences in our child born with a significant cleft lip and palate. We did our research and knew the surgeries she would need would be extensive along with the feeding obstacles and we were ready for that challenge. However, we were unprepared for some of the additional diagnoses that came along the way. In the hospital she was diagnosed with a coloboma in her right eye which would lead to patching for years, and she was given “hard of hearing diagnoses” when she failed her newborn screening exam 3 times. Around the age of 18 months it was apparent that Zoe was experiencing some further delays and we went for more evaluations. Between the ages of 2-5 she was further diagnosed with fine/gross developmental delays, growth hormone restriction, cognitive delays, and autism. In 2012 we topped off her diagnoses with ADD! Those are a lot of diagnoses for one little kid...and family!

Figuring out which condition to “tackle” first has always been a struggle because they all inter-connect so much! Thankfully, due to the multiple diagnoses, we had multiple support systems in place through 9East (formally Vermont Center of Deaf and HOH), Children with Special Health Needs Cleft Palate clinic, and Vermont Family Network CIS-EI program. We struggled to balance all the different facets of life - between changing jobs, growing family (adding 2 more kiddos into the fold), scheduling her intense programming, multiple doctor appointments, and surgeries into our weeks, learning sign language, and trying to give Zoe the support she needed. At times it was hard to stay SANE! (Although to be honest, ALL parents lose their minds to some degree, so that’s not totally to blame on the special kiddo....)

During the elementary school years our family was feeling the need to figure out how to function in a school with an IEP and juggle the huge team that surrounded our child. We wanted to move forward as a team with the school and found ourselves struggling to communicate effectively. We reached out to VFN and found yet ANOTHER invaluable resource to help educate us on the education system. We received some helpful guidance, insight, and legal rights awareness that was game changing for our family. We were given another language to build on the divides we felt at school and help us connect in a team-oriented fashion.

Our family has been so enriched by the connections we have made at VFN. I value their mission and their desire to help families who are struggling with the “hard sides of special”. Through their pursuit of further educating, I have been able to share our story. Speaking to young students pursuing their dream to become doctors, nurses, speech and language pathologists, audiologists, special educators, teachers, and many more has given me the opportunity to share what I have learned on our journey. It’s one of my greatest privileges to share a bit of our story to help educate others.

“Speaking to young students pursuing their dream to become doctors, nurses, SLP’s, audiologists, special educators, teachers, and many more has given me the opportunity to share what I have learned on our journey.”

Children's Integrated Services— Early Intervention Program

VFN's Chittenden County Children's Integrated Services - Early Intervention Program (CIS-EI) is part of Vermont's statewide system of coordinated services for pregnant women and young children. CIS-EI serves children ages 0-3 years old with developmental delays or health conditions which may lead to developmental delays and provides coordinated services in natural environments such as homes and early care and education programs where children without disabilities also participate. CIS-EI also coaches parents or caregivers on ways to integrate play-based developmental interventions that are interesting and functional into the daily routines of their children.

We are pleased to have two staff members, Kelly Morrison, Developmental Educator Supervisor, and Michelle Perry, Developmental Educator, graduate from the Snelling Center for Government's Early Childhood Leadership Program. Our partnership with the UVM Early Childhood Special Education program continues to be strong and we consistently support student interns to gain field experience in their Part C placements with our employees. We supported the transitions of 150 children to the schools' Early Childhood Special Education programs. We continue to work closely with our school partners promoting good collaboration and team building to ensure smooth transitions for families.

This past year our staff received professional development in many areas including: The Infant Toddler Developmental Assessment (IDA), the Power of Touch, the Challenging Child, Connecting the Dots, Trauma of Poverty Community Collaborative Series and attended Pediatric Grand Rounds (various topics). Many employees attended the annual CIS Institute at Lake Morey and enjoyed a day long training on Successful Engagement with Families: Moving Beyond the Obstacles of Poverty, Trauma, Substance Abuse with Tina Bleau, a licensed psychologist—MA, from NFI Vermont Family Center.

Despite periodic staff vacancies that take time to fill, we have been able to serve most children at recommended levels of frequency. Over the summer per diem Developmental Educators filled the staffing gaps, but many work for the school districts and are not available once the school year begins. We are extremely concerned about the rising number of referrals with no additional funding to meet the increased demand. As in the past couple of years, we will be advocating for increases to funding for all CIS services across the state, including specialized autism services, for those children who are at risk.

"I am continuously impressed with the EI services. My son has THRIVED and grown. He has become more confident and loves his time with his therapist."





“Parents are resilient too. That resilience is built by knowing that others are facing similar highs and lows with their children.”

In FY 18, CIS-EI:

- Served 575 children/families, a 6% increase from FY17
- Received 431 referrals, a 28% increase over the past five years

Our FY 2018 CIS EI Family Outcomes Survey showed that:

- 92% of families whose children receive CIS EI services understand their child’s strengths, needs, and abilities.
- 95% of families whose children receive CIS EI services know their parental rights and how to advocate for their child.
- 98% of families whose children receive CIS EI services know how to help their child develop and learn.

“This is a great program that helped us to provide appropriate/helpful support to our child as she built her foundation for fundamental movements. She now walks, runs, and climbs at an age appropriate level and can’t get enough of the freedom that comes along with being able to move where she wants, when she wants.”

Family Story—The Dabertrand Family

When Hojung Yoon left South Korea for school in France, she had no idea she would meet Fabrice Dabertrand, the man that would become her husband. Even more unexpected was when his post-doctoral position brought them both to Vermont in 2009. Their previous time in Bordeaux, France had not prepared them for the snowy January they encountered, but over the next few years they learned to love many things about Vermont— outdoor activities, the people, and most of all, the CHEESE! These things did not deter them from dreaming of a future back in France and they looked forward to the day they would return to the country they both loved.

In March 2015, Hojung and Fabrice welcomed a baby boy into their family. Marcel brought so much joy and they loved being parents. As he grew, Hojung would take him to play groups and story hours, and she began to notice behaviors that confused her. Marcel would not stay in circles and engage like the other children. He didn't have any interest in age appropriate toys and seemed obsessed with spinning objects such as ceiling fans and car wheels. Eating was a challenge and most concerning was the loud, high-pitched scream that seemed endless at times, especially out in public. Hojung was stressed to take Marcel places, and found home to be an increasingly lonely and isolating place. She began to think that she was a bad mother and did not know where to turn for support.

At Marcel's 18-month checkup, their doctor agreed that Marcel seemed behind in certain areas and connected Hojung to Vermont Family Network (VFN). One of the first steps was an evaluation of Marcel. When reading the report, the doctor saw several red flags that indicated autism. As Hojung and Fabrice waited for the official Child Development Clinic evaluation and diagnosis, they kept hoping that the red flags were incorrect. They knew very little about autism and what they did know didn't seem like the behaviors their son was exhibiting. Hojung had worked very hard to prepare herself for a healthy pregnancy and they knew no one who had a child with autism. How could this possibly happen to their child? When the news came confirming the autism diagnosis, they were shocked, sad, and questioning what they had done wrong. The guilt was almost overwhelming but spurred Hojung and Fabrice on to educate themselves in every way they could to meet the needs of their little boy.

Hojung credits the employees at VFN for making this time less scary and confusing. Living in a country neither grew up in, having no family around, and English being neither's native language only added to the strain. VFN immediately helped them feel validated and less alone. For the first time someone told Hojung, "This must be very hard for you" and "You are doing a good job." Just recalling this memory brought tears to her eyes, remembering the desperate feeling of loneliness and doubt she had experienced for most of her son's life. VFN helped them learn and navigate the numerous systems of healthcare and insurance, connected them to Katie Beckett Medicaid, and provided needed information regarding applied behavior analysis. Hojung was amazed when a Developmental Educator taught her the tips and techniques to support Marcel when they went out in public. Suddenly, with a few simple tools, she could calm her son and once again take him out grocery shopping and to other public places. When Marcel graduated from the Early Intervention program at age 3, VFN employees helped them learn about special education and how to advocate for their son in school. They also accessed funding through the Flutie Fund to pay for needed equipment for Marcel.

Through this process they have learned that progress can go back and forth, that the range of autism spectrum is huge, and that the needs of their son can change from day to day. They know that when one technique stops working to try another, that shifting Marcel's attention can calm his behaviors, and that VFN is there for them every step of the way.

At three and a half years old, Marcel attends preschool in Hinesburg. His eye contact has improved, and not only is he talking, he is talking in his mother's native language of Korean, his father's native language of French, and of course, in English. Hojung and Fabrice are grateful for all the support from VFN and no longer have plans to return to France where the services for their son are not as good. Although most days they feel like they can only manage the present, they know that as Marcel grows his needs will change and they may need to plan for his future in a way they did not expect. They also know that no matter what happens VFN will be there for support. Their families are thousands of miles away, but the Vermont Family Network is always just a call away.



“They were shocked, sad, and questioning what they had done wrong.”

“For the first time someone told Hojung ‘This must be very hard for you’ and ‘You are doing a good job.’ Just recalling this memory brought tears to her eyes, remembering the desperate feeling of loneliness and doubt she had experienced for most of her son’s life.”

Puppets in Education

This has been a big year for Vermont Family Network's Puppets in Education! On September 1, 2017, Puppets in Education (PiE) became a program of VFN, helping to support children and families in school and the communities where they live.

In the 2017-2018 school year, Puppets in Education reached 12,652 people (10,886 students and 1,766 adults) through 163 presentations at 47 sites, thanks to North Country Chevy Dealers and Upstate NY Chevy Dealers' lead sponsorships worth \$81,150. Additional program support came from grants from The Gibney Family Foundation, VT Department of Children's Mental Health, Vermont Children's Trust Fund, and People's United Bank, from our community partners Creative Labels, Swedish Pit, The University of Vermont Children's Hospital, Advantage Learning Center, Main Street Landing, Spencer Group, and many generous donors.

This was our biggest year in a decade! Bullying Prevention was our most popular program request reaching 7,253 individuals, Children's Mental Health reached 4,707, and Celebrating Individual Differences reached 4,514. Other topics were also in high demand: Abuse Prevention, Demystifying Autism, Healthy Bodies, and Alcohol, Tobacco, and Other Drug Prevention.

The need for the Puppets in Education programs was evident from a March visit to two rural schools in southern Vermont where 7th and 8th graders were challenged with harassment and a general lack of respect for each other. In our Bully Prevention Workshop we discussed how damaging words from others can be and asked students to present a performance piece revealing LIES and the TRUTH. Groups of seven presented many heartbreaking statements:

The Lie:

"I cut myself because I am a bad person."

"I am gay because I hug my friend."

"I am fat."

"I am stupid."

"I am blonde, so I must be stupid."

"I should go kill myself."

"I am a boy so I should like sports."

"There is something wrong with me."

The Truth:

"I cut myself because of bullying."

"I am just friends and I am not gay."

"I am not fat and I am just right."

"I am smart even when I struggle some-times."

"I am smart."

"I deserve to be here."

"I am a boy and I like other things than sports."

"There is nothing wrong with me and I am a good person."

"Two 4th graders-that had actually had a bullying incident amongst themselves- have advocated to start an anti-bullying alliance. Our first meeting is this coming Thursday. Hoping to involve students and staff from multiple grade levels." -Assistant Principal





Quotes from the Road:

"Everyone should have their own respect. You can't base them off from the country they are from. Everyone deserves to be treated equally no matter where they are from." 6th grade student

"You should be friends with someone who is different than you because they could do great things." 2nd grade student

"It is never a kid's fault for getting abused." 5th grade student

The impact of PiE's social and safety programs this past year can also be heard in the comments and questions children asked:

"I didn't know kids' brains could get addicted so fast." 5th grader

"Do you get bullied for having ADHD?" 4th grader

"My older brother, little brother and friend have ADHD, and it's hard." 4th grader

"I've been harassed about my skin color." 6th grader

"Some people bully because they don't know how to make friends." 2nd grader

"I learned that there are ways to stop bullying and harassment." 6th grader

"I feel sad when I am pushed down and made fun of." 1st grader

"I feel sad when I have no one to play with." 1st grader

"I am the only Muslim in my grade and when I first came here I felt alone and different, but then I became friends with (him). I hope people can understand that my religion isn't bad." 5th grader

"Don't judge a book by its cover, read the pages!" 5th grader

"Do you ever feel alone, like you are the only person in the world who has LD?" 4th grader

"It is good we are all different as it would be boring if we were the same." 3rd grader

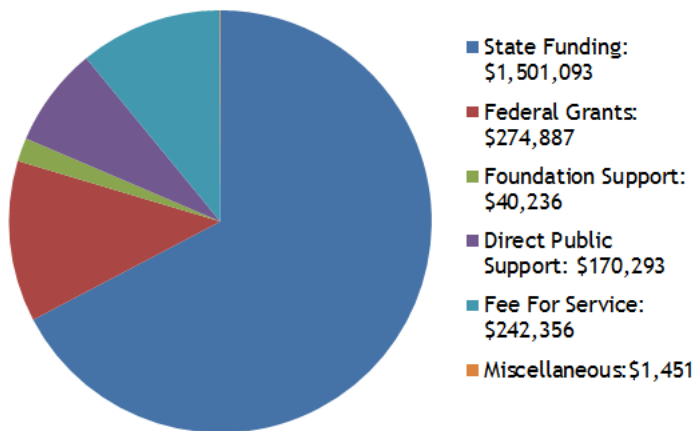
This partnership has been a real "win-win" for both Puppets in Education and Vermont Family Network as we are working to help *all* children reach their full potential while investing in children's strengths, gifts, and abilities.

"I feel more ready to go forward into the world. I'm thinking about entering politics at the local level..."

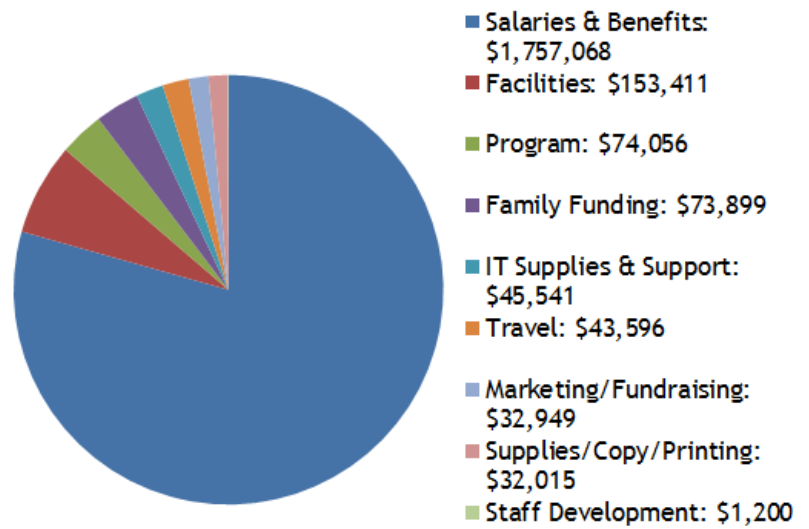
- Leadership Series Graduate



FY18 Revenue—\$2,230,316



FY18 Expenses—\$2,213,735



"I Love VFN! The support, information, kindness, resources, — EVERYTHING!"

SUPPORTING 14,350 FAMILIES IN VERMONT AND BEYOND!

JULY 1, 2017 TO JUNE 30, 2018

