



Vermont  
Family  
Network

# ANNUAL REPORT 2022

Giving a Strong  
Start

Lifting Family  
Voices

Advancing  
Inclusive  
Communities



Empowering and supporting all Vermont children, youth and families, especially those with disabilities or special health needs.

Dear friends and families of VFN,

We are excited to highlight the wonderful work Vermont Family Network has been doing over the last fiscal year, July 1, 2021-June 30, 2022. It was another year of navigating COVID-19 and the unpredictability that it brings. After a brief period during the summer of 2021 when COVID felt like it might be under control we had made plans to bring people back to the office for part of their work week and to return to in-person staff meetings starting in September. Puppets in Education was also preparing for in-person shows at schools when the Delta variant arrived on our doorstep, and we once again found ourselves adapting and adjusting. In-person meetings and shows were put on hold and majority of our staff returned to fully remote work.

Although the Delta and then Omicron variants created uncertainty, the work at VFN continued in full capacity. As referenced in our report, our highly qualified family support staff reached almost 1200 families and 185 professionals providing family-to-family support, information, and trainings. In April we hosted our first in-person conference since the start of the pandemic. It was wonderful to be able to connect face to face with the families and professionals we serve.

Puppets in Education performed both virtual and in-person shows this past year and reached over 7,000 individuals in Vermont, Massachusetts, and New York. This year marked their 40<sup>th</sup> year of providing powerful puppetry to schools, helping children explore their worries and feelings brought on by the pandemic. Through our Family Support and Puppets in Education programs, we were fully able to give families a strong start, lift family voices, and advance inclusive communities.

As we move through the fifth year of our sustainable funding strategy, we now offer three options for our “Meet the Family” tour, which provide participants the ability to learn more about the important mission driven work we do at VFN and the impact it has on families through storytelling. The three tour options are virtual, in person at our office in Williston, or we can travel to people’s homes or places of work. Since we began our sustainable funding strategy, over 800 people have heard these powerful stories and learned more about the critical work we do to support children, youth and families. We look forward to bringing in more people throughout Vermont to participate in a tour and gain knowledge and awareness of all that Vermont Family Network has to offer.

The past year brought about a big change at Vermont Family Network. Our incredible President/CEO Pam McCarthy made the decision to step down from her position after providing strong, steady, leadership for the past eleven years. When Pam joined VFN in January of 2011, VFN was still relatively new, only two years out from the merger of Parent to Parent and Vermont Parent Information Center. Throughout her time at VFN, Pam helped to form new partnerships and strengthen old ones. With her leadership, we grew into a strong cohesive organization that is continually sought out by families and schools as well as stakeholders and decision makers who need input regarding families who have children with disabilities or special health needs. We are so thankful to have had Pam’s leadership for eleven years and are looking forward to what she will do next to support kids and families in Vermont!

We hope you enjoy our Annual Report and learning more about the important work we did this past year. If you have any feedback, thoughts, or new ideas don’t hesitate to reach out. We can be reached at: Interim Executive Director Sarah Wallace-Brodeur (802)876-5315 or [sarah.wallace-brodeur@vtfn.org](mailto:sarah.wallace-brodeur@vtfn.org), Ellen Zeman (802) 651-5912, and Craig Giles at (802)249-3456.

All our best,



*Sarah Wallace-Brodeur*



*Ellen Zeman*



*Craig Giles*



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# Family Story - The Barrows Family

In 2009, Melissa and Steve Barrows of Westford, VT were living a typical life of parents about to become empty nesters. Their son was 17 years old and they had started planning for their future which included the possibility of leaving Vermont and heading south. But as Melissa will tell you, she was raised to believe that “family takes care of family,” so all their plans changed when their niece reached out for support in raising her 18-month-old twins, Lilly, and Dominick.

The twins were separated from their mother, living with their father, and both parents struggled with addiction. Their mother wanted what was best for them, and initially suggested a shared-custody agreement for a period of 6 months to help her get back on her feet. Melissa walked into the courtroom one winter morning expecting to take on partial responsibility for a short period of time. She left the courtroom that day with full and immediate custody through DCF as the only option to keep the twins out of another foster home. She remembers calling her husband from outside, stunned. “Um, Steve, I think I just bit off more than we can chew,” she reminisces. She describes that despite a terrible snowstorm she and her husband were required to drive immediately to Alburgh where the twins were living with their father to take custody. “Fortunately, everything they owned fit into my car” she tells us.

Over the next two years Melissa and Steve would have to navigate DCF and the adoption system, one that prioritizes family reunification, even when it does not seem best for the kids. For a period, the twins did return to live with their biological mother at the Lund Center, but soon DCF called asking her to take temporary custody once again. It was then that Melissa and Steve insisted it was time to seek the termination of parental rights and move forward with permanency. About a month after adopting the twins they got a call. It happened to be Steve’s birthday and while Melissa expected the call from their niece to be a happy one, when she saw the look on her husband’s face, she knew something was wrong. “I thought someone had died, his face was so upset,” but after hanging up the phone she learned that their niece was pregnant again.

Knowing the unfortunate situation that her niece continually found herself in, Melissa immediately let DCF know about the pregnancy. She remembers being frustrated and angry because her concerns were not heard, and despite the loss of the twins, DCF moved forward with allowing her niece to parent the baby girl named Emmie. One week before Emmie’s 2<sup>nd</sup> birthday they got the call and once again showed how important family is to them by taking custody and ultimately adopting. “I was very clear with DCF though that now we would have to work to un-do a lot of damage that did not have to happen. She should have been with us from the beginning.”

While raising 3 small children is never easy, raising children with complex trauma, PTSD, ADHD, and various levels of anxiety is uniquely challenging. She describes the intense “fight, flight, or freeze” mentality that the kids experienced, how challenging their behaviors were, how they would not listen, and how intensely argumentative they could be (she jokes that one especially would make an excellent politician one day).

In the case of Emmie, the school felt she could not be handled in the classroom, and despite the 1:1 staff member that Melissa had fought for, Emmie spent almost 90% of her time out of the classroom, for a period in a repurposed janitorial closet. That was when a staff member from the Howard Center told her she should try calling Vermont Family Network. “I had never heard of VFN and had no idea what they did, but I figured I had nothing to lose,” and that day she reached out via the Helpline. Lori Gilbar, one of VFN’s Family Support Consultants was on the other end of the line, a line that would connect Melissa and Steve to the help, community, and support that they had longed for. “All of a sudden, I felt heard, that my feelings were valid. I knew I was right, but no one was listening to me!”

Melissa and Lori started working together to help Melissa understand her rights, the complexities of systems, and how to navigate the situation in a way that made the school staff her team members, not adversaries. “The first time Lori came to a meeting all their language changed. It was like they were treating me and my kids with more respect just because she was there, and they came more prepared to meetings. Lori never spoke for me, but would ask clarifying questions when needed, and coached me outside of the meetings to know what to expect, what to ask, and what my rights were. She helped me be the best advocate for my children and stood by me step by step.”





**“I believe that if you know your story it is easier to accept it, you become a victor, not a victim.”**

The best option the school could give was an alternative program, and after months of research, selecting a good fit and beginning the transition work, Melissa got a call the night before Emmie was to begin saying that they would no longer take her. Fortunately for Melissa there was a second school available that Lori agreed would be a good option for Emmie. Through a lot of hard work and many meetings she is moving towards transitioning back to her public school.

“Without Lori and VFN I can’t imagine where we would be. Likely I would have ended up homeschooling, and I imagine that my relationship with the school would have gotten much worse.” Melissa was at her wits end and did not know where else to turn. The only ideas she had involved going higher, to the Superintendent or even the School Board, but she was not convinced that would help. Why would they listen to her when the school staff had not?

Now instead of fighting with the school system, Melissa and Steve can focus on showing their children consistency and love, instill in them the value of family and good communication, and show them that they will always be there to support them when needed.

Melissa and Steve have never hidden from their kids the details of their stories, and they have a steady relationship with their biological mom. Currently in recovery and doing well, she is married and has other children in her care. Melissa is clear “it’s not always been roses,” but now she speaks with her niece almost every day, and the kids visit her regularly. “I believe that if you know your story it is easier to accept it, you become a victor, not a victim.”

# Giving a Strong Start

In the fall of 2021, VFN partnered with the University of Vermont's Children's Hospital, Vermont Developmental Disabilities Council, Center on Disability and Community Inclusion, Vermont Department of Health, the American Academy of Pediatrics VT Chapter and families to create Confident Care for Kids (CCFK).

CCFK provided training to medical and support staff to increase awareness of proven strategies to help ease anxiety and stress of receiving the COVID-19 vaccine for patients with high sensory needs or disabilities, and really for all children. This included understanding the “trouble spots” for families during office visits, how to create a more sensory-friendly office environment, considerations for smoother vaccination procedures, and how to use calming, sensory supportive tools with patients. Following the training, participating practices received free sensory tools and tip sheets for supporting their patients. Practices could create a space and an experience that was inclusive for everyone receiving a COVID-19 vaccination.

For parents and caregivers, CCFK provided a free downloadable *Vax Visit Prep Kit* that included a social story, videos and gaming resources about getting vaccinations and tips on how to support their child when getting a vaccination. These resources helped families get a strong start as we know many families have spent years trying to make a vaccine visit a better experience for their child.

CCFK is modeled after UVM Children's Hospital's Empower program: a strengths-based model supporting an effective, individualized, patient and family-centered approach to providing safe and successful healthcare experiences for children and youth with developmental disabilities, delays, and/or sensory sensitivities. The tenets of the Empower program have been expanded and tailored to support community-based pediatric and family medicine practices.

Currently, 52 practices and 1 pharmacy throughout Vermont have received the training and sensory supportive tools.

Here is a quote from a nurse at Richmond Pediatrics about their experience with a family and CCFK.

“Thank you all for the work you are doing to give us the resources to help make children’s experiences better. We are a small practice and don’t have the funds to be able to routinely provide these types of tools which makes it that much more appreciated!”

For more information about CCFK, go to <https://www.vermontfamilynetwork.org/ccfk/> Informational material on CCFK has been translated into 5 different languages: French, Nepali, Somali, Spanish and Swahili.





*"Thank you so much again for donating all of these incredible tools for our sensory-informed vaccine clinic yesterday. Some of the kids who were able to access vaccination were actually on their 3rd or 4th attempt, with previous experiences being incredibly traumatic."*

-Primary Care Physician



*"Our biggest win happened today with a six-year-old who was petrified of coming to the doctors. He told me as soon as I walked in the room that "I hate doctors and want to get out of here as quickly as possible". After doing his initial screening I gave him one of the pull tubes and his eyes just lit up. As he played with it I could see his whole demeanor change. After his visit (which he played with it throughout) his mom came back to tell us that when he got in the car he said, "I usually hate going there but today is the best day ever!"*

- Pediatric Nurse

# Family Support Program

VFN's Family Support Program is founded on the work of its highly experienced and dedicated employees who are all parents of children with disabilities or special health needs who have "walked the walk." Several staff members have been committed to this work for over 15 years and continue daily to support families who are navigating the complexities of health, special education, and disability resources. Navigating 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 Vermont's Family-to-Family Health Information Center/Family Voices state affiliate and the Parent Training and Information Center, our staff is skilled and ready to support Vermont families in this process. In addition to federal grants, our state grant funding from the Vermont Department of Health, Children with Special Health Needs provides families with individualized support and assistance through our helpline, opportunities for leadership, and training experiences through workshops, webinars, and our annual conference.

VFN family support consultants provide individual technical assistance to parents and professionals through our statewide telephone helpline and in-person/virtual meeting support. We provide parents with information on early intervention, special education and related services, general education, and postsecondary transition, rights around IDEA and Section 504, communication strategies, options for resolving disagreements, understanding their children's disabilities, and school reform initiatives. We seek to provide tools to families to accomplish these outcomes: 1) increased capacity in making decisions regarding their children's education, development, and transition to adult life; 2) increased communication skills with professionals on behalf of their children; 3) improved ability in obtaining appropriate services for their children; 4) increased effectiveness in resolving disagreements with schools; and 5) increased family and youth participation in their postsecondary transition planning.

VFN hosted nationally acclaimed speaker, Pete Wright, Esq. from Wrightslaw to present on "Special Education Law and Advocacy," during the VFN 2022 annual conference which was held in-person. This full-day training program was designed to meet the needs of parents, educators, health care providers, advocates, and attorneys.

Our partnership with the HireAbility, formally Vocational Rehabilitation, provided focus on supporting young people with disabilities or special health needs. With partners, VFN helped foster leadership and self-advocacy skills and guided the Youth Advocacy Council through various activities, including managing the annual Youth Summit, a conference for youth planned by youth with disabilities. 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, social media, our website, and printed materials. Families of children with special health needs and disabilities often return to us several times throughout their children's lives for support. From receiving of a new diagnosis to transition to adulthood, 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 disabilities or special health needs, our staff are uniquely qualified to achieve this goal.

"We are new to Vermont (and schools in the USA) and it's been very informative to learn about our rights here, and what the schools are mandated to do, and how to work within the system." - Parent

23 trainings,  
workshops,  
and webinars





## Top 5 Family Concerns:

1. IEPs/IFSP (CIS One Plan)
2. Parent/Professional Communication
3. Parents' Rights
4. Special Education Process
5. Behavior

**Family Support Fund**-Respite and Medically Necessary Supplemental funding helps income-eligible families access respite and helps with unmet medical needs such as equipment, medications, travel, and therapies.

**Tom Sustic Fund**-In memory of Tom Sustic, this funding is for families with children and teenagers with cancer who are involved with hospice care, long term hospitalization, and/or transplantation. Funds are available for families who are referred from the Pediatric Oncology Social Workers at VT Children's Hospital at UVMHC and Children's Hospital at Dartmouth Hitchcock Medical Center.

**Flutie Fund**-from the generosity of the Doug Flutie Foundation, families who have children birth to age 22 with an autism diagnosis may request this funding for needed equipment, respite, camp, therapies, emergency child-care, or to attend a conference related to their child's diagnosis.

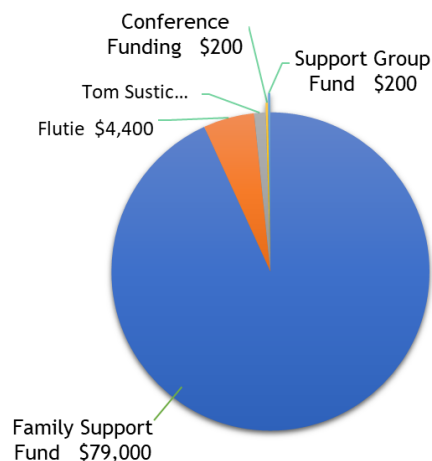
**Parent Conference** -Funding to help parents with the cost of a conference related to their child's diagnosis. Covered expenses include registration, lodging, and travel costs.

**Support Group Fund**-Parents interested in starting a new support group may apply for a \$200 grant to help offset the costs of startup. We will support you in the startup, and will help spread the word.



40 trained  
Support  
Parents  
provided  
37 families  
with Parent  
Matches

"You are always  
on point with  
immediate  
responses to  
my needs."  
- Parent



## FY 22 Funding



# Lifting Family Voice

**Families View - Overcoming the odds: How one parent teamed up with other families to call on the state to take action and won.**

Karen is well known among VFN families as the Co-Director of Family Support. Still, many may not know about her concern for her son, who needs 24/7 care. Like many families, she fears he will not have stable, safe, quality housing options when she can no longer care for him.

“The housing issue is very personal to me, and the pandemic brought everything to light. It showed us how fragile the system is. My son is just so vulnerable, and it’s scary,” Karen said.

But Karen wasn’t entirely convinced that more advocacy would make a difference. She had witnessed families stepping forward in the past with no results.

“For years, families have said that we need more housing options. Shared living may be fine for some families, but it is not the answer for many of us. But I didn’t think anything would really change,” Karen said.

In the fall of 2021, several families began sharing on VFN’s Facebook page examples of housing for adults with disabilities that exist in other states. Families were wondering, “Why can’t we have this here?”

The Facebook posts launched a lot of engagement, and when VFN reached out to family members who posted comments, it didn’t take long for people to act. Families decided to meet, and they quickly got organized.

Despite her hesitation, Karen joined in as a parent advocate because she understood that without families taking action, nothing would change.

The result: H. 720, an act relating to the system of care for individuals with developmental disabilities, was passed. Most importantly, H. 720 provides resources to establish pilot planning grants to develop housing and residential services programs for individuals with developmental disabilities. It also includes support for a Residential Program Developer position.

Why were families successful in this session?

Karen shared that there was more strategy and focus than in past years. Highlighting key steps the families took together, she cited that the group had taken the time to develop a clear goal. After that, they held monthly meetings to stay organized and created committees responsible for certain parts of the work. Karen stated that having the committees made the job more manageable. And they worked together to deliver a consistent message to legislators and the press.

Another essential need was the strong partnerships with disability organizations like VFN and the Vermont Developmental Disability Council. Each advised and supported connections with decision-makers.

The families essentially developed and implemented a campaign strategy to win.







“My experience was more than I expected. I am incredibly grateful for VFN staff. I feel valued, supported, and confident in these supports.”

-Parent





# Puppets in Education



*“Thank you so much for coming! All of our students were talking about the amazing puppet show throughout the day. I have two kiddos of my own who attend school here, and at dinner last night they were giving my husband and I the full review! Thanks again! “*  
—Teacher

We love hearing that the messages our puppets give excite children enough to share the information and skills they learned with adults at home! This is exactly how the conversation continues - either through the enthusiasm of the learners who disclose about their day, or the inquisitive questions of parents and guardians asking how it all went.

In the 2021-2022 school year, Puppets in Education (PiE) continued with virtual programming until the Omicron surge passed, then returned to in-person presentations this past spring for the first time in two full years! Between the two formats, we reached 7,094 individuals (6,501 kids and 593 adults) through 133 presentations at 35 locations in Vermont, New York and Massachusetts.

Our programs focused on addressing Anxiety and Kindness/Bully Prevention. Both helped to foster conversations about wellness, mental health, and how to find support for oneself and to offer it to others. Through the connections the children made with the puppets they were able to share their specific concerns. They also found validation and strategies to help build resilience and overcome struggles. And the programs did this in their typically creative and fun approach: Through puppets with younger kids and interactive workshops with older students in grades 5-8.

## **The worry we heard about included:**

- *I think people my age worry about their families.*
- *Some kids worry about the work being too hard for them.*
- *I think kids worry about getting bullied or being made fun of.*
- *When someone leaves the room, that something bad would happen to us.*
- *I stress about my friends and whether they like me.*
- *When you hear yelling from your parents fighting.*



**But... children have, or learned, skills that can help them in these times of stress:**

- *In my head I say, “I can do this!” and “Everything is going to be okay.”*
- *I have a special worry today. I am on a new gymnastics team. But I can take deep breaths.*
- *I do math to feel better.*
- *I usually talk to my mom and dad when I feel worried.*
- *When I’m worried, I like going to the ocean.*
- *My worry is black, with hands coming out that are going to shoot me. It never gets small. I can do belly breaths to feel better.*
- *When you are worried, you can go into your Momma’s bed.*
- *When I first got my glasses, I was worried people would pick on me. I told myself, “It will be ok.”*
- *I do the starfish breath when I’m worried. You trace your fingers as you breathe in and out.*
- *I go outside in my back yard and lay down, and I roll in the snow and watch as the snowflakes fall. Snow is my favorite.*

These presentations would not have been possible without the kindness and support of Upstate New York Chevrolet Dealers’ lead sponsorship, as well as many others: Vermont Department of Mental Health, National Life Group Foundation and Vermont Children’s Trust Foundation, Bokan Automotive in St. Albans, Vermont NEA, Advantage Learning Center, and many generous donors.

We are proud of the positive experiences we offer to help support learning communities and augment the mental health work that schools are already doing. PiE also provides resources for students and follow-up discussion questions for school and home.

There has always been a critical need for our programs, and we have found that now, our programming is even more imperative. We recently opened a donation letter that said, *“I was heartbroken to hear the news of that school shooting in Texas. I have read a lot about teenage shooters, and the common thread they all seem to experience is that they were all teased about some difference they had. I am very grateful that VFN and PiE continue to create a world where ALL children are valued and respected. Thank you! In a small way you are helping to prevent the kind of tragedy Texas (and other schools) have experienced.”*

As we start our **41st YEAR (!)**, Puppets in Education will continue to actively engage with students and will continue helping children create their own strategies to decrease worry—ones they can use both in this time of stress and for the rest of their lives.

We end this program report with a quote:

*Thank you! The kids were still talking about the show yesterday!  
We appreciate the great lengths all of you went to in offering  
this wonderful program to our community. It offered  
the perfect message for our students and staff.*



# Advancing Inclusive Communities

A few big things happened in 1982: The Commodore 64 was released, prompting *Time* magazine to name “the computer” as Person of the Year; the Vietnam Veterans Memorial was dedicated; and Prince William was born. *E.T.* was the big movie of the year and Michael Jackson released *Thriller*. But the biggest thing of all to come out of 1982 was Vermont Family Network’s Puppets in Education.

Puppets in Education (or PiE, as it is often known) started out with just six puppets, four of whom had disabilities, and had combined funding from the State Department of Education and the Parent/Teacher Organization. They focused on Burlington-area schools and presented skits related to disability awareness and abuse prevention.

Slowly, word of PiE’s work grew, as did their stable of puppet characters, skit topics, and staff and volunteers. Prior to the pandemic, PiE had twenty different skits on offer, including: Autism/Friend-2-Friend, Blindness, Bullying Prevention, Cultural Diversity, Cerebral Palsy, Healthy Habits, Friendship, and Feelings. We have nearly as many puppets as skits, each with their own unique personality and representing the diversity kids see in their schools and communities.



Over the decades, PiE has grown from a Burlington-focused program to one that provides programming across the state of Vermont, upstate New York, and even into Connecticut and Massachusetts. In 1989, PiE reached 875 children and adults with its abuse prevention program. During the 2021-22 school year, we reached over 7,000 people across two states, and had over 130 performances (virtual and in-person). Over PiE’s 40 years, we’ve had the honor and pleasure of reaching 300,000 people with nearly 5,000 performances.

There have been so many memorable experiences over the years. Here are just a few:

I will never forget the time a student asked (after the depression skit) if you ever feel like you have a hole here (pointing to her heart). ... Also, when they asked Mark [puppet] if he had an atomic wheelchair—not just battery powered but something more space connected. —Mary K. Dennison, former Vermont Family Network Board Member and PiE Director

When I talk with people about PiE, I often share the story about one time when you and the puppets presented the show about sexual abuse prevention. You had the children draw an outline of their bodies on a large piece of paper, then you asked them to color it in. I remember once you said one young girl colored her groin area in red and that was a red flag that something at home may not be right and you contacted the authorities. They did find she was being sexually abused. That story always struck me as how powerful the PiE shows are. —Rich Graham



While working in the public schools several years ago, I had a second-grade student on the autism spectrum. I decided to contact Puppets in Education to have them present the “Friend 2 Friend” program to all the students at that grade level. During the presentation, students were fully engaged and enjoyed holding the puppets and making them “talk.” The question and answer period reinforced common language and strategies to use, and allowed students to share their own experiences. The post survey showed children remember several strategies for interacting with others in a more empathetic, supportive way, and teachers were also more aware of their communications. The family of the student on the spectrum was especially grateful to have had an opportunity for their child’s difference to be acknowledged in a positive way. —Carol Irish

I am proud to have been a part of an organization dedicated solely to the education and protection of children across all aspects of their lives. ... We’re no longer using puppets as another means to educate a special issue; the issue is children and what they need. ... We have established ourselves as a major partner in the care of Vermont children because we continually ask what children need and how we can better serve them. —Josiah Pearsall

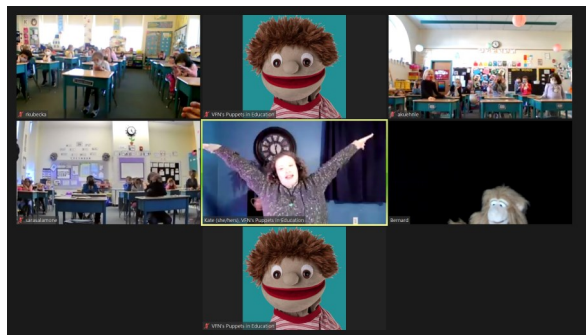
I am a Vermonter. When I was in elementary school, Puppets in Education came to my school and performed. I remember they did a skit about disabilities. I think that what you do is great. Your lessons are easy to understand and they are very memorable. The way that you work with the puppets makes it really easy for kids and adults to feel okay about opening up. I hope that if I end up staying in Vermont that I will be able to have you come to the school that I work at. Your stuff is wonderful. —2009 UVM Education Student

I just want to say that I really enjoyed your puppet show. I think that the people who watched your show will really think twice before they hurt someone on the outside or on the inside. A part that I really liked was Claire telling Eddie how to explain to Jason that bullying was not funny or ok. And that is when I think people really started to listen. One more part that I really liked was when some kids went up and just sort of improvised. Thank you for coming to our school. —From the girl in the green sweatshirt (kid letter, 2005)

Over the last 40 years, we’ve not only had the honor of teaching children about empathy, respect, and inclusion, we’ve been able to reach the *children* of children who saw some of our earliest shows. And even though we’re taking the time to honor the past and all the hard work that’s been done, we’re also looking to the future. We’re constantly asking ourselves, “what do the kids need right now?” and then striving to provide it.

In this quick-paced, technology-driven, politically divided world we live in, it seems almost strange that something so simple as a puppet can still have a tangible impact on the lives of our children. And yet, we’ve seen firsthand that Puppets in Education remains a relevant and necessary program in the lives of our youngest community members.

Here’s to 40 years, and here’s to 40 more.



“We take a big breath and we like to sing a song to ourselves to change our mood!”  
—PreK, White River School

“Why do kids want to be mean? I think they are sad inside.”

—2<sup>nd</sup> Grade,  
Benton Hall  
Academy, NY

# Advocacy and Action

Lifting family voices to advocate for systems change is essential, but it's not easy.

First, advocacy can be intimidating. Many folks are uncertain who their legislators are, how a bill is made, and so on. The fundamentals alone can stop a potential advocate before they even begin.

Then there's the issue of time. For any family, time is scarce. But for our families, additional hours dedicated to attending provider meetings, managing care, and engaging in self-advocacy make it nearly impossible to do anything beyond family/work life.

And above all else, sharing our stories to create change is one of the most vulnerable actions we can take. It can be painful, exposing us - and our children - to feelings of judgment and isolation.

For all these reasons, VFN is committed to making advocacy easier for families. We have the vision to work with and alongside families to advocate for change. But first, we needed to hear from families to understand how we could best support them.

In 2021-2022, we implemented an internal and external engagement plan to research and prepare for the launch of a new advocacy program. We dedicated resources to:

1. Explore what families need to support their advocacy.
2. Develop a plan for a comprehensive advocacy program that outlines goals, objectives, measures of success, and timeline.
3. Create resonating messages and other communications about the new advocacy program for its launch in the first quarter of FY 2023.

However, as the engagement project was underway, families were in real-time need of advocacy support. Although we hadn't quite launched our new program, we had to deliver for families, so we implemented priority elements. You could say we were building the plane as we were flying it, and here's the action we took:

- Provided one-on-one and small group support to families during the legislative session, including assistance in writing testimony, letters to the editor, scheduling meetings with legislators, and advising on strategy.
- Created and delivered Advocacy 101 training for families and VFN staff.
- Launched a new advocacy newsletter, "The Source for Change: Connect. Learn. Act." to offer advocacy tips, timely news, and information and training opportunities.
- Increased social media engagement on policy and legislative issues.

It was a strong year. We laid a solid foundation to build an advocacy program for years to come while ensuring the families were successful during the legislative session.





## Families Sharing Stories

On June 3rd, VFN hosted a powerful storytelling event, *Voices of Our Network*, in association with The Moth Producer Susanne Schmidt and Main Street Landing. Eight amazing family members shared their story about raising a child with a special health care needs. Storytellers worked with Jenny Norris and Sue Schmidt, to craft their story and then learned how to present in front of a live audience. Two diverse stories were pre-recorded and shared at the event. Each story was powerful and carried the listener through a range of emotions. Over 100 people joined in-person or via live-stream. One participant wrote: *"It was deeply nourishing to be part of this group-to connect with amazing humans, witness the story development, and be changed by the stories you shared. From the pre-show outside meditation to the spontaneous sing-a-long with "All You Need is Love"... and all the laughs, tears, and authenticity in-between, I was surprised by the level of connection with all of you. Surprised and grateful."*



## Giving Back Through Talent

Have you ever found yourself wondering “where does VFN get all these great family photos?” For the past several years we have been lucky enough to have Angie King- photographer, teacher, artist, mom and all-around superwoman partner with us to bring gorgeous photography to the families we support. Angie’s generosity of her time and talent, mixed with her unique ability to engage children of all abilities is really what makes these photos shine.

*Angie tells us “Each year, I hear from families who have never had family photos done. I am certain there are so many reasons for this, but my goal is to create spaces and opportunities to allow all people, regardless of physical, financial, and emotional needs, the chance to capture their family in authentically beautiful ways. My work with VFN has allowed me to meet clients who come back year after year for pictures, and these days are filled with memories that last a lifetime.”*

Families take part in 30-minute sessions for a nominal fee, and in exchange allow VFN to use the images in publications, social media, the website and more. We have been so pleased to learn that families who could never afford photos or felt that their children would not be understood by a photographer have walked away with a wonderful experience and images that they will treasure.



## Focusing Our Efforts

VFN’s Diversity, Equity and Inclusion workgroup has met monthly to look at how accessible our services and supports are to all people, especially those that do not speak English. VFN worked with Shana Haines, UVM researcher, Associate Professor, Department of Education in an effort to gain more information from families, professionals and self-advocates to ask about their experiences with VFN. Through a survey and focus groups, we heard firsthand how to increase the accessibility of needed services and materials for families or children with disabilities from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. Connecting with diverse families in this way has been such a gift, and we are excited about expanding our services and continuing these connections in the future.



# Sibshops

10 events throughout the year, both in-person and virtual, engaged 39 siblings of children with special needs and 18 family members.

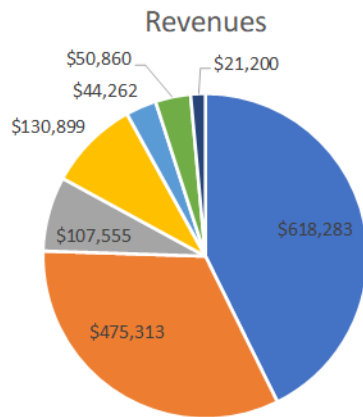
*"I've been attending Sibshops for about 8 years. Every year it seems like it gets even more awesome." - Sibling*

## Updates on Staff

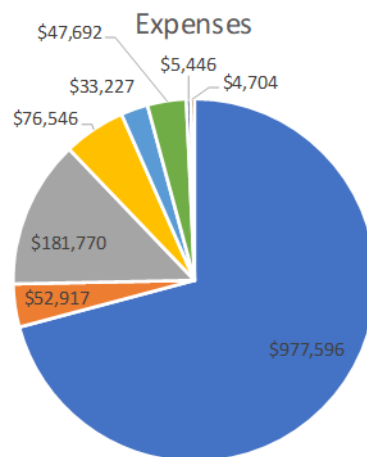
In February we said goodbye to our President/CEO, Pam McCarthy, after 11 years at VFN. Sarah Wallace-Brodeur has been acting Interim Executive Director while the search for a new Executive Director is conducted by the board. We also said goodbye to Family Support Consultant, Molly Lawney, in November.

VFN welcomed Marie Fetterhoff, Diane Bugbee, and Patricia McDonald to our Family Support team. They each bring a wealth of knowledge, expertise, and personal experience to VFN helping us to support even more families throughout Vermont.





<b>FY 22 Revenues:</b>	<b>\$1,448,371</b>
Federal Grants:	\$618,283
State Funding:	\$475,313
Direct Public Support:	\$107,555
Fee for Service:	\$130,899
Foundation Support:	\$44,262
Pledges, Outstanding:	\$50,860
Local Government Grants:	\$21,200



<b>FY 22 Expenses:</b>	<b>\$1,379,896</b>
Salaries and Benefits:	\$977,596
Facilities:	\$52,917
Family Funding & Programs:	\$181,770
Marketing/Fundraising:	\$76,546
IT Supplies & Support:	\$33,227
Supplies/Copy/Printing:	\$47,692
Staff Development:	\$5,446
Travel:	\$4,704



“I feel confident that when I am struggling with a school issue (especially) I can call VFN.”

-Parent



## Family Support Fund

The Vermont Family Network Family Support Fund is made possible through a grant from the Vermont Department of Health, Children with Special Health Needs Program (CSHN). New this year is the addition of respite funding to families. Eligible families may access a total of \$1200 per grant year for both respite and medically necessary funds combined. Initial eligible respite requests are funded up to \$600 per family. If the request is for medically necessary items, families may request up to \$1200. In total for the fiscal year, \$78,302.91 was disbursed from the Family Support Fund. There was a total of 173 applications for both medically necessary items and respite. The Financial/Technical Review Team met weekly which included Joanne Wechsler and Mindy Deibler from Vermont Family Network and Betty Morse and a medical social worker from CSHN.

### Family Faculty

Our Family Faculty programs provide opportunities for families and self-advocates to share their perspectives on family centered care to students at the UVM College of Medicine, UVM College of Nursing and Health Sciences and UVM's Education program. 89 families and one self-advocate shared their stories and experiences about family-centered care to 881 graduate and undergraduate medical, nursing, health sciences and education students. This year VFN hosted:

- 8 Panels
- 7 Medical Education Project rotations
- 2 Professional Communication Reflection classes

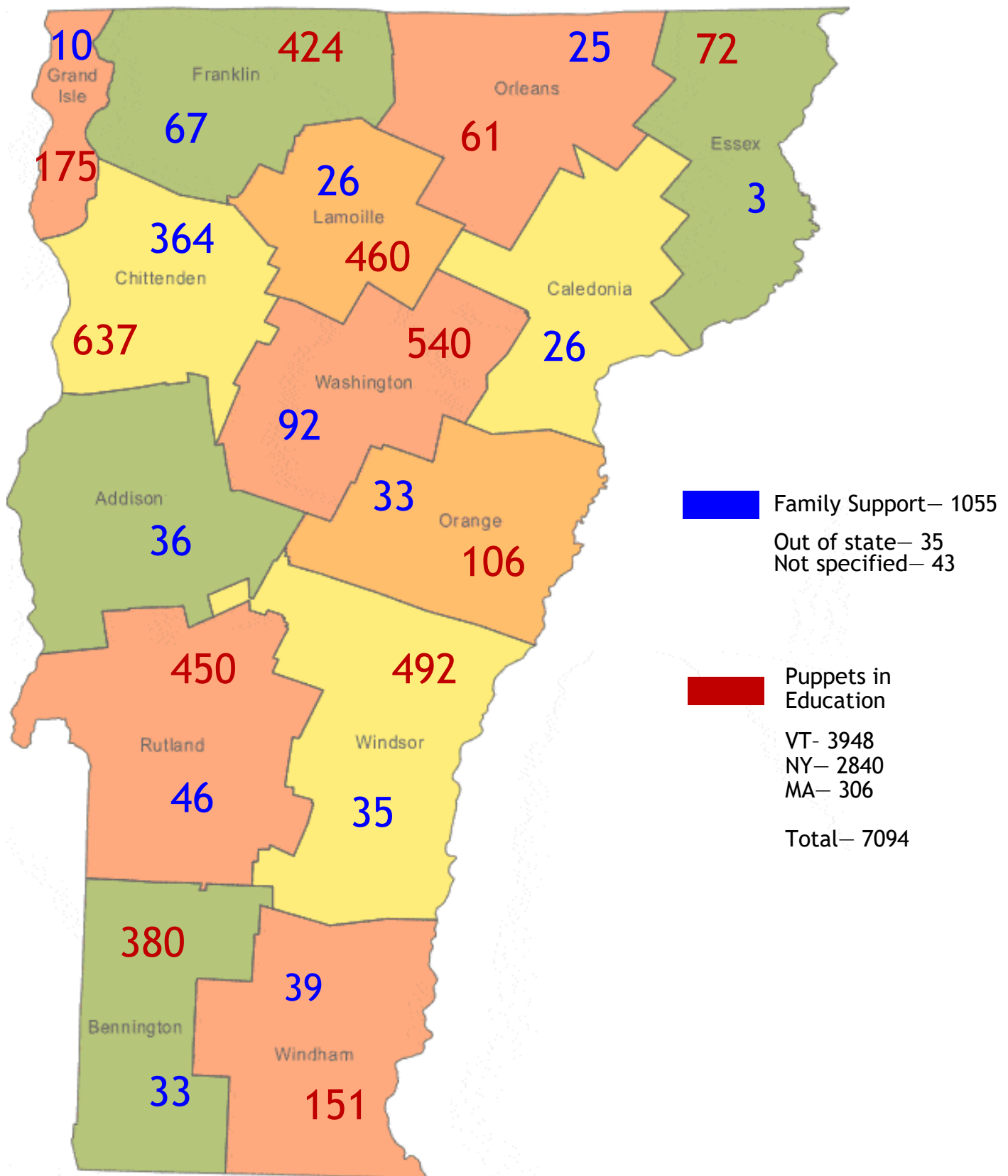
Each family story shared is a gift and a unique opportunity to see care through the eyes of family raising a child or youth with disability or special health care need. We thank and appreciate everyone in our Family Faculty program.

One student wrote *"The opportunity to meet with a family through the Vermont Family Network was an amazing chance to engage with a family in an informal environment and gain insight about their experience."*



# SUPPORTING FAMILIES AND COMMUNITIES IN VERMONT AND BEYOND!

JULY 1, 2021 TO JUNE 30, 2022



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