

VERMONT FAMILY NETWORK ANNUAL REPORT FY23



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**Denotes parent of child with disabilities or special health needs.*



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WE ARE VERMONT

Vermont is a small, rural state with gorgeous scenic views, precious natural resources, and a deep-rooted investment in communities. However, the Green Mountain State is not without challenges concerning disabilities and special health care needs. Vermont has over 15,000 children and youth identified eligible for special education. **At 17.36%, Vermont has the highest percentage of children in the Nation with Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) identified with emotional disturbance, which includes children with anxiety, depression, and externalizing behaviors.**

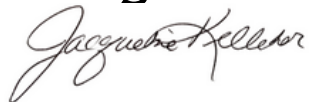
The average percentage of children and youth with IEPs for each county in Vermont is over 20%, **higher than the national average of 15%**; Vermont counties are predominantly in the 20% range with the Grand Isle county reporting over 30%. In School Year 2020-21, 4.92% of all school aged Vermont children ages 5-21 served under Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), Part B, received services in a separate school, **which is significantly higher than the national average of 2.64%**, as reported by the Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP). According to Disability Statistics at Cornell University, in 2019, **Vermont had the second lowest employment rate for youth with disabilities 16-20 years**; however, Vermont also had the second largest gap in employment between people with and without disabilities. With respect to special or complex health needs, close to 21,000 families have children receiving treatment for longstanding medical conditions.

Vermont Family Network has been and will continue to be part of the solution, committed to all Vermont families, regardless of their zip code.

Greetings!

Inclusion is a culture that embraces diversity, allowing individuals to feel comfortable and confident in their schools, workplaces, and communities. It fosters an environment where people can learn, work, and interact in a way that suits them and feel like active and valued members of society. Inclusive practices benefit those with disabilities and special health needs and ultimately improve outcomes for all. In November 2022, I had the privilege of joining Vermont Family Network, a nonprofit organization that is dedicated to advancing inclusion in the state of Vermont. VFN is a valuable statewide resource for families who are seeking guidance and support after receiving a clinical diagnosis or eligibility determination for special education/504 services. When parents are faced with this news, they often feel overwhelmed with stress, fear, and anxiety and struggle to understand how to best support their child and take the next steps. My team and I are committed to ensuring that no Vermont family feels alone on this journey. But there is still much work to be done in supporting families of children with disabilities and special health needs and creating a world where every child can thrive. We appreciate any financial contributions, no matter the size, to help us continue our important work and empower parents to be educated, engaged, and effective advocates for their children. Thank you for your support and partnership, and we look forward to what the future holds.

With gratitude,



**Inclusion ensures
that everyone feels
valued and,
importantly, adds
value.**

At Vermont Family Network, our mission is to empower and support all Vermont children, youth, and families, especially those with disabilities or special health needs. We do this by *Giving a Strong Start, Lifting Family Voices, and Advancing Inclusive Communities.*



Giving a Strong Start

“I don't know anywhere else to turn for factual, direct, clear and concise, nonjudgmental information and guidance around Vermont IEP process. It is inherently stressful to traumatic and highly individual for families, so the perspective and feedback from outside the process was wonderful. I was surprised how supportive and empathetic every interaction was with VFN staff. That support directly helped us AND our Lead Education Agency (LEA) in the process.” -- Parent

Lifting Family Voices

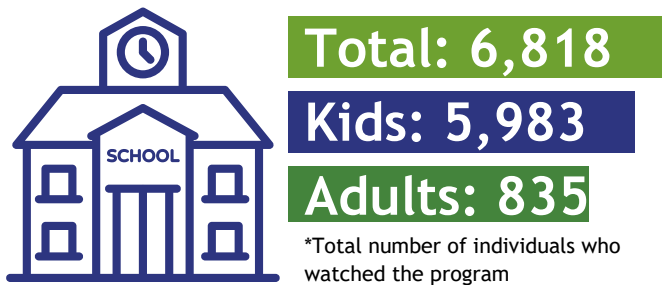
“Every one of my interactions with your consultants have been outstanding! All the information I received was extremely helpful in advocating for my child. I would recommend your organization to anyone needing assistance with navigating through health/school challenges for their children.” -- Parent

Advancing Inclusive Communities

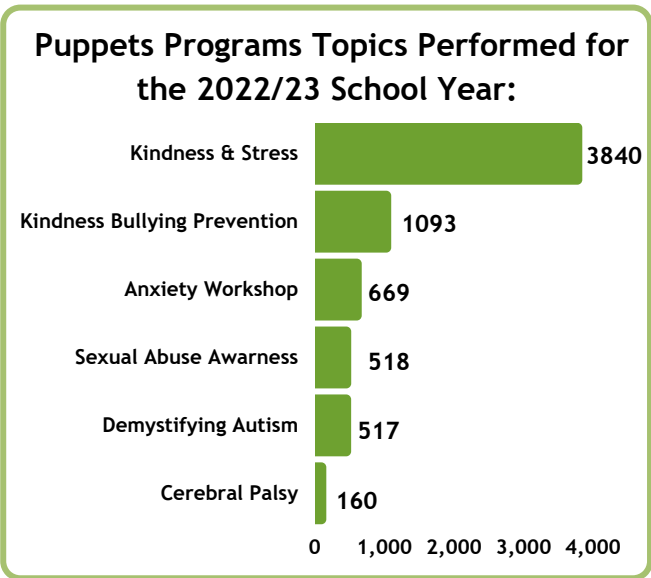
“Thank you for bringing us the puppet show. I learned to not bully and to use the toolbox for helping me feel calm. I think the puppet show was good and my favorite part was the end when I went up to see the puppet. I talked about being bullied and how the bully blames me sometimes. From now on I will talk to a grownup.”—Grade 4 student, Village School of North Bennington

PUPPETS IN EDUCATION

Our Puppets in Education has been dedicated to serving the students of Vermont for over 40 years. Despite changes in the puppets we use and the growth of the students we serve, the need for our shows remains prevalent. We're proud to report that we were able to reach a total of 6,818 individuals at 35 sites last year, and even with over 30 schools on our waitlist for the upcoming school year, we remain committed to delivering our shows to as many students as possible.



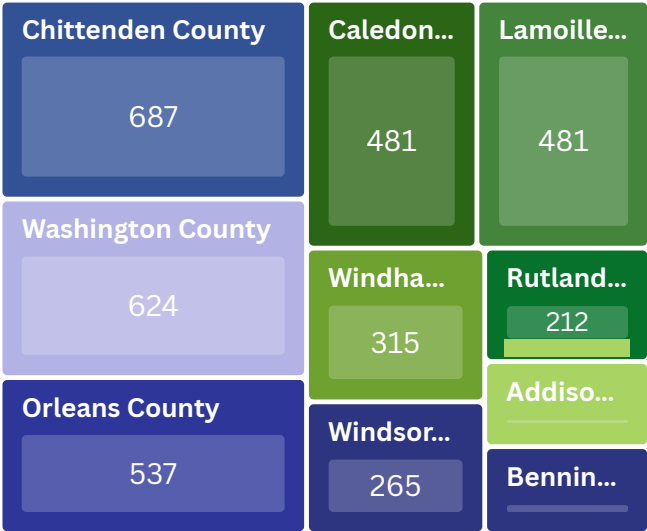
The school year of 22/23 was a monumental year as we reintroduced puppetry to classrooms after the COVID-19 pandemic. During the planning process, our team observed a rise in requests for topics regarding kindness, empathy, bullying, and inclusion and recognized the need to update our bullying prevention material. Hence, we launched our new program called 'Kindness & Stress' to address these concerns.



*The total number of shows performed in the 2022/2023 School Year categorized by Show Topic.

“I’m going to make an Anxiety Toolbox and put my puppet sticker on it.” - 4th grade student

Vermont children who experienced a Puppets in Education Show in the 2022/2023 School Year :



*The total number of children who experienced a PIE show in the 22/23 School year categorized by county.



PUPPETS IN EDUCATION



“I will remember how the puppets demonstrated it is okay to talk about hard things and that you have the right to privacy and consent. ‘Anytime to tell is the right time to tell’ is a powerful statement.” —Afterschool Director

In the spring of 2023, we pivoted our “Kindness” program to “Bullying Prevention,” tackling the topic head-on. We focused on what to do if someone is being mean on purpose, helped kids identify safe adults they can talk to, and discussed the difference between tattling and reporting. We talked about what to say if someone is being mean, and how to be an Upstander for others.

With Bullying Prevention still on the minds of schools and families across the state, Puppets in Education is committed to expanding our Bullying Prevention program, rewriting the script to reflect current curriculum standards, and developing a new bullying prevention workshop for grades 5-8. The well-being of Vermont’s children remains our top priority.

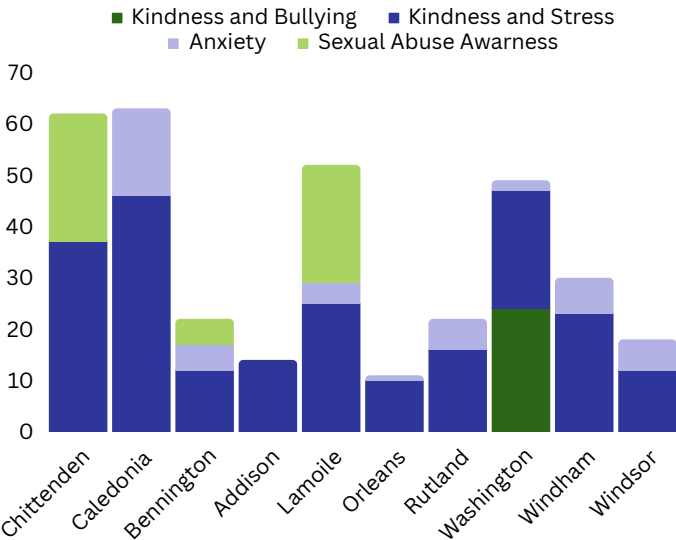
Most Requested Topics from School-Based Professionals in the 2022/2023 School Year:



*The total number of unique topic requests from school-based professionals attending a Puppets in Education Program.

Through our programming, we continue to offer a safe space for children to open up about their fears, emotions, and hopes. Over the course of the school year, we learned through our post-performance program evaluations that issues around bullying, interpersonal relationships, and conflict management were pervading Vermont classrooms.

Topics Performed based in the 2022/2023 School Year by County



*The total number of Puppets in Education show topics performed in the 2022/2023 School year based on County Region.

FAMILY SUPPORT PROGRAM

VFN's Family Support Program offers technical assistance to parents and professionals through our statewide helpline and in-person/virtual meetings. Our experienced team, all parents of children with disabilities and/or special health needs, provides valuable assistance in navigating complex systems, understanding laws, and collaborating with professionals. We provide information on early intervention, special education, communication strategies, and more. Our goal is to empower families with knowledge and experiences to move forward with confidence.



Every one of my interactions with your consultants has been outstanding! All the information I received was extremely helpful in advocating for my child.

Our Family Support Fund assists income-eligible families of children (up to age 21) with disabilities and/or special health needs who have self-identified respite needs or unmet, out-of-pocket medical expenses (including equipment, medications, travel, and therapies). Our Vermont Respite Support Program also provides respite funding for parents/caregivers with a child (up to the age of 19) with chronic physical, medical, mental, or developmental condition; or who are experiencing difficult circumstances that are destabilizing (such as economic hardships, and/or DCF Family Services involvement). This fund also supports respite opportunities for parents/caregivers with a disability who have a child (up to the age of 19) living at home, or are in kinship care, or families through adoption. The Tom Sustic Fund provides funding for families with children and teenagers with cancer who are involved with hospice care, long-term hospitalization, and/or transplantation.

Top 10 family concerns received through our help line in '22/'23

1. Individualized Education Plan (IEP)
2. Parents' Rights
3. ACT 264 Coordinated Service Plan
4. Respite
5. 1 to 1 Parent Matches
6. Special Education Evaluation
7. Parent/Professional Communication
8. Funding
9. Parent Leadership
10. Behavior

The Flutie Fund offers funding for families who have children from birth to age 22 with an Autism diagnosis. This funding can be used for equipment, respite, camp, therapies, emergency childcare, or to attend a conference related to their child's diagnosis. Additionally, we offer funding for parents to attend a conference related to their child's diagnosis, including registration, lodging, and travel expenses. Lastly, the Support Group Fund offers up to \$200 grants to parents interested in starting a new support group. We are here to support you in the startup process and help spread the word.



1,086 preservice university students heard family-centered stories from 90 caregivers and self-advocates



A total of **\$89,736** has been given out in funding to families.



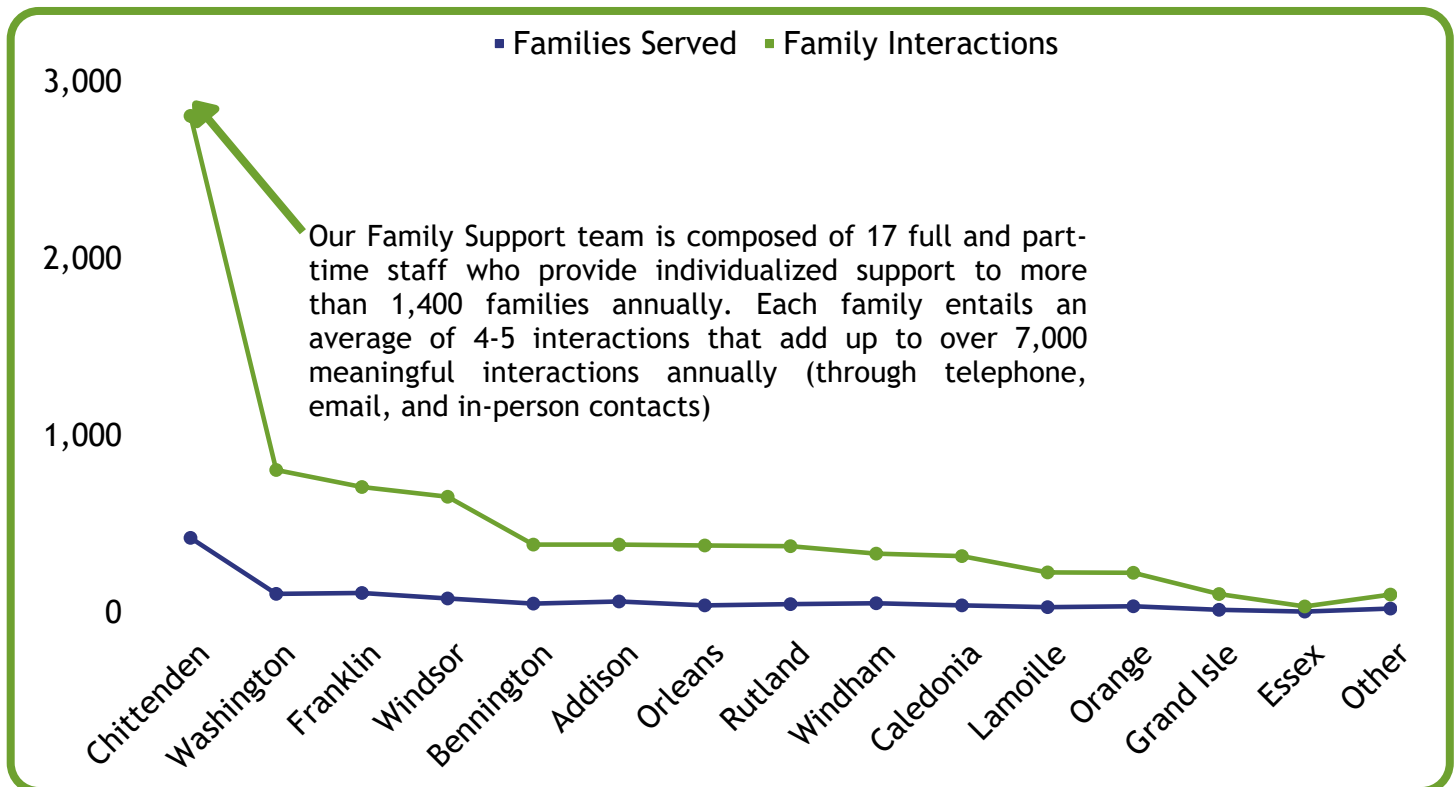
19 Caregivers and Self-Advocates graduated from the VT Leadership Series.



12 new Support Parents trained.
32 new family support matches.
10 Sibshops.

FAMILY SUPPORT PROGRAM

As the Federally mandated Parent Training and Information Center for Vermont, our Family Support program supports families from all around the state. VFN is the federally designated Family-to-Family Health Information Center; the Vermont Chapter of Family Voices; and the Vermont Chapter of Parent to Parent USA. Besides our flagship helpline program, VFN disseminates information and resources through monthly workshops, e-newsletters, the VFN annual conference, fact sheets, publications, social media, and website. We partner with state and local entities to elevate the voices of families to help facilitate system change.



*The total number of unique family cases based on county region in comparison to the number of unique interactions with families accessing our support program. The 'other' category is for family interactions that are out of state interactions.

Vermont Family Network is a vital support to families! Their knowledge, shared understanding, website resources and webinar/training options are a lifeline for families seeking information and community.

Here at VFN, we often have families come back to us for assistance multiple times during their children's lives. Whether it's receiving a new diagnosis or transitioning to adulthood, we are always prepared to help in any way possible.



NEXT STEPS

These five priorities will guide us as we take future steps to ensure VFN's continuous growth and improvement, while sustaining the excellent support and services we have become known for.

Sustainability

01

VFN will strengthen & maintain its organizational effectiveness & vitality by securing sustainable, mission-aligned funding streams.

Capacity Building

02

VFN will be the lead organization in Vermont providing and/or connecting diverse families (including parents, children, youth) and professionals to timely, relevant information, education, and support.

Fostering Change

03

VFN will strengthen the impact of the voices of families of children with disabilities and special healthcare needs and equity in systems through representing the interests of diverse families in policymaking & preparing families to be effective change agents.

Board Engagement

04

With our volunteer nonprofit Board of Directors, VFN ensures that each board member becomes personally invested and engaged in the mission of the organization. Board members will be our best ambassadors, advocates, strategists, and all-around supporters.

Quality Assurance and Improvement Measures/Metrics

05

VFN will use quality *assurance* strategies to prevent, detect, and correct problems in the quality of services. We will use quality improvement strategies to improve equality through continuous inquiry and modification of services. VFN will elevate its system of internal evaluation with improved measures of and metrics for initiatives, services, and products.

The Bourdeau Family



When Kele and Chris Bourdeau's son, Phineas was diagnosed with Autism at 23 months old their initial reaction was to take it in stride. Kele was more struck by the fact that the diagnosing team expected her to be upset when in actuality she knew that Phineas was who he was supposed to be, and they would just need to learn the best ways to support him. As recommended, they enrolled him in Early Intervention Services, but upon aging out did not initially turn to Vermont Family Network for further support.

Admittedly, Kele was perhaps overly optimistic about how the school system in their city, or even society in general, would react to Phineas. It became clear to her that the older Phineas got, that expectations went up and compassion from others went down. She and Chris were disheartened to see the vast difference in how Phineas was treated versus their other son, Zachary, who did not have a diagnosis. Additionally, Phineas was diagnosed with dyslexia, OCD, anxiety, and dysgraphia, only adding to his growing challenges in school.

Phineas' 3rd and 4th grade years were extremely difficult and caused Kele and Chris to seek-out resources. Phineas' needs were not being met causing regular and intense meltdowns and episodes of eloping. Communication with the school was not effective. The I-team joined and helped hold staff and teachers accountable rather than put the whole onus on the child, which felt like a novelty. It took three meetings with school staff to have dyslexia added to his Phineas' IEP, after Kele and Chris paid out of pocket for a Stern Center assessment. Kele and Chris had had enough and changed schools within their city. Unfortunately, even though the new school was drastically better, they found once again the support to be lacking and Phineas continued to struggle. This is when they turned to VFN again.

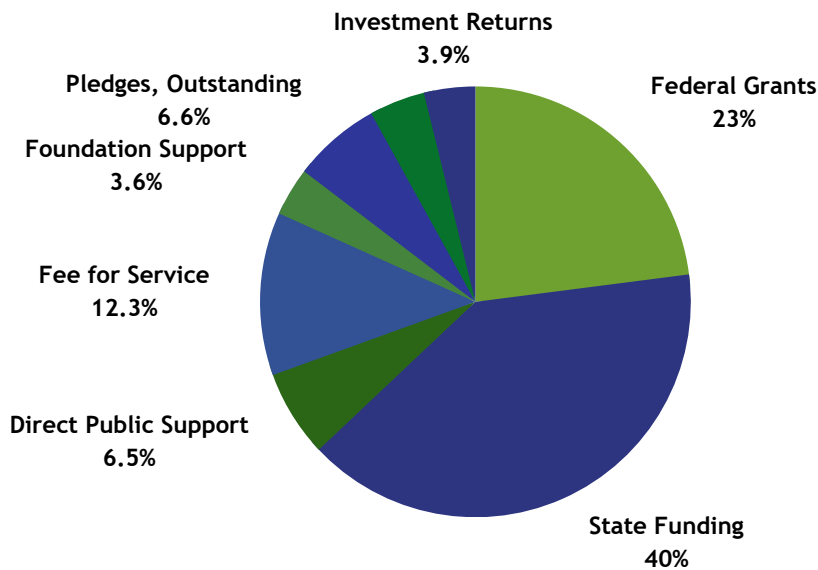
Immediately Kele found the support she needed. Support from other parents that understood, that had knowledge to share. Previously Kele often felt she had no control which was exacerbated by her lack of knowledge and options. VFN's Family Support staff helped Kele sort through the "chaos", broke down the processes, reviewed their options and empowered her with knowledge. For the first time they saw their situation as manageable and she felt confident with the language. She met other parents who had been through similar things. She learned from them and felt comfort knowing she was not alone. VFN helped them grow as parents and they are now committed to helping other parents. Kele loves the grassroots nature of parent-to-parent support, she says VFN gave her a village which is the definition of what family means to her. She describes how beneficial connecting with other parents is to her and Chris, and how it "fills their buckets". She appreciates that resources and opportunities are offered, not pushed; that every family is in their own driver's seat and can engage in the ways they want to. Kele has since become a major part of the VFN mission, supporting other families through the Parent Match Program, getting involved in state councils, and working with future medical professionals through the Family Faculty Program. She says this involvement has helped her to be a better advocate and develop her skills in speaking, which ultimately is positioning her to make a difference on many levels.

Kele appreciates that VFN looks at her family as unique and that not a 'one size-fits-all' approach. She said, "There was never shame or judgment, they always found a way to meet us where we were at any given moment."

Ultimately Kele and Chris made the decision to pull Phineas from public school and homeschool him. Remote learning showed them how much more accessible education was for Phineas when he was in an environment where he felt safe. Eventually they decided to move their family to a new district, and after some transition time, including homeschooling still, Phineas is flourishing. In his new district, with the advocacy of his parents, he has the accommodations he needs, including allowing him to take only a few in-person classes at a time. He is gaining confidence and plans on taking more in-person classes this year. He participated in the 8th grade field trip, has made a close friend, and was invited to walk with the graduating 8th grade class. Kele and Chris are so proud of his strides and know that as a family, with the support of VFN and others like them, the future is only going to be brighter.

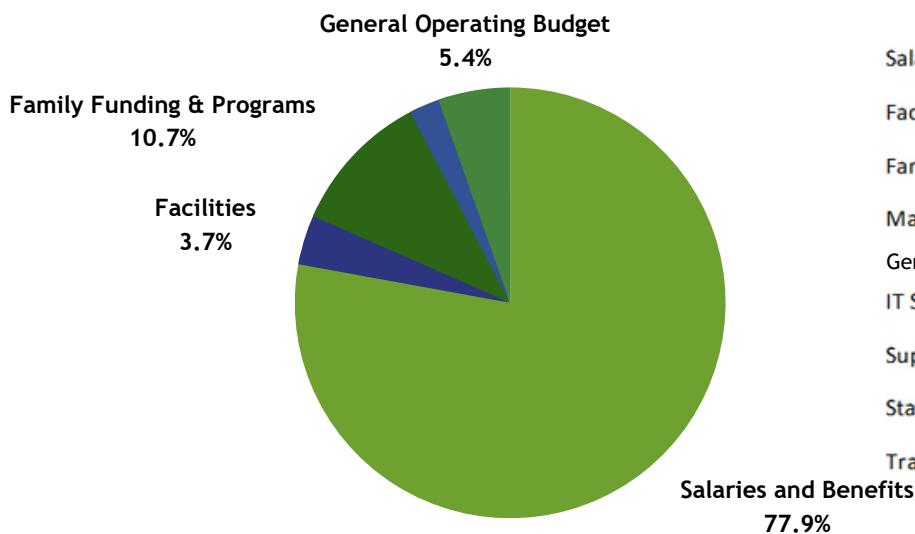
Fiscal Year 23

FY 23 Revenue Breakdown



FY 23 Revenues:	\$1,391,166
Federal Grants:	\$319,464
State Funding:	\$556,348
Direct Public Support:	\$90,729
Fee for Service:	\$170,505
Foundation Support:	\$50,483
Pledges, Outstanding:	\$91,795
Local Government Grants:	\$58,254
Investment Returns	\$53,588

FY 23 Expenses Breakdown



FY 23 Expenses:	\$1,462,586
Salaries and Benefits:	\$1,135,872
Facilities:	\$54,508
Family Funding & Programs:	\$156,232
Marketing/Fundraising:	\$33,139
General Operations Budget:	\$78,959
IT Supplies & Support:	\$47,709
Supplies/Copy/Printing:	\$18,269
Staff Development:	\$4,306
Travel:	\$12,551

*We thank you for your continued support in
our efforts to empower Vermont Families.*



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