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Gov. Shumlin Outlines Comprehensive Enhancements to Vermont's Child Welfare System

MONTPELIER – In response to the urgent and growing demand for child protection services largely driven by the opiate addiction crisis affecting Vermont and other states, Gov. Peter Shumlin today outlined a comprehensive proposal to enhance Vermont's child welfare system. The package will add a total of 35 staff at the Department for Children and Families (DCF) and one additional Superior Court Judge, as well as provide increased resources for the Defender General and State's Attorneys Offices to support the increased child abuse and neglect caseload.

"The effect that the opiate crisis is having on Vermont's children is heartbreaking," Gov. Shumlin said. "All of those involved in the child protection system are doing heroic work but they need additional resources. We have to remember that social workers and others who are dedicating their lives to protecting Vermont's children are dealing with some of the most horrific and tragic family circumstances one can imagine. Despite their best efforts, we will not succeed 100 percent of the time. But my hope is that these additional resources will increase our chances of success going forward and bring much-needed resources to those on the frontlines."

Vermont's child welfare system is struggling with an influx of cases related to parental substance abuse. The total number of children in custody has risen sharply, from 982 in September 2013 to 1,373 in September 2015 (a 40 percent increase). Of particular significance, this increase is most substantial for young children and is primarily driven by parental opiate addiction; in a survey of cases conducted by DCF, opiate use was a factor in 80 percent of cases where a child under the age of three was brought into custody.

The package laid out by the Governor today costs roughly \$8.4 million, spread over the FY2016 and FY2017 budgets. The Governor will make a \$3.4 million funding request in FY2016 Budget Adjustment and a \$5 million in the FY2017 budget that he will present to the legislature in January.

This package includes resources to hire 28 social workers, 1 supervisor, and 6 administrative positions to recruit foster parents and support direct service functions. Currently, Vermont has an average caseload of 17.7 families per social worker. These additional staffing resources will reduce caseloads to an average of 16 families per social worker by spring 2016, with the goal of lowering caseloads to 15 families per social worker by the end of 2018.

"This proposal goes a long way to addressing DCF's urgent workforce challenges," said DCF Commissioner Ken Schatz. "Our social workers do a difficult job incredibly well under challenging circumstances. We appreciate Governor Shumlin's support in adding additional staff to improve child safety and services to families."

This proposal also expands the use of substance abuse screeners who accompany social workers on home visits, screen for substance abuse, and help connect parents with treatment. This model has been very successful in connecting families with appropriate services. It is currently in place at six of the 12 DCF district offices; this additional funding will expand the model statewide by spring of 2016.

"Every day, we see the growing impact the opiate crisis is having across our state," said Secretary of Human Services Hal Cohen. "Vermont is taking a comprehensive approach to addressing substance abuse. This proposal is an important part of that work, one that will make a significant difference in the lives of Vermont's most vulnerable, our children."

The Governor is also recommending additional resources in the FY2017 budget to add one Superior Court Judge to handle the increased abuse and neglect caseloads. This Judge would be a "floater," available to assist counties where caseloads are high.

"On behalf of the Judiciary I want to thank Governor Shumlin for the increased funding for the criminal justice system announced today, and in particular, funding for additional judicial resources to address the impact of the opiate epidemic on that system," said Judge Brian Grearson. "This initiative represents an acknowledgement not only of the pressure that the entire judicial system is under as evidenced by the increase in juvenile filings, but also a recognition that even in a time of constrained resources, the essential services of government must be funded appropriately."

Lastly, the Governor is requesting funding in the FY2017 budget to assist the Defender General's Office and States Attorney's Offices. The funds would be used to add two new public defenders, increase resources for private attorneys who represent parents or children in child protection cases under contract with Defender General's Office, and add three full time employees to the State's Attorney's Offices with the greatest need.

"We appreciate that the Governor and Administration recognize that when one part of the justice system is resourced to respond to an acute need, it has impacts on all of the players in the system. These additional resources, if deployed appropriately, will help us respond to the increased caseload that we expect from the addition of DCF social workers," said Matthew Valerio, Defender General.

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