

OVERVIEW

Children's behavioral health remains a critical issue in New Hampshire and Vermont, consistently emerging as a top priority in Upper Valley community health needs assessments. Data indicates that rates of emotional, behavioral, and developmental conditions among youth in these states surpass national averages, yet many children do not receive the treatment they need. Addressing this crisis requires policy action to strengthen mental health services, expand the workforce, and improve access to childcare. We ask policymakers to support key legislative efforts that increase funding for children's behavioral health and childcare, invest in workforce development, and integrate mental health services into primary care settings.

POLICY TAKEAWAYS

- **Expand funding for behavioral health services:** Increased state and federal funding is needed to support mental health programs targeting children and adolescents, ensuring access to timely care.
- **Strengthen the behavioral health workforce:** Investments in training, recruitment, and retention initiatives for mental health professionals are necessary to address workforce shortages
- **Improve child care accessibility and affordability:** Policies that support child care provider expansion and affordability can help reduce stress on families and promote child development.

CONCLUSION

With rising mental health concerns and ongoing child care crises, both New Hampshire and Vermont must act decisively to improve behavioral health services and early childhood care infrastructure. By investing in these areas, legislation can better support children and families, ensuring a healthier and more resilient future for the region.

FACTS AND FIGURES

NEW HAMPSHIRE

- The percentage of children aged 3 to 17 diagnosed with anxiety and depression increased from 14.4% in 2016 to 18.4% in 2020 – a 27.8% rise. ([link](#))
- Child care shortages cost the state an estimated \$177.9 million in lost wages annually, and businesses lose up to \$55.5 million due to reduced employee productivity ([link](#))
- Between 2017 and 2024, the number of licensed child care providers serving children under five declined by 13%, worsening accessibility issues for working families ([link](#))

VERMONT

- The 2023 Vermont Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS) shows that a third of Vermont high school students struggle with poor mental health ([link](#))
- Approximately 3 out of 5 of Vermont's youngest children (infants, toddlers, and preschoolers) don't have childcare needs met
- 61% don't have access to any regulated program ([link](#))



CURRENT LEGISLATIVE EFFORTS

NEW HAMPSHIRE

- **Senate Bill 128 (SB 128):** This bill aims to require private insurance companies to contribute to funding wraparound mental health services, ensuring all children receive care regardless of insurance type. It is currently under review in the legislature
- **House Bill 1473 (Did not pass):** Introduced in 2023, this bill sought to ban social-emotional learning (SEL) curricula in public schools. The proposal faced significant opposition from educators, parents, and students who emphasized SEL's role in emotional development. The bill did not pass, but its introduction reflects ongoing debates about mental health education in New Hampshire

VERMONT

- **Act 76 (Passed in 2023):** This landmark child care bill allocates \$125 million annually to expand child care access, stabilize provider funding, and increase early childhood educator wages. The law is now in the implementation phase, with funding already benefiting families and providers across the state.
- **Vermont Family and Medical Leave Insurance Plan (Launching in 2025):** This voluntary program will provide affordable paid family and medical leave, ensuring parental support during critical developmental periods. The initiative aims to ease financial and caregiving burdens for Vermont families.

METHODOLOGY

In the fall of 2024, the Public Health Council of the Upper Valley hosted a legislative event to engage policymakers and subject matter experts in discussion of key health issues in the area. Following the event, participants were asked to prioritize policy issues for further exploration. Additional conversations with experts in children's behavioral health further informed the development of this summary.

We also connected with local statewide advocacy groups and public health organizations in the Upper Valley to gain insights into community needs and current gaps in services. By synthesizing this information and consulting with stakeholders, we developed an overview of legislative efforts that could significantly impact children's well-being in New Hampshire and Vermont.

REFERENCES

"Survey Shows NH Second Nationwide for Children's Health and Well-Being, but Mental Health Challenges," The Laconia Daily Sun, August 16, 2022 ([link](#))

"New Study: Child Care Shortages May Cost New Hampshire Businesses Up to \$56 Million Annually," New Hampshire Fiscal Policy Institute, August 2, 2022 ([link](#))

Jessica Carson, "Fewer Providers, Longer Distances: New Hampshire's Child Care Landscape," Carsey School of Public Policy, December 1, 2022 ([link](#))

"Statewide Youth Survey Shows Mental Health Challenges Persist in Vermont," Vermont Department of Health, April 28, 2022 ([link](#))

"The Child Care Crisis in Vermont," Let's Grow Kids, February 2023 ([link](#))

