



VIRGINIA DEPARTMENT OF
SOCIAL SERVICES

VDSS Strengthening Families Initiative
Overview Document

Purpose

While recognizing major changes in demographic characteristics of the American family over the past several decades, the Virginia Department of Social Services (VDSS) is developing a system-wide approach to strengthening families that focuses on the following three goals:

- Reducing non-marital births;
- Connecting and reconnecting fathers with their children; and
- Encouraging the formation and maintenance of safe, stable, intact, two-parent families.

The Strengthening Families Initiative, which focuses on a holistic approach that looks beyond clients as individuals and focuses on strengthening the family unit as a whole, requires a fundamental shift regarding how systems work with families. Through the alignment of resources, policies, and processes and the implementation of specific strategies, VDSS will impact the well-being of the families it serves by strengthening them at every point of client contact.

Background

Over the past fifty years, social and cultural influences have led to drastic changes in the structure of the American family. For example, people are waiting longer to get married, more people are cohabitating, and marriage is no longer considered to be a prerequisite for parenthood. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, 41% of U.S. children are born to single mothers, while 1 out of every 3 children are raised in families without their biological fathers. In Virginia, the number of children living in single-parent families has increased from 12% in 1960 to approximately 36% today.

Individuals, children, and families thrive and succeed in a number of different family structures; however, research indicates that children who grow up in intact, two-parent families do better on a wide range of outcomes than children who grow up in single-parent families. Nationally, children who are raised by single parents are at greater risk of dropping out of school, teenage pregnancy, juvenile delinquency, living in poverty, and experiencing health, emotional, and behavioral problems than children growing up in two-parent families. While growing up in a single-parent home is not the only indicator of these outcomes, family structure has a direct impact on the overall well-being of children.

In Virginia, the recent economic landscape has exacerbated these societal shifts, while the demand for core public services continues to increase. In 2010, the official poverty rate for the nation was 15.1%, an increase of 2.6 million people since 2009. Many of Virginia's citizens are experiencing serious financial hardships for the first time, while others, already known to our human service organizations, are forced to rely heavily on government support. In Virginia, poverty rates are higher for children, less educated adults, female-headed households, and families with no working adults. Virginia families that are headed by women have a 31% chance of experiencing poverty, compared to only 4% of married families with children.

While a variety of different family structures have emerged over the years, giving rise to a broad and ever-evolving definition of what constitutes a family, VDSS is thinking differently about how programs and services are delivered to clients in order to support the involvement of both parents and target the entire family. As a result, VDSS is developing an approach to strengthening families at every point of client contact in order to ensure better outcomes for Virginia's citizens.

Key Strategies

Understanding changes in family structure and the basic demographic characteristics of the people we serve is critical for shaping the way social programs and policies are administered. In order to achieve system change, key strategies must be employed to align policies and practices effectively. These strategies include:

- Development of a practice model that sets forth standards of professional practice and serves as a values framework that defines relationships, guides thinking and decision-making, and structures beliefs about individuals, families and communities;
- Establishment of outcome measures, process measures, and benchmarks relevant to the work of VDSS and that align with the values outlined in the practice model;
- Evaluation and revision of policies and processes across all VDSS divisions and program areas for alignment with the goals of the initiative;
- Identification of opportunities to streamline and maximize VDSS' resources through performance-based contracting, reallocation of funds, and federal waivers;
- Development of strategic partnerships with internal and external partners to garner support and engage various stakeholders through community outreach and engagement efforts;
- Delivery of training to VDSS staff, local department of social services staff, and stakeholders;
- Dissemination of research and information to stakeholders and the general public;
- Development and implementation of a comprehensive, multimedia marketing campaign that provides ongoing outreach to stakeholder groups, the general public, targeted audiences, as well as state and local social services staff; and
- Development and implementation of best practices related to responsible fatherhood, parenting, and healthy marriage and relationships through local programming efforts.