

Abstract

The Vermont Youth Project of Rutland, a coalition led by the Rutland City Public Schools, the Rutland City Recreation Department, and The Mentor Connector, requests **\$665,280.00** to develop and implement an afterschool **Youth Voucher system for Rutland City youth ages 12-18**. Each youth would receive a \$400 voucher to ensure barrier-free access to vetted high-quality out-of-school activities to promote and instill the values of health, mental health, well-being, and leadership within our community. This project is modeled on the internationally recognized Youth Voucher system in Iceland and Finland, where youth who are actively involved in 3rd Space (out-of-school) programming, spend 88% MORE time with their parents and use drugs and alcohol 52% LESS.

The vision of the Vermont Youth Project of Rutland is ***to build a community culture that values, promotes, and supports youth on their path to independence by encouraging a sense of belonging***. The Youth Voucher Program is the next logical step in our work, to achieve community-wide barrier-free access for youth to life-changing activities. The measurable outcomes of this program will be:

- ❖ 50% increase in Rutland City youth engagement in structured out-of-school programming (enhancing protective skills),
- ❖ 10% reduction in youth high-risk behaviors across the region (enhancing self-esteem and leadership skills),
- ❖ 15% increase in youth reported family time among program youth (enhancing protective skills),
- ❖ 15% increase in available youth programming across Rutland City (stimulating Rutland's economy).

The system will provide a **\$400 voucher to be redeemed as a subsidy for participation fees in sports, arts-related activities, or other recreational activities across the region to promote physical and mental health, well-being a sense of community belonging.**

The Youth Voucher Program will serve 1,177 youth in Rutland City, at an investment of appropriations totaling \$565 per youth, to complement the \$428,780.00 of in-kind contributions of many individuals and community-based organizations involved.

It is too late to cover the well when the child has fallen into it.

- Icelandic Proverb -

Program Narrative

The Vermont Youth Project of Rutland has challenged the community programs and assets to answer key questions:

- What if Rutland had a thriving youth community?
- What if our youth wanted to stay, or return because they felt at home here?
- What if our youth were so involved with hobbies and within the community, they never felt the need to engage in high-risk behaviors?

The foundational key answer to all three questions is to build a culture of inclusion with a sense of belonging and purpose, resulting in youth feeling more connected to our community and less tendency toward high-risk behaviors.

Today's youth are looking for belonging; a place where they are valued and welcome to explore their identities, talents, and interests. True equity and inclusion can be achieved by providing equal access to **high-quality out-of-school programs** regardless of a family's financial or social circumstances. The Youth Voucher Program reduces or removes barriers to access, by providing an incentive and discount for all youth to access and engage in high-quality out-of-school programming, while serving as a catalyst to increase new and innovative opportunities (like arts, sports, drama, and music programs) to fill the gaps in programming across the region.

Background

The Vermont Youth Project of Rutland is an extensive and ever-growing collaboration of community resources and partners (60+ to date) working to create a culture that embraces and values our youth. Our passions were united four years ago, in response to data demonstrating a sense of urgency to mobilize our community and its resources and agents to address the critical needs of youth and stem the tide of suicide, hopelessness, and migration from our community.

“Our Children are not okay, and I know that’s not acceptable to any of us. In fact, many kids are really struggling,” said Governor Phil Scott during a press conference in February 2021. The fact is, Rutland City youth have been struggling for a long time. Rutland sees a **25% higher** rate in youth who were kicked out of their homes than the average Vermont town¹. Highlighted as the loneliest generation that ever lived, **1 in 6** high school youth in Rutland City made a plan for suicide last year, and **2 out of every 3** LGBTQ

¹ 2019 Vermont youth Risk Behavior Survey Report. Retrieved: https://www.healthvermont.gov/sites/default/files/documents/pdf/HSVR_YRBS_RUTLAND_2019.pdf

youth felt sad or hopeless. **1 in 10** youth didn't eat dinner with their parents in the past week (higher than VT average). The 2020 County Health Rankings estimate **1 in 6** of Rutland City's youth are living in poverty (4% higher than the national average)². In fact, students eligible for free and reduced lunches has **doubled** in the past 10 years, from 26% to 45%³, and **over** 1/3 of our youth have experienced at least one adverse childhood event⁴.

This storm of disconnection, poverty and trauma has led to a **3% increase** in Rutland City high-schoolers trying e-cigarettes last year (40.4 in 2019 to 43 in 2020), **32%** used marijuana, and almost **5%** used non prescribed opioid drugs⁵. Crisis services for Rutland City youth **increased 35%** between 2017 and 2019⁶. The pandemic has greatly exacerbated the need for services and intervention. The Vermont Youth Project Survey, found that **53%** of 11th and 12th graders in Rutland City report that the pandemic has worsened their mental health, while **55%** stated that their sense of loneliness has greatly increased⁷. Therefore, it is no surprise that only **63%** of middle school students feel safe in Rutland City (10% less than VT average), and **only half** of all students feel they matter to the Rutland Community⁸.

Primary prevention research has found that strengthening protective factors within a community is key to reversing the impact of risk factors, thus reducing rates of high risk behaviors⁹. The Youth Voucher Program enhances individual and community protective factors at the place youth *spend most of their time*. **Vermont youth spend over 70% of their awake hours outside of home and school.** However, on average, only 24% of Rutland City youth participate in structured afterschool/out-of-school programs¹⁰. For parents living in poverty, the challenge increases. **Over 60% of parents in poverty state**

² 2020 County Health Rankings. Retrieved:

<https://www.countyhealthrankings.org/app/vermont/2020/measure/factors/24/data>

³ Children Eligible for Free and Reduced Lunch. 2020 County Health Rankings. Retrieved: <https://www.countyhealthrankings.org/app/vermont/2020/measure/factors/65/data>

⁴ Vermont Insights. (2019) Adverse Childhood Experiences. Retrieved: <https://vermontinsights.org/19-aces/>

⁵ Rutland City (2020). Planet Youth Survey

⁶ Vermont Insights. (2019). Crisis Services for Youth. Retrieved: <https://vermontinsights.org/19-crisis-services/?f=search&i=3>

⁷ Rutland City (2020). Planet Youth Survey

⁸ 2019 Vermont youth Risk Behavior Survey Report. Retrieved: https://www.healthvermont.gov/sites/default/files/documents/pdf/HSVR_YRBS_RUTLAND_2019.pdf

⁹ National Institute on Drug Abuse. (2011) How are Risk and Protective Factors Addressed in Prevention Programs. Retrieved:

<https://www.drugabuse.gov/publications/preventing-drug-use-among-children-adolescents/chapter-3-applying-prevention-principles-to-drug-abuse-programs/risk-protective-factors>

¹⁰ Afterschool Alliance. (2014) How are kids spending their time afterschool?. Retrieved: <http://www.afterschoolalliance.org/AA3PM/>

that challenges, such as financial conditions and transportation, make it difficult to afford positive youth programming¹¹.

Through our annual Vermont Youth Project Survey, we have seen a 11.2% decrease in Rutland City youth's participation in afterschool programs. Rutland City 7th and 8th graders reported attending sports programming **20% lower** than the state average. This lower trend within Rutland City is also seen across arts, music, and drama classes and volunteering. Yet, Rutland City youth who spent twice a week or more in an organized out-of-school activity displayed two times lower rates of smoking, and 32% lower rates of cannabis use¹².

Without dramatic change, the cycle of poverty, addiction, and hopelessness will continue to ravage the Rutland community. Our youth will continue to use high-risk behaviors to 'manage' the trauma they are living with and disconnect from the community; most will choose to move out of Vermont when they graduate high school.

We refuse to accept this as the option of choice!

Vermont Youth Project of Rutland's Choice and Work to Date

In the summer of 2019, a group of community leaders, parents, school personnel, and youth assembled to ask *"How can we make Rutland County the best community for youth?"* Connected to Iceland's research, Rutland City became one of the pilot communities for the Vermont Youth Project, alongside Vermont Afterschool. In the first two years of the project, the Rutland Youth Coalition quickly grew to over 60 members who led an array of community projects focused on impacting the societal and environmental factors ("causes of the causes") that enhance protective factors for youth.

By working together, and by being agile and adaptive, we have embarked on a comprehensive needs assessment while also successfully implementing projects responding to voiced needs of families and youth. We have leveraged economies of scale by taking approaches both individually and collectively - pop up events to engage youth in socialization and skill building, we created and distributed 10,000 FREE youth and family activity kits to work on STEM projects together, and a youth council that solicited proposals for and funded youth-led initiatives to improve the community.

We are ready to take the next step.

¹¹ Afterschool Alliance. (2014). Afterschool in Communities of Concentrated Poverty. Retrieved at: http://www.afterschoolalliance.org/AA3PM/Concentrated_Poverty_Executive_Summary.pdf

¹² Rutland City (2020). Planet Youth Survey

Fortunately for Rutland City youth, we have a tested successful model to follow to reverse the downward trend of poverty and addiction and corresponding hopelessness. In the 1980s, Iceland was in a similar situation. Roughly 42% of their youth had been drunk in the past month and their rates of addiction and abuse were the highest in all of Europe.

“20 years ago Icelandic teenagers were the heaviest drinkers in Europe. Traditional prevention education wasn’t working, so they interviewed youth that wasn’t drinking or using drugs to see what was different. They found that:

- Their parents spent more time with them.
- They did regular after-school activities.
- They didn’t go out late at night.

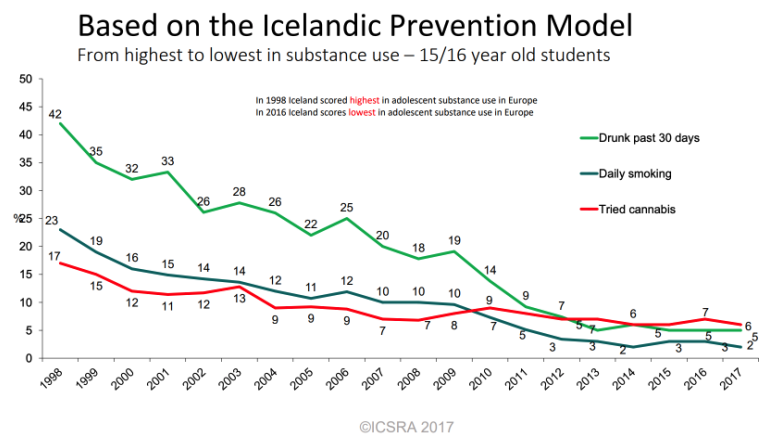
Those that DID DRINK were often coping with family stress and boredom, so Iceland offered teenagers music, dance, sports, and art clubs to help them feel part of a group, something bigger than themselves.

Iceland gave every family \$400 per year per child to spend on afterschool/out-of-school activities, and they saw results:

- By 2012 42% of 15-16 year-olds played sports 4 times per week.
- The number of hours teens reported spending with their parents **DOUBLED**.
- The number of teens who report being drunk in the last month **dropped by 90%**.
- ***This model could help millions of kids in other countries.***

- World Economic Forum -

As youth grow into adulthood, they begin making decisions independently of parents or families, choices that can set young people onto a path for success or start them down a riskier trajectory. **Data recommends that out-of-school programs sit at a crucial nexus when it comes to prevention and intervention.**



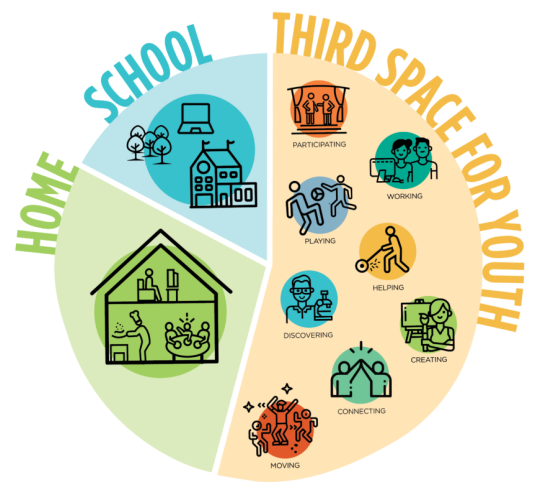
The Solution

The Youth Voucher Program is predicated on three pillars of research; 1) Evidence-based practice, 2) Using a community-based approach, and 3) Maintaining a collaboration between research, policy, and practice.

Through implementing the [Icelandic] Planet Youth survey for Rutland City youth each October, ensuring a strong local coalition of practitioners, parents, and youth, and by collaborating with Iceland research and implementation sites around the world, *Rutland City is poised to implement the Youth Voucher Pilot program to affect dramatic and measurable change for youth.*

The **Rutland City Youth Voucher Program** works to provide equitable access to a wide range of out-of-school opportunities for youth, directly impacting the likelihood of high-risk behaviors. The objectives of the voucher system are:

- **Enhance equity for all Rutland City youth.** By providing equitable access to out-of-school opportunities all youth can access the program, regardless of family financial or social circumstances.
- **Reduce high-risk behaviors.** Out-of-school programs provide youth with a sense of belonging, thus reducing high-risk behaviors that affect the community long-term.
- **Catalyst to stimulate growth in the Rutland City region.** The approach increases new and innovative offerings to fill the gaps in programming across the out-of-school economy.



Modeled after Iceland's *Leisure Card* program¹³ pioneered over a decade ago, the program provides all 12-18 year olds living in Rutland City, VT with a **\$400 voucher that can be redeemed as a subsidy for participation in sports, arts related activities, or other various recreational activities across the region.** "Since the [Leisure Card] was introduced in Iceland, participation in sports and other programs increased significantly", said Andras Nolsoe, sports consultant at the Faroese Sports Federation.

Program Overview

¹³ Iceland's Leisure Card: <https://fristund.is/>

- All youth ages 12-18 residing in Rutland City will be eligible for a \$400 “voucher” redeemable at approved out-of-school recreational programs such as dance, art, music, sports, and other affirmative programs.
- The voucher will be in use-it-or-lose-it format, to encourage youth participation and usage.
- All leisure programs will be encouraged to participate, adhering to a set of fundamental program guidelines (background checks, baseline, and ongoing training, basic prevention framework, etc).
- Transportation for youth to participating programs will be incorporated wherever available.
- Non-identifiable data will be collected through the program to monitor usage, completion, and program effectiveness.

The voucher program provides the bridge between Rutland City youth and available programs to boost access and provide youth with a wide range of opportunities available throughout the year. Once youth identify an approved program, they complete the sign-up process with their guardian, as is currently being done, indicating whether they would like to use the voucher for the specific activity they are signing up for. Programs will receive the voucher payment directly, up to \$400 per youth, toward the program fees. Direct payments DO NOT go to guardians, but they have the right to designate the specified amount in their child’s name to subsidize participation fees.

Standards: The primary condition for approved program providers is that all activities are based on educational values and prevention in a broad sense. All activities are carried out under the guidance of staff or volunteers who are qualified and trained to work with children and adolescents. The Vermont Youth Project of Rutland will work with Iceland researchers and Vermont Afterschool to design and implement a set of standards for all programs including background checks, insurance coverage, and attendance at and participation in training throughout each year (Mental Health First Aid, youth stages of development, social and emotional development, etc).

Programming: All 3rd Space/afterschool programming will run a minimum of 8-week programs based on educational values and primary prevention; enhancing practical and transferable life skills development, connecting youth to the community, and providing a place of belonging for young people. Skill-building courses such as financial literacy, podcasting/vlogging, entrepreneurship, workforce expectations, floral design, cooking and decorating, programming, and gaming, provide youth access to the development of skills that enable them to enhance their repertoire of assets. Music and arts courses such as theatre, choir, art classes, digital art, and pottery enhance expression and emotional regulation. Sports programming such as soccer, skiing, rugby, volleyball, and tennis provide

youth experience with lifetime healthy physical activity, with a physical outlet to reduce stress, and join together to work as a team. Academic programming such as STEM courses, Science clubs, and Safe Sitter programs provide educational opportunities for youth in a peer setting to enhance belonging and connection.

Although Rutland City hosts a handful of resources that currently serve youth, only 24% of target youth are accessing services. Preliminary asset mapping has identified two primary causes for the low attendance: cost and interest. To keep youth engaged in 3rd Space programming, with its host of lifelong benefits, the community must:

- Reduce the out-of-pocket cost of programming for the average youth
- Expand and enhance the types of programs within the region

This project provides the needed voucher for youth to access programming at a discounted rate and the influx of capital to incentivize an array of innovative 3rd Space programming.

Adhering to implementation research provided by Iceland Centre for Social Research and Analysis (ICSRA), the Rutland City Youth Voucher System will be designed utilizing the following steps:

Step 1: Local Capacity Identification and Building

Month 1

In 2019, Rutland City became one of the first sites of the Vermont Youth Project, a collaboration with Vermont Afterschool, to utilize primary prevention research and community capacity building to reduce high-risk behaviors among youth. Joining the Rutland Trauma Coalition, Partners for Prevention, and the Youth Coalition of Project Vision, this 60-member collaborative works to implement evidence-based, primary prevention efforts across the region to boost all youth's sense of purpose, passion, and belonging. Utilizing a community-based approach to implement evidence-based practice, we create and maintain a dialogue among researchers, policymakers, practitioners, and the community.

The Vermont Youth Project of Rutland is currently undertaking an assessment of all youth spaces and out-of-school programs across Rutland County, an existing effort funded by a local Bowse Health Trust grant. This youth asset map will be utilized to identify resources and gaps in the region. As resources are identified, coalition partners will reach out to the resource (agency or program) and invite them to be part of this process. All resources will be invited to ensure equal access.

A leadership team selected from community leaders, partners, parents, and youth is in place to establish and implement the program with fidelity throughout Rutland City. The team will determine standards for “approved” programs, marketing/branding, website design, and implementation, and data collections and evaluation criteria.

Step 2: Develop Qualifications/Standards for all Programs

Month 2-3

The Vermont Youth Project of Rutland will work alongside ICSRA, Vermont Afterschool, and coalition partners to develop a set of standards for “approved” programs. To ensure a comprehensive prevention approach and to boost professionalism across the sector, the group will work to ensure all approved activities are based on pedagogical values and prevention in the broadest sense, have qualified and trained employees, utilize the Voucher Program only for program membership or fees, and carry out all programs in a professional manner and setting.

“No longer were you JUST teaching piano, you are taught to be intentional to use teachable moments to talk about belonging and goals.” - Jon Sigfusson, ICSRA

Step 3: Develop the System to Utilize and Evaluate, Data-Driven Diagnostics

Month 2-4

The Leadership Team including The Mentor Connector, Rutland City Public Schools, and Rutland City Parks and Recreation, will collaborate to develop and implement a virtual system to 1) connect youth with an array of approved 3rd Space programming including sports, music, art, dance and other clubs, and 2) track Voucher payments between youth programs and the grant holder (Rutland City Public Schools).

Utilizing best practices learned from Iceland’s over 10 years of practice, the leadership team will monitor program involvement and completion to provide data-driven diagnostics to the team. The system will include (not limited to) a platform to monitor the residence of youth, participation in programs to avoid duplication, and participant completion of programs. Following continuous quality improvement protocol (Plan-Do-Check-Act (PDCA)), the Vermont Youth Project of Rutland will routinely review the data to enhance and alter capacity based upon the needs, gaps, and recommendations of City youth.

Step 4: Marketing and Awareness of Program to the Community

Month 3-5

In conjunction with the Leadership Team and the Vermont Youth Project of Rutland, an awareness campaign will be developed to target Rutland City youth and guardians to attract interest in the Voucher program. Utilizing traditional and nontraditional marketing avenues, the website (app style) system will be the “go-to” access point for youth or

guardians to find vetted 3rd Space activities of interest to the youth. Once obtained, guardians will be encouraged to sign up for the program using the program's sign-up process, in which they will use the "Voucher System" as a portion of (or the entirety) of the participation cost. The receiving program or organization will then verify the youth's eligibility of the Voucher System and submit the "paperwork" to Rutland City Public Schools for fee reimbursement.

A secondary marketing campaign will target programs and organizations to enhance and continuously expand the array of 3rd Space offerings for youth. This will include new and innovative types of programs developed to meet the needs of Rutland City youth

Step 5: Track Involvement and Build Capacity

Month 5-10

The website provides the "hub" of the Voucher System, enabling a data-driven approach to track outcomes of the program. Program organizations will be responsible for tracking the involvement of program youth to enable the Leadership Team to evaluate results and adjust program implementation to meet the program outcomes.

Step 6: Evaluation

Month 10-12

While the Youth Voucher Program's direct aim is to increase the number of youth accessing out-of-school support in an equitable fashion, a proven protective factor, the program also serves to reduce youth high-risk behaviors, increase family time, and stimulate Rutland's economy. Therefore, the Leadership Team will utilize a variety of data: the Youth Voucher Program data, Vermont Youth Project annual survey data, Youth Risk Behavior data, community surveys, and youth focus groups to gauge the utilization and effectiveness of the program. The ultimate outcomes the program will achieve are:

- ★ 50% increase in Rutland City youth participation in structured out-of-school programming (enhancing protective skills),
- ★ 10% reduction in youth high-risk behaviors across the region,
- ★ 15% increase in youth reported family time among program youth (enhancing protective skills), and,
- ★ 15% increase in youth programming across Rutland City (stimulate Rutland's economy).

Sustainability

The Youth Voucher Program serves as a pilot program for Rutland County (and all of Vermont, through duplication) to begin to implement Governor Scott's vision of universal

afterschool access throughout the state. 77% of Rutland County's youth have all available parents in the workforce¹⁴. For most families, there is a gap of roughly 20 hours per week needed for post-school supervision and the need increases during school vacation and summer months¹⁵. Research finds that youth involved in up to 19 hours per week of extracurricular activities are less likely to use drugs, skip classes, or engage in early sexual activity. In fact, for every dollar (\$1) spent on quality afterschool programming, the community's ***Return on Impact is over \$2.18 in long-term savings*** from reduced criminal activity and substance abuse treatment, and increased work productivity¹⁶.

Current Rutland City out-of-school programming is provided through Rutland City Public School supported by a Nita M. Lowey 21st Century Community Learning Center grant, Rutland City Parks and Recreation, The Mentor Connector, Boys and Girls Club, 4H, Rutland Free Library, and Wonderfeet Kids Museum. The collaboration of community programs and coordinated funding support the investment of the community, the schools, and the government in our city, on which we can continue to expand and broaden the scope of available and accessible programs and activities for youth to achieve even greater success and improved outcomes.

This pilot program serves as a catalyst to address the youth high-risk behaviors, trauma, and poverty that continue to plague Vermont. **Every dollar invested in the Youth Voucher System remains in our local infrastructure**, will strengthen our economy, while also providing a much needed boost to the arts, culture, and music infrastructure in the region. With your support, this pilot program will provide the much needed start-up capital to coordinate efforts and provide effective outcomes. We will continue conversations with funders, the municipality, and statewide partnerships to sustain this effort beyond this pilot program.

¹⁴ Kids Count Data Center. (2013-2017). Retrieved: <http://datacenter.kidscount.org>.

¹⁵ America after 3PM: Afterschool programs in demand. Afterschool Alliance, 2014.

¹⁶ Vermont Afterschool. (ND) Why 9-26?. Retrieved: <http://www.vermontafterschool.org/vt9to26/who-we-are/>