

# Investing early in our future

## CHAMPLAIN VALLEY HEAD START PROVIDES SUPPORT FOR CHILDREN AND FAMILIES, NURTURING A BETTER COMMUNITY

**C**hamplain Valley Head Start (CVHS) is a local nonprofit with lofty goals. The ultimate aim is to create a better society. But how do we get there? Sandra Graves, the director of CVHS, thinks it's achievable by providing well-rounded assistance for both children and their parents.

"What sets us apart from other early education programs is the wraparound comprehensive services for the family," Sandra said.

### ADDRESSING MORE THAN EDUCATION

CVHS was founded in 1965. It's one of seven Head Start programs in Vermont. Champlain Valley Head Start's early childhood education and family services are part of the Champlain Valley Office of Economic Opportunity (CVOEO), a human services agency. That term, "human services" is truly all-encompassing when it comes to CVHS. Typically, people think of Head Start programs as a sort of pre-K enrichment, but CVHS goes far beyond that.

Christine Gilliam, the associate director at CVHS, said it's all about accessibility.

"It's not just about the education of the children," Christine explained. She



believes that since parents are their kids' first teachers, it's important to remove obstacles that could affect both the children and parents' well-being. That's why CVHS helps with would-be obstacles like food insecurity, homelessness, childcare, and more.

"If we can help support families to overcome those obstacles in their lives, then they can be more present for their child, who would then be more present in school and just have a path of furthering their own education and well-being as they age."

CVHS offers things like prenatal care for mothers, care for infants and toddlers, support for children with special needs (as well as their families), mental health and wellness counseling, assistance with food insecurity, health services, assistance with housing challenges, and more. Right now, there are 312 children and family members across four counties who can participate in CVHS.

"Having that early intervention for the whole family is key," Christine said.

### WITNESSING THE IMPACT OF THEIR WORK

The Head Start program is for pregnant people and kids aged 0-5, where children gather in a classroom setting.

Enjoying sensory play at the water table in the St. Albans Early Learning Center Early Head Start classroom.



CVHS also offers a home visiting option for one-on-one visits, a family connections program combining group time with caregivers and children that also includes home visits, and group socialization outings. Recently, those outings have included things like visiting apple orchards, going pumpkin picking, and visiting the ECHO, Leahy Center for Lake Champlain

Even the way they offer food resources goes above and beyond. Through their innovative collaboration with CVOEO's Feeding Chittenden, families can enroll in the food access program that lets them individualize their free food choices to meet their individual needs at home. Families are

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**COURTYARD**  
BY MARRIOTT

A photograph showing the interior of a hotel room. The room features a bed with a dark headboard, a striped bench at the foot of the bed, and a blue armchair. Large windows offer a view of the outdoors. The lighting is warm and modern.

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A photograph of a dining table set for oysters. Several oysters are served on a bed of crushed ice. In the background, there is a bottle of wine labeled 'LES TROIS TOITS' and a wine glass. The setting is dark and elegant.

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given the option to pick up at a CVHS site or opt for home delivery.

Christine said early childhood education is the foundation of a child’s entire life. That education encourages children to be curious and persistent—to be lifelong learners. They teach parents to be leaders and advocates, speaking up for what they and their children need.

They’re already able to see the success of their work: Khari Garvin, the director of the Office of Head Start, went through a Head Start program himself. Parents have come back to CVHS to tell Sandra and Christine about how their work on the CVHS Policy Council led them to involvement with other boards and community leadership roles.

“It’s just really affirming,” Sandra said.

### WORKING FOR CHILDREN AND FAMILIES

Sandra didn’t always see herself working in this field. She went to college for interior design and then switched her major to early education and psychology, first working as a teacher and director in the private sector then joining CVHS as a supervisor in 2004. Now, she said she loves the organization and the dynamic between the people involved in it.

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Above: CVHS “Tooth Tutor” visiting the King Street Center Early Head Start classroom.

Right: Outside time at the King Street Center.  
Bottom right: The CVHS Family Connections Program in Burlington.



“It’s just such a phenomenal group of people all in the same mission of caring for children and families and our community and making the world a better place.”

Christine, in contrast, said she knew in the sixth grade that she wanted to work with children and families.

“It’s just such a fulfilling place to be. Every day is different, but just the impact that we all can have on one another in our community is what means the most to me,” Christine said.

If you’re interested in getting involved, you’re in luck: CVHS is hiring. Like everywhere else across the nation, they’re struggling with a shortage of teachers. They’re offering hiring bonuses for teachers, and they’re hoping to fill positions quickly so they can offer more services to families.

## Champlain Valley Head Start

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