



SUBMISSION FORM

All submission forms must include the following information. Separate submission forms must be turned in for each eligible program. **Deadline: July 1, 2023.** Please include this submission form with the electronic entry. If you do not receive an email confirming receipt of your entry within 3 days of submission, please contact [Gage Harter](#).

PROGRAM INFORMATION


County: Roanoke
Program Title: STARS Program
Program Category: Health and Human Services

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SIGNATURE OF COUNTY ADMINISTRATOR OR DEPUTY/ASSISTANT COUNTY ADMINISTRATOR

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Roanoke County-City of Salem Department of Social Services (RCDSS) operates the STARS (Specialized Treatment And Resource Support) program, a locally-run, hybrid public-private specialized foster home model. The program uses local Children’s Services Act (CSA) funding to provide best practice training, support, retention and program development for locally-approved foster families in Roanoke County and the City of Salem. STARS offers exceptional clinical-level training, licensed professional support and counseling, advanced crisis support, and ongoing professional support staff. Services are provided at a lower cost than comparable private Treatment Foster Care (TFC) agencies or group homes, with similar or better outcomes, while maintaining 100% local oversight.

STARS professionals include: two professional trainers; a dedicated program coordinator; a licensed therapist; a program acknowledgement specialist; a contract-side regional, program and assistant director; and a DSS-side program manager.

STARS services include:

- 12 hours of additional clinical-level training on child-development, complex trauma, the cycle of attachment, de-escalation, the neurobiology of trauma & resilience, and other topics as developed in the latest child welfare research and best practices.
- Regular special-topic trainings by local, state and national experts in child welfare.
- Mandatory parenting assessment, introductory session, ongoing sessions as needed, and monthly support groups facilitated by a licensed therapist.
- Clinical-level documentation and monthly reporting.
- 24/7 crisis response services.
- Case support including individualized support plan and creative interventions tailored to the needs of the family, not just Medicaid-reimbursable tasks.
- Regular, tangible support such as family meals, seasonal celebrations, and specialized respite.

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BRIEF OVERVIEW

The Roanoke County-City of Salem Department of Social Services (RCDSS) operates the STARS (Specialized Treatment And Resource Support) program, a locally-administered, public-private hybrid program offering advanced foster parent training, support, recruitment, and retention to maximize the effectiveness and stability of locally-approved foster families while maintaining best practices based on the latest child welfare research.

STARS uses local agency infrastructure, a contracted support agency and Children's Services Act (CSA) funds to administer the program. There is a high level of stewardship producing measurable efficiencies and savings, compared to similar privately-managed programs that duplicate many components of a local DSS, as well as reducing utilization of higher-cost congregate care placements for youth.

FULFILLING AWARDS CRITERIA

PROBLEM/CHALLENGE/SITUATION

In 2010, the Roanoke County-City of Salem Department of Social Services (RCDSS) needed a locally-managed solution to offer highly skilled, well-trained, collaborative, and stable “specialized foster care homes.” The specific needs identified included:

- A specialized foster home would need to fall under the detailed and expansive VA Local Department of Social Services (LDSS) foster care policies and guidance, not the comparatively sparse Licensed Child Placing Agency (LCPA) policies and guidance that applied to private foster care agencies.
- A specialized foster home would need to be locally-managed, ensuring supervision, monitoring and shared decision-making were built-in expectations and common practice. The home would not be “packed” to maximize billing, but carefully managed to ensure the needs of every youth placed within were effectively met. VA DSS policy and guidance can change regularly, and local connection to policy and guidance would be essential to effective and appropriate child welfare practices.
- A specialized foster home would need to be fully trained in a state-endorsed pre-service curriculum, with no steps “accelerated” or skipped to rush an approval to open a home for billing.
- A specialized foster home would need to be assessed to have the skills and stamina to maintain a moderate- or high-needs youth matched with their strengths. There was a need for a viable alternative to group homes and even higher levels of congregate care for youth who were appropriate for a family home but simply didn’t have a willing match. All the foster families would need to come to the table ready and willing to work directly with biological family and natural supports on reunification efforts.
- A specialized foster home would only be expected to serve youth from our local community. Staff would “train local to serve local” to avoid placing youth far away from the community and their natural supports.

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- A specialized foster home would be able to utilize existing local DSS infrastructure and staff, maximizing the utility of our resources and allowing room for innovation and program development outside traditional boundaries. Local Children’s Services Act (CSA) funding would also be utilized at maximal efficiency without the need to sustain separate overhead, staff and tools.
- A specialized foster program would benefit from effective recruitment and marketing activities, in contrast to the shortage of state-level resources offered to local DSS offices.

While RCDSS was exploring this idea, a 2008 pilot specialized foster program called “Portsmouth Cares” was underway. Portsmouth Cares’ model included a contracted private agency to administer multiple components including additional casework staff to support high-needs placements, additional best practices training and a dedicated therapist for the foster family. The model emphasized wrapping supports around the foster family as the primary means of maintaining a healthy, successful foster placement. The local CSA was on-board with providing nominal funding for administrative costs per foster placement, using the rest of the existing DSS infrastructure as a backbone.

RCDSS noted the promise of their innovative model and proceeded to replicate parts of it to create **Roanoke Valley STARS**, in collaboration with the City of Roanoke’s DSS, in 2010. The first fully-trained class of local STARS foster parents was approved in 2012.

THE PROGRAM/RESULTS/INNOVATION/COLLABORATION/MODEL FOR OTHER LOCALITIES

STARS focuses on the expectation of positive biological family engagement, the maintaining of stable placements for moderate- and high-needs foster placements, and collaboration fully integrated into RCDSS and our local CSA. STARS remains an example of good financial stewardship, costing our CSA 1/5 – 1/3 of a comparable high-needs TFC placement episode, on average, and an even smaller fraction of the daily costs of a congregate care placement.

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STARS initially focused on recruitment of experienced, local and even former TFC homes to provide the higher level of professional foster care that STARS youth needed. We quickly realized that, regardless of the past, there were no more “beginner foster placements” and almost all our foster placements had moderate-to-high needs.

We developed a second track called the STARS Teen/Mental Health track. This track allowed us to recruit new and existing local foster families that had not yet gained significant experience in fostering or were already providing care for a high-needs youth without yet completing the full STARS training. As the State of Virginia continued to innovate and lead on Kinship engagement, we noted that often our Kinship foster homes needed even more support and training than our traditionally recruited local homes. We developed a third track called STARS Kinship to meet that need. Currently, half of our STARS placements are STARS Kinship. STARS supports have been crucial to the success of many otherwise fragile Kinship Foster Care placements in our community.

STARS would be impossible without the close collaboration and reciprocal insight with our Roanoke County-City of Salem CSA. Through multiple CSA coordinators over the past 11 years, our local CSA office has continued to see the value and benefit of locally-managed, specialized foster care. In addition to direct, responsive communication regarding STARS specialized foster parent performance and contract staff through Youth Advocate Programs (YAP), the local CSA has seen measurable savings because of STARS. In fiscal year 2018, CSA analyzed the available data and was able to report a savings of \$1 million due to the diversion of local youth from high-cost congregate care and TFC placements. Currently STARS receives just \$20 per day in administrative costs, per youth in a STARS placement, to provide all the program elements described above (except for STARS support staff hours that are set by the CSA level system informed by the individually rated Virginia Enhanced Maintenance Assessment Tool scores).

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Another essential component of STARS is a local contract agency to provide additional casework support staff, support groups, clinical-level training, a therapist, crisis services, logistical support and effective supervision for all the above; in addition to operating in collaboration, instead of competition, with local RCDSS foster parent recruitment and training efforts. Youth Advocate Programs (YAP) is an innovative provider of services designed to reduce the institutionalization of youth nationwide, with a large catalog of resources available from many offices across the country. They have been known for creative solutions to complex family problems and being a leader in empowering youth and families to become the best versions of themselves through effective advocacy. The Roanoke-area office of YAP responded to our RFP in 2010 and have been a crucial partner with RCDSS ever since. The contribution of YAP staff over the past 11 years to our program's innovation, development and sustainability cannot easily be measured. YAP provides multiple STARS case support positions, two STARS trainers, a STARS coordinator, a licensed STARS therapist, and shares YAP administrative staff and resources, including regional director, local director and assistant director. YAP also provides a program acknowledgment position, dedicated to foster family appreciation and crucial retention.

STARS *currently* has 21 foster homes and 14 foster placements. Several of our STARS homes are fully dedicated to providing needed respite to locally-approved homes who have full-time placements. Each of our homes is trained to expect to work closely with a child's biological family, both blood relatives and kin, in-line with current VADSS policy and best practices.

STARS homes provide a family environment for some of our highest-needs youth and have regularly provided a short-term home for youth who are waiting for a structured, secure, residential program slot due to highest needs; otherwise, they would reside in our agency building, taking up immense staff time and missing out on many age-appropriate activities. Also, our DSS building is not an approved foster placement for children in Virginia. RCDSS is the only foster program in Virginia that provides a therapist for the foster families, at no cost to them.

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The STARS families operate as a third layer of support behind RCDSS and YAP, coming together for meal trains, parents' night out, and mutual support as a natural network sharing each other's struggles and triumphs. YAP facilitates trainings based on needs identified by RCDSS and the monthly STARS support group. National experts such as Alison Sampson-Jackson, LCSW; J. Kellie Evans, LCSW; and Kevin Campbell's "You Gotta Believe" staff have shared high-quality trainings with our STARS staff and parents, and STARS has consistently opened up these high-level trainers and trainings to local DSS staff as well, benefitting not only our program but our local agency as well.

STARS has been presented, and lauded, at the Virginia CSA conference, as well as in neighboring jurisdictions. STARS was the subject of a very favorable media story in late 2020 as well, which is somewhat rare for a DSS-Media interaction: <https://www.wsls.com/news/local/2020/11/19/innovative-program-helping-foster-care-system-saving-taxpayers-thousands-of-dollars/>

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The STARS Philosophy:

STARS is a least restrictive, community-based program for children whose special needs can be met through services delivered primarily by trained resource parents working in full partnership with the child, the child's family of origin and all other persons on the comprehensive treatment plan team. Support from all other team members allows the child to benefit from a home environment and community-based setting while receiving intensive treatment and clinical services."

- *All services provided are family-oriented and community based*
- *All children and their families have unique strengths and needs, and planning with them in mind produces high-quality outcomes.*
- *All children and their families shall be treated as partners in the planning and delivery of services.*
- *All specialized resource parents shall be treated as partners in the planning and delivery of services.*
- *A healthy relationship between the specialized resource parents, the child(ren) in their care and the family of origin is key to the overall effectiveness of the program.*
- *The supportive family setting offered through the specialized program is a vital part of positive intervention with the child(ren) and is key to successful outcomes.*
- *The family systems approach will focus on how interactions between all family members affect the behavior of individual family members.*
- *All interventions with families and children in care are interrelated in achieving lasting outcomes for permanency.*
- *STARS affirms the use of an individualized behavior management plan, based on rewards, assessing the antecedent of the behavior and recognizing that most behavior is driven by needs. "Behavior is Communication."*
- *STARS shall be sensitive to cultural differences and special needs. Services shall be provided in a manner that respects these differences and attends to these needs*
- *Services should be child-centered and family focused, with the needs of the child and family dictating the types and array of services provided.*

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- *Children with emotional disturbance and behavioral issues should receive services that are integrated, with linkages between child-serving agencies, programs and mechanisms for planning, developing and coordinating services.*
- *Children with emotional disturbance and behavioral issues should receive services in the least restrictive, most normative environment that is clinically appropriate.*