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Contacts:

Christie Marra
Virginia Poverty Law Center
Staff Attorney
804-782-9430x16 or 804-615-8150
christie@vplc.org

Mary Dunne Stewart
Voices for Virginia's Children
Policy Director
804-649-0184x24 or 804-307-9161
mds@vakids.org

**CHILD ADVOCATES SUPPORT GOVERNOR KAINE'S PROPOSALS TO IMPROVE
CHILD WELFARE SERVICES**

- Proposals will provide incentives to move children from congregate care to community-based settings -

The Governor has answered the call made by Casey Strategic Consulting's report on the status of youth in foster care in Virginia. By proposing a differential reimbursement rate system to increase the state's contribution for community based care to approximately 85% and reduce the state's contribution for congregate care to 51%, the Governor has responded to the finding that Virginia is worst in the nation in achieving permanency for youth in foster care.

"Best practice in child welfare dictates that no more than 10% of initial foster care placements should be made into congregate care. Virginia uses congregate care for 24% of its initial placements, well above the national average of 18% and best practice," notes Mary Dunne Stewart, Policy Director at Voices for Virginia's Children. "What is particularly troubling is that the first placement for over half of the teens coming into foster care is a congregate care setting," added Christie Marra, Staff Attorney at the Virginia Poverty Law Center.

Congregate care is a restrictive environment that may be appropriate for particular youth, such as those who are at risk of harming themselves or others. Most youth benefit from being part of a family environment close to their home community. "Unlike youth in a family foster home, youth in congregate care have an average of ten different caregivers each day," noted Stewart. "Children deserve to be in a family environment where they can develop a close relationship with adults who will make a long-term commitment to them."

"From my conversations with teens in care around the state, it's clear that those in congregate care feel more isolated and far less supported than youth living with families," added Marra. "I've also noted that the youth living with families are able to point to real, tangible benefits that their foster parents have helped them obtain, such as a job or a car to get to and from college classes."

Other items in the Governor's proposal are aimed at increasing the number of and support for foster parents. These include increasing the financial support for foster parents and providing more training for both the foster parents and the social workers who work with the families.

"The Governor's proposals, if approved, will significantly improve the nature of foster care in Virginia for years to come," Marra predicted. "However, the teens in Virginia's foster care

system today have other immediate needs such as access to health insurance and other critical services.”

In addition to supporting the Governor’s proposals, Voices for Virginia’s Children and the Virginia Poverty Law Center will be pushing for improved access to Medicaid for older youth in foster care. “Currently, many older youth receiving foster care services lose their Medicaid benefits at age 19 if they have a job or paid internship and earn more than approximately \$3000 per year,” stated Stewart. “In addition to supporting the Governor’s package, our top priority is to insure that youth who continue to receive services past their 18th birthday will continue to have Medicaid coverage through age 21.” The total cost to Virginia of providing Medicaid for these several hundred youth is only \$750,000 per year.

Virginia Poverty Law Center (VPLC) is a not-for-profit organization concentrating in the areas of law that affect low-income families. Established in 1978 to advocate on behalf of low-income Virginians on poverty issues of statewide importance, VPLC is the only state-wide organization providing training to local legal aid program staff, private bar attorneys, and low-income clients, relating exclusively to the legal rights of Virginia's poor. For more information visit www.vplc.org.

Voices for Virginia’s Children is a statewide, privately funded, non-partisan awareness and advocacy organization that builds support for public policies to improve the lives of children. A recognized leader in child advocacy, Voices mobilizes support for initiatives by conducting research, developing policies, building coalitions, and helping people articulate their support for children. For more information visit www.vakids.org.

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