

Voices for Virginia's Children 2008 Legislative Agenda

The mission of Voices is to improve the lives of children in Virginia by advancing effective public policies. Voices' 2008 priorities support our long term vision that all children are healthy, grow up in nurturing families and communities, and have access to experiences and services that promote their development and potential. We also envision a community where all children enter school ready to learn, receive a high quality education that fully develops their abilities, and enter adulthood prepared to succeed in life.

Family Economic Success:

Expand the child care subsidy program for low-income working parents.

Rationale: Child care assistance helps low-income working parents afford the tremendous burden of paying for stable child care. Current funding is inadequate; upwards of 11,000 eligible children per year are unable to obtain a subsidy. Low-income families often pay as much as 30% or more of their income for child care. Without a subsidy to offset some of this cost, many working parents are unable to locate suitable care. They may quit work or place a child in unsafe or substandard care. Lack of subsidy funding also denies children access to early education experiences known to promote development and school readiness. (\$12 million over two years reducing the waiting list by thousands)

Foster Care Reform:

Serve more foster children in the community rather than group settings by:

- **Offering localities incentives to create community-based services by increasing the state's contribution for community-based care and reducing the state's contribution for services provided in residential settings** (this initiative will reduce expected budget increases by \$12.5 million over two years)
- **Increasing financial support for foster and adoptive families** (\$22.6 million over two years to increase the rates by 25%)
- **Enhancing child welfare worker training** (\$4.4 million over two years)
- **Improving recruitment and retention of foster and adoptive parents** (\$7 million over two years)

Rationale: Virginia is worst in the nation in achieving permanency for youth in foster care. While best practice in child welfare recommends no more than 10% of initial foster care placements should be in a congregate care (group) setting, the first placement for over half (52%) of Virginia teens entering foster care is a congregate care setting. This is partly due to the shortage of foster and adoptive families. The financial subsidies and other supportive services provided to foster and adoptive families in Virginia is inadequate. Recent research indicates that in order to reach "minimum adequate rates" based on the actual costs of providing care, Virginia should raise the rates for younger children by 64% and for teenagers by 39%.

Support older youth as they are aging out of foster care by:

- **Extending Medicaid health care benefits to 18, 19, and 20 year old youth receiving foster care services**
- **Allowing former foster youth age 18 and older access to foster care services until their 21st birthday**

Rationale: When youth turn 18 in foster care in Virginia, sometimes they lose access to important benefits such as health insurance and "independent living" services. National studies have demonstrated that youth who do not receive foster care services after age 18, when compared with youth who continue to receive services, are less likely to be enrolled in college and are more likely to experience serious economic hardships. (\$9.5 million over two years)

Provide financial support to individuals (through the TANF program) who are caring for relative children removed from their parents' custody.

Rationale: Because of complex eligibility guidelines, sometimes adults caring for relative children removed from their parents' custody are barred from receiving TANF cash assistance. Providing financial support will assist these caregivers with the significant additional expenses incurred including health and mental health services, childcare, clothing, and personal items. (this initiative will save \$283,000 over two years)

Early Care and Education:

Expand the Virginia Preschool Initiative (VPI) to serve additional at-risk 4-year olds. Increase program capacity and maximize parental choice by incorporating qualified private-sector classrooms, including those in faith-based settings.

Rationale: Twenty percent of Virginia's entering kindergartners lack the skills needed for success in school. Many communities lack sufficient affordable preschool slots to serve all those in need. The Virginia Preschool Initiative currently serves 12,000 students, yet as many as 17,000 additional low-income and otherwise at-risk 4-year olds could benefit from a quality preschool experience. Preschool, especially when targeted to disadvantaged children, is a proven investment that reduces the "school readiness gap" between these children and their more advantaged peers. Participation in high-quality preschool results in lower rates of grade retention, special education, school failure and drop-out, delinquency and unemployment. (\$45 million over two years)

Establish a Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS), a research-based tool for measuring and promoting the quality of early childhood programs.

Rationale: Programs are rated on a five-star scale and then provided with technical assistance and incentives to improve quality. Programs included in state-funded initiatives like the Virginia Preschool Initiative (VPI) would be required to participate; other programs would participate voluntarily. Research indicates that only programs of sufficient quality are potent enough to impact school readiness, especially for children from disadvantaged circumstances who are more likely to start school already behind. A QRIS maximizes parental choice – ratings are public so parents can compare programs and choose one that meets their needs. (\$4.6 million over two years)

Voices also endorses:

Significantly expanding community-based mental health services for children and adolescents through the Community Services Boards (CSBs).

Rationale: Funding is needed for: wraparound services, day treatment, respite care, crisis stabilization, in-home family therapy, after school intervention, intensive outpatient treatment, mobile crisis teams, intensive case management, school-based mental health services, and drop-in centers for emotionally and behaviorally troubled teens. (\$20 million per year)

Expanding access to prenatal care: Expand prenatal coverage for low income women by increasing eligibility from 185% to 200% of the federal poverty level, which is consistent with eligibility for infants through FAMIS (the state children's health insurance program). (\$3.2 million over two years)

Increased funding for the Virginia Early Childhood Foundation: Increased funding will enable the Foundation to support additional local and regional school readiness coalitions (\$5 million over two years).

For more information, please visit www.vakids.org or contact Mary Dunne Stewart at mds@vakids.org or 804-649-0184 x24.