

2017 Legislative Priorities- RESULTS OF THE 2017 GA SESSION

Highlights:

- *Sparking the conversation around dismantling the school to prison pipeline* and reducing suspension and expulsions. Although the bills did not pass this year we helped lay the groundwork for this important issue.
- *Stopping efforts to reduce the amount of time a family could receive TANF.* A bill to change the lifetime limit from 60 months to 24 months died in committee.
- *Ensuring Virginia's youth aging out of foster care are enrolled in health insurance.* A bill passed to auto-enroll foster youth into Medicaid to 26.
- *Continuing to improve safety in child care.* The Governor has approved legislation applying fingerprint background checks to license-exempt, regulated child care. We are continuing to monitor how to strengthen this effort by clarifying the language in a companion proposal.
- *New funding to implement same day access to mental health screening services at Virginia's Community Services Boards.* We anticipate more conversations around improving children's services in our mental health system through several new and continuing workgroups.
- *Introducing policymakers to regional Trauma-informed Community Networks* and recognizing their efforts.

Protect Our Investments in Children

After a year of making significant progress—investments in a comprehensive early childhood approach, children's mental health crisis response, and foster care improvements-- Virginia faces a \$1.5 billion shortfall that puts our progress at-risk. We must fight to protect these investments otherwise, young children in at-risk families will be more vulnerable to abuse and neglect, children with urgent mental health needs will have to wait longer for help, and youth aging out of foster care with no family at age 18 will once again be left on their own.

The final budget included no cuts to children's programs. Given the funding and revenue picture the legislature did not support expansion or new initiatives in the final budget.

Children's Mental Health Care Access

Reform the children's mental health system in Virginia by building capacity and improving access to community-based services throughout the Commonwealth

As policymakers consider improvements to Virginia's mental health system, Voices will advocate that strengthening the system for children is a critical part of overall system reform. Voices will continue to advocate that Virginia develop a community-based system of care that allows children of all ages to receive treatment and services in the least restrictive settings and near their families whenever possible, regardless of where they live in the state or the type of insurance they have.

Mental health reform continued to be a significant focus of the legislature. State policymakers adopted a recommendation of the SJ47 Mental Health Reform Commission to promote same-day access to mental health screening and outpatient primary care screening and monitoring services at each community services board in Virginia. The final budget allocated funding and authorized the continuation of the Mental Health Reform Commission for two more years, along with language and funding to prepare an implementation plan for financial realignment of Virginia's behavioral health system due this Fall. Additionally, the final budget

included funding for staffing needs at the Commonwealth Center for Children and Adolescents. We were not successful in seeking the expansion of other children’s mental health initiatives given the difficult budget climate.

Foster Care Reform

Improve and bring structure to Virginia’s “Kinship Diversion” program, which is designed to increase the use of kinship care and avoid unnecessary foster care custody by facilitating placements with relatives.

Voices will continue to advocate for improvements to the kinship diversion program including tracking outcomes we successfully advocated for last year. We will advocate to adopt best practices in identifying relative placements and in ensuring the safety of children in those placements. Additionally, we will advocate for support services for kin placements that will build protective factors—such as parental resilience, parenting skills, and social connections—that will ensure the safety of children.

Several bills to support children in foster care moved forward including a survey of youth aging out of foster care, auto-enrolling former foster youth in Medicaid, and tuition grants for former foster youth. We will keep working on bills to support kinship caregivers and strengthen kinship diversion.

Juvenile Justice Reform

Reform Virginia’s juvenile justice system so that most of our delinquency-involved youth are served in their families and communities, as opposed to juvenile prisons that are unsafe, ineffective, expensive to maintain, and keep kids disconnected from families.

Protect the reinvestment dollars and direct those dollars saved to be used to create a continuum of best-practice, trauma-informed supports and services geared towards rehabilitation in family and community environments. Advocate for dollars that could be used on a second youth prison in Hanover be used towards the continuum of care.

Issues around the juvenile justice system had a low profile this year because the Governor’s proposed budget did not include any significant changes.

Early Childhood Education

Adequately fund early interventions to promote the healthy development of babies and toddlers. Meet the increased demand for services for infants and toddlers with developmental delays and disabilities by continuing to increase funding for Early Intervention (IDEA Part C) services.

We were not successful in seeking the expansion Early Intervention (IDEA Part C) given the difficult budget climate.

Continue efforts to improve the safety of child care. To build on the child care safety reforms, fingerprint background checks must apply to all child care providers and checks of minimal safety standards should apply all child care providers.

A measure to require fingerprint background checks for all child care providers advanced and was signed by the Governor. However, a bill to implement minimal safety precautions in license-exempt child care providers

also advanced, with some unclear language in the conference committee report that included an effort to counteract the fingerprint background check proposal. While the language is currently being reviewed to provide a final legal opinion, we are hoping that the Governor will consider strengthening the bill and continuing the efforts to require fingerprint background checks of all child care providers.

Support a mixed-delivery early education system to expand access for at-risk young children. Support pilots and other approaches that encourage public-private partnerships that leverage private child care facilities, child care assistance funds, Head Start and the Virginia Preschool Initiative to create a higher quality system with targeted initiatives to improve quality and access for low-income children.

Budget language was included to support the continued expansion of mixed-delivery early education.

Trauma-Informed Approaches

Research shows that chronic, severe stressors in childhood can cause biological responses that are toxic and traumatic to the developing brain and can have long-term consequences for health and wellness. But science also tells us that responsive relationships and strong communities can buffer the effects of adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), allowing children to develop to their potential and contribute to their communities. Voices will work with partners engaged in regional Trauma Informed Community Networks (TICNs) to raise awareness of the need to implement trauma-informed best practices in all systems. With our partners, we will introduce resolutions to recognize the interagency, public-private models that have emerged at the local and regional levels and to encourage statewide adoption of best practices for children and families experiencing toxic stress and trauma.

The House and Senate passed joint resolutions commending the work of regional trauma-informed community networks. Representatives from around the state took part in the first trauma-informed networks advocacy day.

Voices will support partner organizations who are taking the lead on the following issues:

Bringing more social workers, counselors, school psychologists and nurses into schools to better prepare children for educational success. As the rate of children in economic hardship increases, school personnel recognize that they need additional supports to meet the needs of their students to achieve academic success. The Board of Education has made recommendations to establish minimum staffing levels for these essential support positions and to lift the support cap. Along with our partners in the Alliance for Students, we ask the legislature to include these positions in the school funding formula.

Efforts to provide supplemental funding based on support position were not included in the Governor's budget. A legislative effort to fund more school nurse positions failed. We plan to address this issue as the Standards of Quality are revised next year.

Dismantle the school to prison pipeline by supporting school suspension reform as well as by supporting alternative discipline interventions that can help reduce suspension rates and improve student behavior. Virginia is the worst in nation for referring students to law enforcement for school discipline issues. During the 2012 – 2013 academic school year 27,568 students were suspended, and, of that, 16,019 were elementary school students. In addition, students of color and students with disabilities were disproportionately suspended.

Students who are suspended from school are more likely to experience academic failure, mental health challenges, substance abuse, gang activity, and justice system involvement, according to research.

After much discussion and debate, efforts to reduce school suspensions and expulsions did not advance. Despite significant bipartisan efforts, and EXTREMELY close votes, it became clear that a compromise could not be negotiated to further advance the bills. Our efforts on these measures were significant and critically important to bring the best interests of children to the table. We hope to continue the discussions on these efforts and work to bring more legislation next year.

Substance exposed newborns- Over 1,300 babies were referred to CPS as substance exposed newborns in FY16, a 21% increase over FY15. Pregnant women and mothers facing addiction struggle to balance receiving appropriate recovery services while maintaining bonds with their families and attachment to their infants. Stronger systems of care are needed to support pregnant and parenting women with substance abuse issues, including easier access to treatment and home visiting services. These topics should be further explored to ensure that mothers receive treatment and children are safe and able to maintain strong bonds with their families.

Several efforts to support substance exposed newborns advanced including a measure requiring families with substance exposed newborns to have a “plan of safe care” developed and involvement with Child Protective Services for a family assessment. An effort to study the barriers facing substance exposed infants and a new Perinatal Quality Collaborative also advanced.

Media Coverage of State Legislative Issues

[“Facing millions in federal penalties, Virginia expands background checks on child care providers”](#) – *Virginian-Pilot*: February 28, 2017

[“State braces for potential federal threats to health funding”](#) – *Richmond Times-Dispatch*: February 23, 2017

[“GOP welfare reforms sputter in House”](#) – *Daily Press*: February 6, 2017

[“Republican welfare reform bill advances; critic calls it ‘mean spirited’”](#) – *Richmond Times-Dispatch*: January 26, 2017 (cross posted on *The News & Advance*)

[“Bipartisan fear of Medicaid block grant threat to Virginia”](#) – *Richmond Times-Dispatch*: January 16, 2017

[“State worker compensation key issue in upcoming session”](#) – *Richmond Times-Dispatch*: January 7, 2017

[“Big needs, and some results are the focus budget hearing”](#) - *Daily Press*: January 4, 2017