



President's message— Winter 2007

The Power of Working Together: Voices' 2007 Children's Agenda

Each year, Voices develops a Children's Agenda that is the best combination of the ideal and the possible. What are the most important advances needed by the children in Virginia? Which of those have “political legs”, or a chance of gaining traction with the General Assembly, amid many other worthy (and not so worthy) competing priorities.

Because it will be the second year of the biennial or two-year budget, the upcoming 2007 legislative session (starting January 10th) is a “short” session lasting approximately 45 days. During this short session, several thousand bills and resolutions will be introduced and amendments to the budget will be considered.

A major consideration when defining the Children's Agenda is the environment - fiscal, political, advocacy, and otherwise. Because it is a short session, legislators are hesitant to make large investments in new initiatives. New initiatives or large expansions are best

advocated for during the long (60+ days) even-year sessions. The 2007 Children's Agenda, therefore, includes fairly modest funding requests found in the first two pages of the agenda. Voices has well-developed positions on these issues and has sought out legislative sponsors when necessary.

Fortunately, Voices does not develop the agenda in isolation. The 2007 Children's Agenda marks the culmination of months of research, surveys of Voices supporters, and deliberation by the Voices' board. The issues prioritized are not chosen lightly. By the time you read the priorities, Voices' staff have collaborated with valued partners in the advocacy community, professionals working in state and local government agencies, state legislators and their aides, and officials in the Governor's office.

The third page of the Children's Agenda includes initiatives that Voices will support in addition to our key legislative priorities. These items have Voices' full support, but are being initiated in coalition with key partners.

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Our mission

is to build a powerful voice for children and to inspire the people of Virginia to act on their behalf.



Voices' 2007 Children's Agenda

Increase funding for child care subsidies for low-income working parents:

Expand Virginia's child care subsidy program to serve an additional 13,000 children from low-income working families (cost: \$34.3 million).

Rationale: Child care subsidies support low-income working parents struggling to stay in the workforce and attain economic self-sufficiency. After



housing costs, the burden of paying for child care is the single most serious threat to the continued employment and self-sufficiency of low-income parents. Many are paying 30% or more of their income for child care. Although Virginia has among the most stringent subsidy eligibility requirements, thousands of eligible Virginia families are unable to obtain a subsidy, threatening their continued employment and putting them at risk of financial breakdown. Fiscal impact studies confirm that the ultimate cost of dealing with such breakdowns will exceed the cost of subsidies.

There are currently 32,000 children whose low-income, working parents receive a subsidy to help pay part of their child care expense. However, there are already over 13,000 eligible children on local DSS waiting lists, twice the number from two years ago (note that the 13,000 figure seriously underestimates total unmet need, for some localities stop adding to the waiting list when it reaches a certain level).

Based on costs to provide subsidies for the current 32,000 children (\$84.5 million), \$34.3 million is needed to serve an additional 13,000 children, representing only a portion of those potentially eligible.

Expand child and adolescent mental health services to address significant unmet needs:

- Provide funding for the nine remaining juvenile detention centers that do not receive funds for collaborative mental health projects with the Community Services Boards (cost: \$1.2 million).
- Implement evidence-based “system of care” programs in 6 new localities to serve 3 priority populations: those involved with the juvenile justice system, those returning from residential care, or those diagnosed with co-occurring mental health and substance use disorders (cost: \$3 million).

Address critical mental health workforce shortages:

- Increase the size of the behavioral health workforce by creating 4 child psychiatry fellowships and 4 child psychology internships with “payback provisions.” These provisions require the recipients to work in underserved areas in Virginia (cost: \$493,000).
- Establish a university-based teaching center to organize, coordinate, and implement trainings for pediatricians, family practitioners, and therapeutic clinicians in evidence-based, promising, and best practices for children's behavioral health treatment (cost: \$700,000).

Provide Information and Support to families of children with mental health problems:

Build a strong statewide Family Resource and Referral Network to educate parents and professionals about children's mental health, and to increase

family involvement in the development and implementation of local and state systems of care (cost: \$150,000).

Rationale:

- According to official Virginia estimates, over 92,000 children or adolescents have a serious emotional disturbance.
- Nearly 75% of youth in juvenile detention centers have at least one diagnosable mental disorder.
- Over 2000 children with or at risk of serious emotional disturbance are on CSB waiting lists (January - April 2005). The services with the largest wait lists were counseling and psychotherapy, case management, psychiatric services, medication management, and family support.
- Nearly half of Virginia localities are federally designated as “mental health professional shortage areas.”
- The “system of care” program implemented by the Richmond Behavioral Health Authority has prevented recidivism in 90% of the youth served.

(Data taken from the Department of Mental Health, Mental Retardation, and Substance Abuse Services 2006-2012 Comprehensive State Plan and the Virginia Department of Health Office of Health Policy and Planning)

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Voices also supports:

Start Strong Pre-K Initiative:

Funding to promote the creation of local Start Strong Councils and to establish 6 local Start Strong pre-K pilot projects, as first steps in a comprehensive initiative to ensure the school readiness of all Virginia children. Critical components include:

- blended public-private programs and funding streams, with provisions for parent payments,
- a voluntary Quality Rating System (QRS) that defines five levels of quality and provides mentors/coaches to help willing pre-K programs improve quality,
- research-based best practices to measure program quality and to assess child progress,
- expanded opportunities for professional development and career advancement, and
- provisions to expand the number of at-risk 4 year-olds served, and to add program enhancements that ensure maximum impact on at-risk children.

Tax relief for low income families:

Raise the filing threshold from \$7,000 to \$12,000 for individuals and from \$14,000 to \$24,000 for couples filing jointly in order to remove 147,000 low-income people from the tax rolls, providing permanent economic assistance to the neediest taxpayers. Another 171,000 filers who currently pay no state income taxes would no longer have the burden of filing state tax returns.

Expanding access to prenatal care:

Expand prenatal coverage for low income women by increasing eligibility from 166% to 200% of the federal poverty line, which is consistent with eligibility for babies through FAMIS (the state children's health insurance program).

Increasing financial support for foster and adoptive families:

Increase maintenance payments made to foster family homes and special needs adoption homes by 10%. Maintenance payments are the financial subsidies paid to families to support their care for a foster or special needs adoptive child.



Clean Indoor Air:

Prohibit smoking in indoor public establishments, including restaurants, thereby reducing children's exposure to second hand smoke. Second hand smoke is particularly harmful to young children, causing middle ear infections, induction and exacerbation of asthma, and lower respiratory tract infections.

Increasing the State Minimum Wage:

Increase the state minimum wage (\$5.15/hour), which has not been increased since 1997.

Restricting Payday Lending:

Enact meaningful reform to the payday lending industry including requiring payday lenders to adhere to a 36% interest rate cap.

What does Transportation have to do with Child Care Subsidies?

The General Assembly battles regarding transportation funding have dominated the press for many months. If you live in northern Virginia or Hampton Roads, you have an almost daily reminder of the transportation funding crisis. What you may not have considered is its possible impact on vital services for children, such as child care subsidies and mental health treatment.

Several experts who have studied funding of the transportation system in Virginia have concluded that a stable and reliable funding stream that provides about a billion new dollars of funding each year is needed for transportation initiatives. Members of the General Assembly continue to debate the best way to provide the necessary funds and ideas range from selling off some of the state's assets for immediate cash to adding tolls on more roads to using existing general fund monies for transportation.

Children, and their advocates, have a major stake in the outcome of the transportation debate. Only our active involvement in the political process will keep children a high priority in the minds of legislators and will ensure that legislators, while they weigh all of the transportation funding options, will remember to protect funding sources for vital state agencies and initiatives that benefit our children.

As long as the transportation debate continues, the needs of children will be overshadowed by transportation needs in the annual battle for already scarce funds.

This year, ask your legislators to resolve the debate and to keep in mind the need for important services like early care and education programs, foster care initiatives, and mental health resources.

So, Where Do You Begin?

Find out who your legislators are by visiting the General Assembly website at <http://legis.state.va.us/> and clicking on the "Who is My Legislator" button.

If you need guidance about how to talk to your legislators about the issues, visit Voices for Virginia's Children's website at www.vakids.org or call the office at 804-649-0184. When

you visit Voices website, be sure to sign up for email alerts that will keep you up to date and help you craft your message.



The Power of Working Together: 2007 Children's Agenda

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What You Can Do to Help!

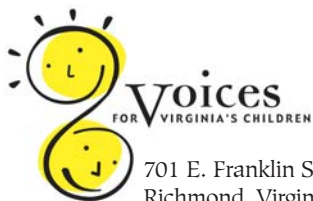
Just recently a veteran, powerful legislator cautioned that children's issues often do not receive the attention they deserve. He respectfully dismissed the efforts of professional children's advocates to speak up directly. "What I and my colleagues listen to," he advised, "is consumers, what some people call voters!" He advised us to equip and encourage parents and grandparents, providers of services, and other grassroots folks, especially those in districts of strategically positioned legislators, to speak up.

During the session, Voices sends weekly email updates to alert people to specific ways they can help push the agenda for children forward. During session, Voices' policy staff are at the Capitol daily tracking legislation and educating legislators about the needs of children. But, we cannot do it alone! Your Voice is more important and more effective than ours - your Voice makes a difference.

Here are three specific things you can do to make that difference.

1. If you are not already signed up for the email alerts, go to www.vakids.org and sign up now. We are careful not to pester you with too frequent emails but to alert you to what's both important and timely.
2. As you receive the action alerts, take a few minutes to use our easy-as-pie online system to tell your legislators what you think is important. We will provide some "talking points" - please take an extra 30 seconds to tell your legislator that you are a constituent and why you care about the issue.
3. Expand the chorus of constituents speaking up for children. Forward our emails to interested family, friends, and colleagues. Encourage them to sign up and spread the word.

It's a short session. Nevertheless, let's speak up to ensure that children don't get shortchanged!



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