



a newsletter for child advocates

fall 2010

New Network continues efforts on behalf of youth in foster care

Children and youth in Virginia's foster care system have benefited from major reforms during the last five years. Foster and adoptive families are better able to meet the needs of the children in their care due to a much needed increase in monthly reimbursements. Social workers are better equipped to work with children and families because of investments in caseworker training. More children live in homes with families rather than institutional settings because of incentives that were enacted.

These achievements were a result of many groups, including Voices, working under the leadership of former First Lady Anne Holton and her For Keeps initiative. Holton, a newly elected member of Voices Board of Directors, is a former Richmond City Juvenile Court Judge with a particular interest and expertise in foster care issues. "I am so proud of the achievements we've been able to make to improve outcomes for young people in foster care. But the work isn't done. Voices is well-positioned to help ensure this important work continues so that more kids find their forever families," Holton stated, now working as a consultant with the Casey Child Welfare Consulting Group.

Voices, with support from the Freddie Mac Foundation, is partnering with the

Virginia Poverty Law Center, FACES of Virginia Families, and JustChildren to launch the Virginia Child Welfare Policy Network. The Network will provide a unified voice for children involved in foster, adoptive, and kinship care.

"The Network will bring together foster, adoptive, kinship, and birth families, youth, professionals, private providers, and other advocates to collaboratively work on policy initiatives to improve the lives and opportunities for these children," said Voices Policy Director Mary Dunne Stewart.

The Network has met twice and has an exciting agenda planned for the upcoming months, including developing policy initiatives to support older youth in care and monitoring the implementation of the federal Fostering Connections to Success Act, the most sweeping foster care legislation in more than a decade.

If you are interested in more information about the Network, please contact Mary Dunne Stewart at mds@vakids.org.

We champion public policies that improve the lives of Virginia's children.



Policy initiatives to help Virginia's young children

Strengthening The Virginia Preschool Initiative

We are fortunate in Virginia to have an administration and legislators who understand the importance of early education, especially for disadvantaged children. Over the past several months, Voices and our partners at JustChildren have worked with key members of the Governor's staff on the possibility of having the Governor create a Virginia Preschool Initiative (VPI) workgroup. The group would explore policy approaches and administrative changes to strengthen VPI and to promote full utilization of VPI funding by those school divisions not currently utilizing all their allocated funds.



We have received positive signals from the administration, and we are hopeful that the Governor will soon establish the work group and direct it to make recommendations to his Early Childhood Advisory Council before the 2011 General Assembly session.

The results of the VPI work group may inform aspects of Voices' advocacy work during the upcoming months. Voices will advocate for any policy recommendations that promote full utilization of available VPI funds. If such policy proposals are put forth to expand the program, then we will

also advocate for full restoration of the \$12 million "non-participation amount" that was removed from the VPI allocation in 2010. Ultimately, it is Voices' goal that every four-year-old in the state has access to quality preschool.

Child Care Subsidies

Did you know that the average cost of full-time child care for an infant in a center ranged from more than \$4,550 to more than \$18,750? A recent report from the National Association of Child Care Resource & Referral Agencies reveals the staggering cost of child care and explores the impact the recession is having on the ability of families to afford reliable and safe child care.

The economic recession has exacerbated the financial challenges of child care, causing concern that children will be placed in care settings that may not be as safe or supportive of child development. Given this climate, Voices reconvened its statewide Working Families Child Care Coalition whose purpose is to promote family self-sufficiency and school readiness by advocating for increased access to quality child care for low-income working parents.

Over the last several months, the Coalition has advocated at the federal level for the President's proposed \$1 billion in increased funds for child care. An infusion of federal funds into Virginia's child care program is necessary to prevent cuts to Virginia's child care assistance program. In addition to its federal work, the Coalition – and Voices independently – will work to protect current state funding for the child care assistance program during the upcoming General Assembly session.

From the Executive Director

John Morgan



New Florida Initiative, the “Milk Party,” May Bring Added Energy and Power to Child Advocacy Efforts

We are keeping an eye on potentially exciting child advocacy developments in Florida. David Lawrence, former publisher of the Miami Herald and for many years a vigorous child advocate, is the guiding force behind the Florida Children’s Movement and its recently launched “Milk Party.” Lawrence has assembled an impressive group of Florida political and business leaders who are now spearheading a unified grassroots campaign to pressure elected officials and candidates to support investments in children. The Milk Party is a decidedly bipartisan initiative yet obviously plays on the current Tea Party emphasis to gain public attention. The first set of policy initiatives pursued by the Movement include child health coverage, early childhood/school readiness initiatives, screening and early treatment services for children with special needs, support and education for parents, and mentoring programs for at-risk school-age children.

The centerpiece of the campaign is a bus tour and series of Milk Party rallies being held in 17 localities statewide in advance of the November elections. Attendance and press coverage have been impressive so far, holding promise that the movement will be a powerful way to influence candidates and office holders to support sound investments that promote child well-being.

For the past few years, Voices has partnered with leading national organizations Every Child Matters and First Focus in the attempt to wield influence with elected officials and candidates via media attention and direct voter education. Our recent “Step Up For Kids” rally in Capitol Square is one way we have tried to mobilize those who care about children to make their voices heard. The Florida Children’s Movement now opens up another potentially powerful way to gain this influence, combining the drawing power and credibility of well-known political and business leaders with a grassroots political organizing strategy to mobilize voters.

Is there a Florida-style “Milk Party” in Virginia’s future? We’ll see. If the Children’s Movement succeeds, it will attract many imitators. We’ll keep a close eye on Florida developments and learn from their efforts. In our quest to make kids a higher Virginia public policy priority, we welcome Florida’s example and look forward to adopting strategies that might help our cause in Virginia. Join us in keeping watch and wishing them well. Learn more about Florida’s Milk Party at www.childrensmovementflorida.org.

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What have we been up to at the Campaign for Children's Mental Health?

- **We issued our first report, "Virginians Speak Out,"** analyzing the information from our regional forums held in the spring. You can access the report on the Campaign's website, www.1in5kids.org. Parents and service providers are gravely concerned about the lack of access and availability of mental health services across the Commonwealth as well as the fragmentation of the system and the quality of certain services. Our report reached key legislators and members of the McDonnell administration who are already using the information to shape their own policy recommendations. The Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Services (DBHDS) used the report as a source for its General Assembly-directed study about the children's mental health services system.
- **We represented the Campaign in key policy discussions in state**

government. First, we participated on an expert panel for families and advocates for DBHDS as they developed their study report for the General Assembly. We were able to advocate strongly for the needs of children who are struggling to find treatment. Second, we are participating in ongoing workgroups on the future of Children's Services System Transformation that have been formed by Secretary of Health and Human Resources Bill Hazel. The purpose of the groups is to recommend policies and funding strategies for integrating the Transformation across child-serving agencies.

- **We've continued to build our network of supporters:** citizens like YOU who care about children's mental health. We know we have strength in numbers when we talk to policymakers about this important issue. *We need more citizens to sign up to receive Campaign emails; please go to www.1in5kids.org to sign up.* If you recruit 10 friends to sign up on the email list, we'll mail you a free Campaign t-shirt! Together, we can make a difference.



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