



## ***2016 Legislative Agenda***

### ***Children's Mental Health***

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#### **Continue to expand community-based crisis response services for children and child psychiatry services throughout Virginia.**

Voices and its partners in the Campaign for Children's Mental Health are grateful for the \$6.65 million in ongoing annual funding provided by the General Assembly in the last four sessions to expand children's access to crisis response services and child psychiatry in each of the five regions of the state. New funding the last four years has allowed each region of the state to expand or initiate services to improve access to community-based care for children. Examples include telepsychiatry in rural areas, 24/7 mobile crisis teams, ambulatory crisis stabilization units, urgent care child psychiatry center, and two residential crisis stabilization units. Having proven successful in preventing unnecessary hospitalizations, significantly reducing wait times for psychiatry, and providing families additional supports to help their children manage mental health disorders, these services need to be expanded so that more children can be treated more effectively and at a lower cost.

#### **Support efforts to expand Coordinated Specialty Care programs to help youth with serious behavioral health disorders transition from the child to adult mental health systems effectively.**

Many individuals with serious mental health disorders experience the first signs of illness during adolescence or early adulthood, and long delays often occur between symptom onset and consistent, effective treatment. Adolescents with serious mental health disorders often discontinue their participation in treatment once they turn 18 due to the lack of coordination between systems, different eligibility criteria, lack of supports for independent living and other barriers. Given the scarcity of age-specific services for this population, the eight CSBs who began providing Coordinated Specialty Care in FY 2015 are experiencing high demand for these services, which demonstrates the need to expand these services to additional areas of the Commonwealth.

#### **Invest in workforce capacity development to increase the number of qualified children's mental health professionals and expand professional development and training opportunities to enhance the skills of professionals in the field.**

Workforce and system capacity is currently inadequate to provide a comprehensive service array across the state, and training for children's mental health providers is fragmented and underfunded. In order to support quality services provision and assure consistency, training is needed to assure that mental health service providers have the knowledge and skills that are required to be effective.

The following issues are priorities of the Voices-led *Early Childhood Policy Network*.

**Provide pregnant moms and young families with in-home parenting support and health education by expanding proven, cost-effective family support services through Virginia’s Home Visiting Consortium.**

Scale-up the highly effective two generation approach to ensure healthy births and development and nurturing homes that currently reach less than 10% of the need. The Home Visiting Consortium will identify targeted communities to serve more families while simultaneously building program capacity.

**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 increasing funding for Early Intervention (Part C) services.

**Continue efforts to improve the safety of child care.**

To build on the child care safety reforms implemented last year, fingerprint background checks must apply to all child care providers, and we must pursue penalties for providers operating without a license.

**Promote continuous quality improvement initiatives in all early care settings.**

Recognize that improving the quality of all early care—infant care, child care, and preschool relies on strengthening the skills of the workforce and promoting continuous quality improvement systems, such as Virginia Quality (QRIS). The ideal quality improvement strategy brings mentoring and coaching to the educator in the classroom where they can apply learning to real-life scenarios.

**Support innovation models that enable communities and high-quality private child care settings to work as engaged partners to expand preschool for at-risk students.**

**Ensure that all at-risk children can attend the Virginia Preschool Initiative. Support additional investments in ensure that the Virginia Preschool Initiative is the model for high quality early learning in Virginia.**

Boost the quality and impact of the Virginia Preschool Initiative by increasing per pupil funding to account for the true cost, supporting additional monitoring and technical assistance capacity, and establishing eligibility criteria that is research-based and allows for local flexibility.

### **Extend and strengthen critical transition supports for youth aging out of foster care without permanent family connections through support of the “Fostering Futures” initiative.**

Though we have made many improvements in making sure children who come into foster care are living with families (preferably relative caregivers), Virginia still has a significant number of young people “age out” of the foster care system without permanent family connections intact: in 2014, more than 500 youth (over 20% of youth who left the system) turned 18 years old while still in foster care and before being connected to a family, leaving them at high risk of negative outcomes such as homelessness, unemployment, and involvement in the criminal justice system. Voices will continue to advocate that Virginia opt in to a provision of the Fostering Connections Act that will draw down significant additional IV-E dollars to fund transition and stability services and supports for this population until age 21. This effort, most critically, provides housing support, which can mitigate the difficulties for these youth of transitioning to higher education, entry-level employment, and job skills-building programs while essentially on their own.

### **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.**

Voices will advocate for a budget package that will result in the closure of our two remaining Juvenile Correctional Centers (JCCs) and a reinvestment of those funds into a full, evidence-based continuum of supports and services geared towards rehabilitation in family and community environments. Many youth in our juvenile justice system have mental health needs that are either untreated or undertreated; these youth could also benefit from family engagement strategies that can often only be implemented when youth are living with or near family members. Family and community-based services also allow for continuity of treatment needs: these youth are often known to other systems before they enter DJJ, and will most likely need to be known by other systems (like mental and behavioral health) when they leave. Virginia is poised at a moment of real opportunity to see large-scale reform of a system that is just not working as it’s currently structured.

### **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 advocate for a bill that will begin the process of placing some parameters on the CPS practice of kinship diversion, which currently is not supported in either statute or regulation. The bill will call for extensive data collection on the number of youth who are diverted, the outcomes achieved for those youth, the timelines related to diversion and either reunification or custody transfer, and any subsequent child welfare involvement, among other points, so that we can begin to track outcomes and learn more about how the practice is or is not working throughout the state. The bill will also provide for transparency by disseminating information to parents about the process and their attendant rights. We see this bill as the first step in a multi-year process to improve this practice.

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

### ***Access to Health Care***

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**Support health care reform initiatives in Virginia that increase access to health insurance and health care for children and their parents, including closing the coverage gap for low-income adults.**

We will continue to advocate as part of the Healthcare for All Virginians (HAV) Coalition for Virginia to draw down federal dollars to expand health care coverage to low-income adults up to 138% of the federal poverty level. This action could provide insurance coverage to approximately 400,000 low-income working adults, one-third of whom are parents of children younger than 18. Research shows that when parents are insured, they are more likely to insure their children and take them to the doctor for preventive and other health care.

### ***Family Economic Security***

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**Strengthen the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) and Child Tax Credit (CTC) programs in Virginia in order for families to receive the greatest benefit from their participation, and support efforts to protect TANF from the reductions and restrictions that hurt families and children.**

Given that approximately 15% of Virginia’s children are living in poverty—and that figure has worsened considerably since 2006—it is crucial that Virginia ensures that EITC and CTC programs are accessible and provide the greatest benefit to eligible families. These two programs are essential tools to help lift families and children out of poverty, and our own state policies could be improved to increase the effectiveness of both. Voices will work with our partners at The Commonwealth Institute for Fiscal Analysis to monitor any proposed actions related to and support efforts that strengthen these programs.

Similarly, any cuts to TANF payments or eligibility will be an extraordinary threat to the well being of a great number of low-income children. TANF payments to low-income families are an important component for mitigating poverty’s negative and lasting effects on children.