



2018 Legislative Agenda

Children's Mental Health

Continue implementation of STEP-VA, the plan for improving statewide community-based mental health services for all ages

Voices and its partners will advocate for a budget package that includes significant funding to continue implementation of STEP-VA, the plan for improving statewide community mental health services. STEP-VA aims to ensure that every community has the capacity to provide integrated behavioral health and health services to people of all ages, regardless of insurance status. The General Assembly signaled its commitment to STEP-VA by partially funding same-day access to mental health services during the 2017 session.

Improve transportation of children in mental health crisis by supporting a non-law-enforcement transportation model

In Virginia, children experiencing a mental health crisis are often transported to a mental health facility by law enforcement under a temporary detention order (TDO). During their transport, these children are frequently handcuffed in the back of a police car. This criminalization of children's crises often results in traumatization and stigmatization. A recent alternative transportation pilot project in Southwest Virginia demonstrated that adults in mental health crisis can be safely transported to the hospital without the use of law enforcement. The pilot produced positive patient outcomes and provided relief to law enforcement. Voices and its partners will advocate that the General Assembly fund two expanded pilot projects for non-law-enforcement transportation for both children and adults during the upcoming biennium.

Invest in early childhood mental health workforce development opportunities

As the Commonwealth transforms its behavioral health system, it is important that a statewide infrastructure is built to ensure that evidence-based early childhood mental health services are available for young children (ages 0-5) across the state. Voices supports state investments dedicated to building a statewide early childhood mental health workforce with the capacity to provide clinically appropriate mental health services to children ages 0-5 and their families.

Access to Health Care

Protect health insurance coverage for children and pregnant women in low-income and working families

Congress failed to extend funding for the Children’s Health Insurance Program (CHIP), known as FAMIS in Virginia, before it expired on Sept. 30. If Congress does not take action to re-fund this program, approximately 69,000 children and pregnant women risk losing their health insurance. Virginia must continue to fund FAMIS at its current funding level.

Support health care reform initiatives that will increase access to health insurance for Virginia children and their parents

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 insurance coverage to adults with incomes up to 138 percent of the federal poverty line. This action could provide health insurance coverage to approximately 300,000 low-income adults, many of whom are working parents. Expanding Medicaid will allow Virginia to save state dollars that should be reinvested in efforts to improve the delivery of mental health and substance-use disorder services.

Foster Care Reform

Connect efforts to address barriers faced by youth transitioning out of foster care

Learning to drive is a rite of passage to young adulthood for millions of teens. However, teens in foster care often face significant barriers to obtaining a driver’s license, such as difficulty securing the necessary parental or guardian permission to enroll in driver’s education or purchase an insurance policy. An inability to pay for the various fees associated with becoming a driver is often the root of the problem. Voices will work with the Virginia Commission on Youth to study barriers to youth in foster care making the transition to adulthood. In addition, Voices will advocate for improving the process for former foster care youth enrolling in Medicaid to ensure they receive coverage through age 26.

Ensure youth aging out of foster care can participate in housing and educational supports through Fostering Futures

Voices played an active role in designing and enacting Fostering Futures, a program that ensures youth in the foster care system will receive housing, educational and casework support, and access to counsel through age 21. Voices is now working with the Department of Social Services to codify Fostering Futures. Originally authorized in 2016 through an appropriation, the program must be included in the Virginia Code to ensure its sustainability.

Provide temporary financial support for kinship care

Voices will advocate for Virginia to adopt a kinship guardianship assistance program that will facilitate child placements with relatives and ensure permanency for children for whom adoption or being returned home are not appropriate permanency options. Kinship assistance includes support services that foster protective factors—such as parental resilience, parenting skills, and social connections—to ensure the safety of children. Relatives caring for children placed in kinship care currently have little or no access to the financial support and services that licensed relative foster parents receive. They often

lack information about how to access services for the children. We will advocate for regulations to ensure the use of best practices for kinship diversion throughout the state.

State Policy Coordination

Continue supporting the Governor’s Children’s Cabinet

Voices will champion continued funding and staff support for the Governor’s Children’s Cabinet to ensure its continuance in the Northam administration. Established by Gov. Terry McAuliffe, the Children’s Cabinet is a cross-secretariat, multi-agency collaborative dedicated to developing and implementing a comprehensive policy agenda to promote the well-being of the commonwealth’s children from birth to age 21.

Promote trauma-informed best practices

Voices will advocate for Virginia to establish an interagency working group to evaluate the commonwealth’s policies and practices that address adverse childhood experiences and promote resiliency. Voices will also help to promote innovative trauma-informed practices by advocating for additional state-funded grants for local organizations that promote trauma-informed care.

Early childhood development and education (unified early childhood policy agenda)

Collaborate on promoting the unified early childhood policy agenda

Voices will collaborate with its early childhood network partners to support the unified early childhood policy agenda. The network supports better access to, and coordination of, health care and mental health services for children. It will advocate for the social-emotional needs of young children by supporting evidence-based training and interventions for parents, caregivers, and health care professionals. The network also champions incentives for quality improvement across early care settings. Voices and the network will continue to promote the implementation of fingerprint background checks for all licensed and regulated child care providers. Finally, we will support efforts to improve access to high-quality early care and education for children from low-income families.

Support for partner organizations that are taking the lead on shared issues

Bring more social workers, counselors, psychologists, and nurses into schools

As the rate of children experiencing economic hardship increases, so too does the need for additional supports to ensure all students have what they need to achieve academic success. The Virginia Board of Education recommends establishing minimum staffing levels for essential support positions cap. Voices and our partner Alliance for Students asks the legislature to include these support staff positions in the school funding formula.

Dismantle the school-to-prison pipeline

The commonwealth ranks among the top five states in the nation for referring students to law enforcement for school discipline issues. During the 2015–2016 school year, Virginia schools issued over 131,500 out-of-school suspensions to over 70,000 individual students, representing an increase in the overall suspension rate for the second year in a row. In addition, students of color and students with disabilities were disproportionately suspended. Therefore, Voices supports school suspension reform and alternative discipline interventions as ways to reduce suspension rates and improve student behavior.

Enhance services to substance-affected newborns and their mothers

Over 1,500 newborns were referred to Child Protective Services for substance exposure in FY17, a 16 percent increase over FY16. Pregnant women and mothers facing addiction struggle to balance receiving appropriate recovery services while maintaining bonds with their families and attachment to their infants. Voices supports stronger systems of care to support pregnant and parenting women with substance abuse issues, including easier access to treatment and home-visiting services and the extension of health insurance for new mothers beyond 60 days postpartum. These topics require further exploration to ensure mothers receive treatment and children are safe and able to maintain strong bonds with their families.

Support efforts to protect TANF and SNAP

Given that approximately 15 percent of Virginia’s children are living in poverty, we must ensure TANF and SNAP programs are accessible and provide the greatest benefit to eligible families. Any cuts to TANF payments or eligibility will threaten the well-being of many low-income children.