



2019 Legislative Agenda

Children's Mental Health

Improve access to children's mental health crisis services through the continued implementation of STEP-VA. Voices will continue to advocate for the implementation of STEP-VA, the plan for improving statewide community mental health services for adults and children. Efforts this year are focused on the need for community-based mobile crisis services and improved access to regional crisis stabilization units for children and adolescents. Developing a robust continuum of crisis services in partnership with community services boards reduces costly and potentially traumatic in-patient hospitalizations and out-of-home placements.

Support the integration of mental health services in primary care by establishing a pediatric mental health access program in Virginia. Provide state financial support to scale up the Virginia Mental Health Access Project (VMAP). This project seeks to improve primary care providers' ability to address children's mental health needs through additional training, improved care coordination, and behavioral health consultation services.

Improve access to health and mental health services by increasing Medicaid reimbursement rates for primary care providers and licensed mental health professionals. In Virginia, there is a critical shortage of licensed mental health professionals available to treat children and adolescents in need. Increasing Medicaid reimbursement rates for primary care physicians and mental health professionals is necessary to promote robust access to necessary health care and specialized behavioral health services.

Strengthen early childhood mental health policies to support the healthy development of young children in Virginia. As the commonwealth transforms our behavioral health system, it is important to build a statewide infrastructure that ensures evidence-based early childhood mental health services are available across the state. Financing options including Medicaid and other new federal funding streams, such as opioid response grants and Title IV-E, can be explored as options to build the needed infrastructure.

Mental Health Support in Schools

Increase support personnel in schools such as counselors, social workers, psychologists, and nurses to help schools recognize and respond to trauma and implement trauma-informed interventions. These student support positions help to create a positive and supportive school climate, help implement positive behavioral interventions and supports, and help respond to behaviors through treatment and referral to other community-based resources.

- Improve the ratio of school counselors to students in PreK-12th grade to 1 to 250 students by adding additional state funding for support personnel.
- Amend the standards of accreditation so that school counselors spend a minimum of 80% of their time providing direct counseling services.

Provide training in trauma recognition and trauma-informed approaches to all school personnel.

Require school resource officers and school security to have background training in trauma-informed care. Currently, these positions do not have training requirements.

Support the creation of a student mental health commission to make recommendations for how to increase access to mental health services in schools, including partnerships with community-based services. Additionally, the commission should focus on collaborative opportunities that could support student mental health services, such as leveraging Medicaid.

Early Childhood Education

Sustain funding for preschool expansion efforts for at-risk 4 year-olds. Federal funding for the VPI+ initiative runs out next school year. These federal funds have enabled communities to add new classrooms, establish quality improvement strategies, and train new teachers. The state should offer incentives to local school divisions to continue these efforts such as an enhanced state match for the program.

Help parents understand their role as a “buffer” -- preventing exposure to, and mitigating the impact of, childhood trauma. Virginia should expand efforts to support parents such as home visitation and other evidence-based parenting support initiatives.

Improve the quality of early education programs by investing in quality improvement strategies such as classroom observation and coaching. Build on the existing efforts of Virginia Quality and UVA CASTL initiatives to improve observation, coaching, and curriculum implementation to expand impact for all public and private early learning settings.

Identify the frameworks to expand publicly supported early learning in private settings and to better align early learning initiatives including program governance, collaborative data sharing, and performance metrics. Improving the early learning system requires a shared vision for success, as well as a system to measure progress or identify needs.

Family Economic Stability

Use existing balances in federal Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) funds to increase monthly payment rates for participating families. The average monthly TANF payment is currently \$314. This rate has been adjusted rarely in Virginia; had it been adjusted for inflation, the average monthly payment would currently be \$676. This financial assistance helps very low-income families afford essentials such as food, housing, health care, and child care. Additionally, an increase in the TANF payment rate would help support kinship caregivers who rely on “child-only” TANF as the only financial assistance they are eligible to receive to help cover costs of raising kin.

A refundable Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) helps to put money back in the pockets of working low-income families. Voices supports partners in the efforts to make Virginia’s portion of the EITC refundable so that low-income working Virginians have additional resources to meet their families’ needs.

Monitor the implementation of Medicaid Expansion in January 2019 to ensure previously uninsured parents receive health and mental health care. Voices will track the implementation of Medicaid enrollment and proposed work requirements in the COMPASS waiver application to ensure that parents will be able to fully benefit from improved Medicaid coverage.

Foster Care

Support the initial steps to implement the federal Family First Prevention Services Act. The Family First Prevention Services Act is the first transformation of the child welfare system in nearly 40 years and provides an opportunity to invest in prevention through evidence-based and trauma-informed services. To support implementation we must add leadership positions at the Department of Social Services, invest in the infrastructure to scale up evidence-based services, and provide funding to help residential treatment centers implement a higher standard of care.

Reduce barriers and pave the way for youth in foster care to obtain driver's licenses. Nationally, only 3% of youth in foster care obtain a driver’s license while in care, compared to 63% of their peers. To remove some of these barriers, Voices supports the Commission on Youth’s recommendation to reimburse foster parents, kinship caregivers, and youth in Fostering Futures for their insurance premiums. In addition, protections should be put in place so that foster parents cannot be denied coverage because of their status as foster parents. The Virginia Department of Social Services should be funded to effectively implement these initiatives.

Bring structure and additional supports to the kinship diversion program, an effort designed to avoid foster care by facilitating placements with relatives. To ensure the financial stability of relative caregivers, Virginia should increase monthly payments for child-only TANF, one of the only funding streams available for low-income kinship caregivers. To better understand where children are in relative kinship placements, Voices supports a requirement to track data on children diverted from foster care.

Freeze credit for children who are in foster care for more than 90 days in order to prevent fraudulent activity. Occasionally youth aging out of foster care realize their identity and information has been falsely used by foster parents or family members to establish credit. Voices supports a proposal to freeze their credit, now a free benefit, for all foster children while they are under 18.

Trauma-informed Communities

Provide support for communities to build cross-sector trauma-informed networks. Provide additional state funding to the Family and Children’s Trust Fund (FACT) to increase the number of grants supporting trauma-informed communities. FACT currently has resources to fund two community networks out of the 15 communities where networks exist. Additional state resources could help FACT leverage additional private dollars to support these networks.