



Foster care is a state-run program that provides temporary care for children who cannot live with their parents or other relatives. Through this system, the local department of social services takes legal custody of a child when a parent or parents are unable to care for him or her, most often because of neglect and/or abuse.

Placement of a child in foster care should be temporary and family based, when possible, until a more permanent connection is made. Preferred options include working with families to improve conditions in order to return children to their homes, placement with a relative, or adoption.

A Vision for Virginia

The Foster Care Unified Agenda is created by partners from across the Commonwealth who represent policy advocates, service providers, parents and caregivers, and—most especially—youth to identify key legislative opportunities to improve Virginia’s child welfare system.

In 2018, Congress passed what is now the greatest reform to child welfare in 40 years with the Family First Prevention Services Act. The Family First Prevention Services Act reforms Title IV-E and Title IV-B of the Social Security Act, the federal child welfare financing streams that provide services to families at risk of entering the child welfare system. The bill aims to **prevent** children from entering foster care by allowing federal reimbursement for mental health services, substance use treatment, and in-home parenting skill training before children are removed from their home. It also seeks to improve the well-being of children already in foster care by providing incentives to states to reduce placement of children in congregate care. Advocates are in strong support of the full implementation of this act as it presents Virginia with the opportunity to transform its child welfare system from a reactive system to a preventative one.

In 2019, the first-ever Foster Care Caucus will be established. This caucus will provide legislators an opportunity to learn about the most pressing issues in child welfare. The caucus is chaired by Delegate Emily Brewer (R) and Senator Monty Mason (D).

The Foster Care Network believes that children do best when there are able to remain safely in their homes. We believe that strengthening families should be a top priority for our lawmakers.

Members:

Children’s Home Society
Depaul Community Resources
Family Focused Treatment Associations
Families Forward Virginia
Greater Richmond SCAN
Greater Charlottesville Trauma Informed Community Network

United Methodist Family Services
Virginia Association of Child Placing Agencies
Virginia League of Social Service Executives
Virginia Poverty Law Center
Voices for Virginia’s Children

2019 Unified Legislative Agenda

- **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 additional 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 to 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, advocates support 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. In order to effectively implement these changes, the Virginia Department of Social Services should be funded to 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 and supports to relative foster care placements.** 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. Although studies show that the best family for a foster child is a relative foster family, Virginia's rate of relative foster families is less than a third of the national average. Advocates support language added to the code of Virginia that will require LDSS's to prioritize family placement for children who are entering foster care. To better understand where children are in relative kinship placements, advocates also support 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 a youth aging out of foster care realizes 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.
- **Increase accountability of Child Protective Services and Foster Care by clarifying and strengthening the authority of the Virginia Department of Social Services over local departments.** Increase staff capacity at the regional level, and create a children's ombudsman as an independent investigative office. Ensure that best practices are followed statewide, including caseload limits, increasing the use of relative foster homes, and prioritizing the sufficiency, stability, and professionalism of caseworkers throughout the Commonwealth.