

2020 FOSTER CARE UNIFIED AGENDA

Voices

For Virginia's Children

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 2019, the Joint Legislative Audit and Review Commission on foster care study revealed Virginia’s longstanding failings in Virginia’s foster care system. It showed a lack of adherence to requirements in some cases, a need to place more children in family-based foster care settings (including kinship care), high caseloads, and a 40% turnover rate in the workforce. In 2019, the legislature made several sweeping reforms to the foster care system. However, this year the foster care unified agenda is focused on continuing momentum and advancing needed financial investments into foster care.

In 2019, the first-ever Foster Care Caucus was established. The caucus provides 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).

OUR MEMBERS



SCALE-UP EVIDENCE-BASED PRACTICES TO ACHIEVE BETTER OUTCOMES FOR CHILDREN AND FAMILIES

Enable providers to implement more trauma-informed and evidence-based practices by funding efforts to train providers in new models. To support implementation of the Family First Prevention Services Act we must continue to invest in the infrastructure to scale up evidence-based services

- **REQUEST: \$33M over two years in Governor's budget to provide evidence based and trauma-informed mental health, substance use disorder, and in-home parent skill based training to children at imminent risk of entering foster care.**

CREATE STRUCTURE FOR VIRGINIA'S KINSHIP CARE SYSTEM

Virginia must create a financial assistance program for kinship caregivers. Additional financial assistance can incentivize relatives and kin to take children in and avoid foster care placements. Research shows that children placed with relatives or kin are more likely to achieve permanency than children in non-relative placements. Half of children of color who are discharged from foster care go to live with relatives. Although studies show that the best family for a child in foster care is a relative, Virginia's practice does not provide financial or social support to relatives and kinship caregivers outside formal foster care placements. The implementation of Family First provides an opportunity to support kinship caregivers but it will not provide financial assistance.

- **REQUEST: \$16M over two years in Governor's budget to provide support payments for relatives caring for children outside of foster care.**

STABILIZE THE FOSTER CARE WORKFORCE

Increase the minimum salary for local DSS Family Services Series positions and provide a salary adjustment for current Family Services employees. The 2018 JLARC report highlighted that stability of the foster care workforce as one of the primary challenges. Turnover rates for an entry-level Family Services Worker Specialist is 42%, with retention efforts being an even greater issue in small, rural agencies. The minimum starting salary for an entry level position is \$30,828, which is only slightly above the 2019 Federal Poverty Level for a family of four. The impact of the high-turnover of caseworkers on children is found in our low rate of permanency of children and the number of placements children experience.

- **REQUEST: \$18 Million over two years in Governor's budget to increase family service specialists position salaries by 20%.**

HELP FOSTER CARE YOUTH HAVE NORMAL ADOLESCENT EXPERIENCES

- **Help foster youth obtain drivers licenses and transportation to attend school and to find employment.** Support foster youth to obtain a driver's license by providing reimbursements for foster parents, kinship caregivers, and youth in Fostering Futures for their car insurance premiums.
 - **REQUEST - Driver's License Program for Foster Care Youth Budget Amendment | \$250,000 | Item 354 #6 (Keam) & 354#9s (Favola)**
- **Codify Fostering Futures.** In 2016, Virginia was able to extend foster care services for older youth in foster care by obtaining additional funds in the budget. Now we must pass a law to put the program in code to ensure it is always available for young people. Virginia has one of the highest utilization rates of extended foster care in the country.
 - **REQUEST - Support SB156/HB400 | Favola & Keam**
- **Create a children's ombudsman as an independent investigative office.** Establish an independent and autonomous agency that handles and investigates complaints from citizens and families related to child welfare services that protects the interests and rights of children and families.
 - **REQUEST - Support HB1301 | Hurst |**

Increase compensation for Guardian Ad Litem. Many young people who have experienced foster care say they never met their Guardian Ad Litem. One of the reasons for this is the two-level compensation for GALs, who are paid \$75 per hour for in-court work, and \$55 per hour for out-of-court work. But their work outside the courtroom, ascertaining what a child's best interests may be, is their most important duty. GAL compensation should reflect what we value most: a child's best interests, not speaking to a judge.

- **REQUEST - Support HB137 | Collins |**

Replace the Virginia Department of Social Services data tracking system known as OASIS. Updated technology, along with updated training and child welfare courses, will allow social services to serve children and families more efficiently. This can reduce the length of time between a child entering foster care and finding permanency through reunification, kinship care, or adoption.

- **REQUEST: Support \$4 million included in Governors proposed budget to replace VDSS data tracking system.**