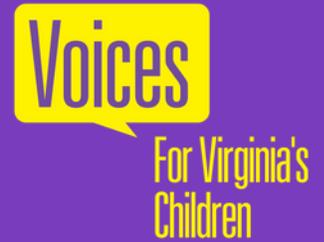


# 2021 FOSTER CARE & CHILD WELFARE EQUITY IMPACT STATEMENT



Allison Gilbreath | Voices for Virginia's Children  
804-649-0184 ext. 109 | allison@vakids.org

## **BLACK CHILDREN AND CHILDREN OF TWO OR MORE RACES ARE OVERREPRESENTED IN FOSTER CARE:**

In the 2020 legislative session, a number of key advancements were made for children and families in foster care. However, these investments were almost all put on hold due to the pandemic. The pandemic created more challenges in day-to-day activities for foster and kinship caregivers, as well as child welfare professionals. Many children entering the foster care system have experienced adversity and trauma, leaving them more vulnerable to the changes that come with school closings, lack of daily contact with friends and mentors, and other forms of social distancing. Virginia's local department of social services has seen a decrease in reports of child abuse and neglect but expects a sharp increase as schools reopen. The child welfare system often feels immediate and long-term impacts from an economic downturn with more demands for services and increased parental stress.

- Black children make up 22% of Virginia's child population but 30% of the foster care population, in addition they make up a disproportionate number of children aging out of foster care without a permanent connection.
- Children of color are disproportionately represented in group care settings; which research shows is less beneficial than a family setting.
- Families of color are more likely to support children outside of the formal foster care system due to systemic barriers to becoming foster parents, such as barrier crimes, laws and fear of working with the child welfare system.

**BLACK CHILDREN REPRESENT****22%**OF VIRGINIA'S POPULATION  
BUT**30%**

OF CHILDREN IN VA FOSTER CARE.

**MIXED-RACE CHILDREN REPRESENT****6%**OF VIRGINIA'S POPULATION  
BUT**10%**

OF CHILDREN IN VA FOSTER CARE.

**IMPACT ON CHILDREN:**

- Children of color are more likely to age out of foster care without a permanent connection and are more likely to experience low educational and job attainment. They are also more likely to experience homelessness than the general public.
- Parents who live in lower income communities are more likely to be referred to child protective services due to poverty rather than child abuse or neglect.

**INFORMED PERSPECTIVE:**

- Voices for Virginia's Children is home to the Foster Care Policy Network made up of partners from across the Commonwealth who represent policy advocates, service providers, parents and caregivers, and—most especially—youth. It was created to identify key legislative opportunities to improve Virginia's child welfare system. The network helped to develop this race/equity impact statement and determine what the priorities are for reform efforts in our foster care system.
- Youth participating in Voices' Foster & Kinship Care Advocacy Cohort help inform the policy priorities in this impact statement and are also made up predominantly of youth of color.
- The Virginia League of Social Services Executives has increasingly made known the intense burnout from those working in the field as well as the lack of training available on how to address the race/equity issues within the sector.
- Though Virginia lacks quantitative data, from accessing partners in the field, youth who identify as LGBTQ+ are more likely to be system involved and more likely to age out of care. Advocates are seeking greater reforms to the foster care system to meet the needs of this population.

## **POLICY CONSIDERATIONS:**

### **Fund community based prevention services to meet families where they are.**

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 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. Families of color would benefit from services they can turn to that would provide an alternative to placing children in foster care.

### **Bring social supports to the kinship diversion program, an effort designed to avoid foster care by facilitating placements with relatives by creating a statewide kinship navigator program.**

Provide funding to VDSS to develop a statewide Kinship Navigator program in Virginia, which will provide information, resources and referral services to children and kin caregivers. Kinship navigator programs offer help to kinship providers, more often families of color, and the public in areas such as financial assistance, legal referrals, education and support groups, basic needs, child care and respite, and outreach and public education. Many kinship navigator programs also assist caregivers in obtaining copies of birth certificates, social security cards, immunization records, and any documents needed for the school registration of a child.

### **Eliminate barriers to kinship caregivers becoming licensed foster parents by amending the barrier crime statute.**

One commonly articulated reason about why the percentage of kinship foster care has remained so low in Virginia, compared to the rest of the nation, is that Virginia's list of barrier crimes is extensive. A barrier crime is a crime set forth in statute that explicitly disqualifies a person from foster care or kinship foster care. Federal law sets the baseline for barrier crimes standards that states must follow in setting up their foster care program in order to be eligible for Title IV-E funds. They also have a limited list of barrier crimes that states must comply with, as well as a short list of crimes for which an exception may be granted after five years.