



Voices

For Virginia's
Children

2021 MENTAL HEALTH LEGISLATIVE AGENDA

Emily Griffey | Voices for Virginia's Children
804-649-0184 ext. 101 | emily@vakids.org

The status of children's mental health is facing a critical system change moment because of the COVID-19 pandemic. There has never been a moment when mental health needs were more prevalent or more normalized. There are few moments in history when every child and parent experience a collective trauma and we are in that moment. Our awareness and understanding of how racial and historical trauma is also connected to mental health and wellness. As the pandemic continues to exacerbate hardships for families along lines of race and ethnicity, more must be done to address the mental health of Virginia's children.

We must take this opportunity to build a new approach to mental health services and supports for children. The first step starts with investments from Governor Northam, state agencies, and the legislature in 2021.

RACIAL AND HISTORICAL TRAUMA IN VIRGINIA'S CHILDREN

Prior to the pandemic, 1 in 4 children in Virginia experienced a mental health issue ranging from ADD to depression/anxiety. Mental Health America found a 93% increase over the previous year of individuals seeking help through the online screening during the pandemic. There was a 9% increase in September 2020 compared to 2019 among youth ages 11 to 17 taking the screening.

Research shows that community disasters or traumas can produce high levels of mental health issues in children, with as many as half of children in a community experiencing mental health issues after a disaster. In 2018-19, data from the National Survey of Children's Health shows that nearly 61% of Black and Latino children in Virginia experienced trauma. In the future, our systems must respond to this disproportionate impact and the context of racial and historical trauma.

Every legislator should ask, "How am I addressing mental health needs in education, health care and the economy?"

Support parents

1 in 5 parents reported feeling stressed or depressed during the pandemic. The mental health and wellness of parents directly impacts their children. Parents who are stressed financially or by grief, loss, and anxiety cannot provide the optimal supportive environment for kids to grow and thrive. We need policies such as home visiting and paid leave expansion that support parents.

Start early

Begin in early education and elementary schools by training educators to support social-emotional wellness and to identify and address mental health issues appropriately. A team of advocates and state agency leaders put together a report about how to build mental health supports in early education systems. State agencies must work towards implementing those plans and the legislature must support additional mental health services.

Use Medicaid as an opportunity

More than 700,000, or 1 in 3 children in Virginia, is insured by Medicaid/FAMIS. These children are the most economically at risk in the state. They also experience a lack of access to resources in their communities. We can reach a large group of our most vulnerable children through Medicaid and know which tools for screening, care coordination, and incentive funds can be leveraged before kids fully return to classrooms and child care.

Build the continuum

2020 has disrupted the way we deliver services. Since efforts such as the Family First Prevention Services Act and Behavioral Health Enhancement will reform how services are delivered, another look at the continuum is warranted. Currently, additional services and a trained workforce will need to be built at every level and in every geographic region for a fully articulated continuum. Funding to continue implementing Behavioral Health Enhancement and the Family First Prevention Services Act should be a priority.

Apply an equity lens

Virginia must strengthen our systems of support to be better prepared to meet the needs of children of color and respond to racial and historical trauma. We need training in implicit bias and the intersection of racial and cultural trauma for all of our child-serving professionals. There also must be greater efforts to recruit a diverse set of professionals more reflective of the kids they serve.