



# 2022 FOSTER CARE UNIFIED AGENDA

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.

## MEMBERS



# 2022 FOSTER CARE UNIFIED AGENDA

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.

**There are approximately 5,000 children in foster care in Virginia.**

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## Pressing Needs in 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 first-ever Foster Care Caucus was established, providing 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).

During 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. These investments would have supported the implementation of the Family First Prevention Services Act, provided more assistance to kinship caregivers, and provide more support for older youth in care transitioning to adulthood. 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.



# Pressing Needs in Virginia

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.

Long-term and significant investments are needed to eliminate barriers, strengthen the child welfare workforce, provide support for kinship caregivers and achieve the best outcomes for children, youth and families.

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## Child Welfare Infrastructure

The instability of the foster care workforce and outdated technology are major challenges in Virginia's child welfare system. According to a 2018 JLARC report, turnover rates for an entry-level Family Services Worker Specialist is 42%, with retention efforts being an even greater issue in small, rural agencies.

Additionally, delays in placement are caused by an inefficient case management system that prolongs the amount of time a child finds permanency.

### To Move Virginia Forward:

**When the Child Welfare workforce is stabilized, children achieve permanency faster and more often.**

- **INCREASE THE SALARIES FOR LOCAL DSS FAMILY SERVICES SERIES POSITIONS AND PROVIDE A SALARY ADJUSTMENT FOR CURRENT FAMILY SERVICES EMPLOYEES.**

A salary boost for the child welfare workers is an important and necessary step in reducing high turnover rates and keeping staff in the workforce.

- **REPLACE THE VIRGINIA DEPARTMENT OF SOCIAL SERVICES DATA TRACKING SYSTEM CHILD WELFARE INFORMATION SYSTEM.**

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.

# Scale Up Evidence & Community-Based Practices to Achieve Better Outcomes for Children and Families

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 fully support implementation, what's needed is additional leadership positions at the Department of Social Services, investment in the infrastructure to scale up evidence-based services, and funding to help residential treatment centers to implement a higher standard of care.

## To Move Virginia Forward:

- **ALLOT FUNDING TOWARDS IMPLEMENTING THE FEDERAL FAMILY FIRST PREVENTION SERVICES ACT.**

Supporting implementation will help prevent children from entering foster care, and continued efforts to recruit and retain a child welfare workforce.

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# Provide Social Supports & Easier Path for Kinship Caregivers

Kinship navigator programs offer help to kinship providers 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.

## To Move Virginia Forward:

- **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, resource, and referral services to children and kin caregivers.

# Provide Social Supports & Easier Path for Kinship Caregivers

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.

## To Move Virginia Forward:

- **ELIMINATE BARRIERS TO KINSHIP CAREGIVERS BECOMING LICENSED FOSTER PARENTS BY AMENDING THE BARRIER CRIME STATUE.**

Removing barriers to participation and placement with foster families by addressing the list of crimes that prevent individuals from becoming foster placements, will increase the percentage of kinship foster care in Virginia; especially when crimes are far in the past.

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# Help Foster Care Youth Have Normal Adolescent Experiences

Virginia continues to rank 49th in the country for youth in foster care aging out without a permanent connection.

## To Move Virginia Forward:

- **SUPPORT THE RECOMMENDATIONS FOR VIRGINIA'S COMMISSION ON YOUTH WORKFORCE OUTCOMES FOR YOUTH IN CARE.**

Provide support for the Great Expectations program at community colleges to serve more students or recruit students.

Create a point of contact at the State Council of Higher Education for Virginia for those involved in the foster care system.

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.



# Help Unaccompanied Homeless Youth Access Health Care

Unaccompanied homeless youth under the age of 18 are not able to access safe emergency shelter and services or basic health and mental health care without parental consent. However, their parents are unable or unwilling to consent for various reasons - including their own mental health and/or substance abuse issues, incarceration, and family dysfunction. This creates a barrier to safety and stability for youth and communities.

## To Move Virginia Forward:

- **HELP YOUTH ON THEIR OWN ACCESS BASIC HEALTH CARE AND SERVICES.**

Reforms to Virginia state laws could help keep unaccompanied homeless youth safe. Virginia could join 31 states, including Maryland, and DC, in enacting a law allowing minors to consent for routine health care, including vaccinations. Virginia also could take a major step to combat trafficking of youth by allowing homeless youth under age 18 the legal right to access housing, shelter, and other basic services, as several other states, including Maryland, have done.

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## Court Involvement

Improvements to court system process can improve parents' access to justice, and shorten the time to permanency for children in foster care.

## To Move Virginia Forward:

- **ESTABLISH COURT OVERSIGHT OF FOSTER CARE PLACEMENTS.**

This would allow a court to reject a placement decision if it's not in a child's best interests, requiring the DSS to come up with a new placement - just as if a plan goal was rejected.

- **CHILD-WELFARE-SPECIFIC "BEST INTERESTS OF THE CHILD" FACTORS.**

Child-welfare-specific "Best Interests of the Child" factors would give courts guidance as to what to consider when making determinations about DSS child placement decisions.

- **CREATE PARENT REPRESENTATION PILOT CENTERS THROUGH A BUDGET AMENDMENT.**

These have been shown to improve parents' access to justice, and to shorten the time to permanency for children in foster care, thus improving outcomes for children and saving money--without compromising safety. Pilot programs would be located in Northern Virginia and Southwest Virginia.

