

Voices 2007 Children's Agenda

Increase funding for child care subsidies for low-income working parents:

- Expand Virginia's child care subsidy program to serve an additional 13,000 children from low-income working families (cost: \$34.3M). There are currently 32,000 children whose low-income, working parents receive a subsidy to help pay part of their child care expense. However, there are already over 13,000 eligible children on local DSS waiting lists, twice the number from two years ago (note that the 13,000 figure seriously underestimates total unmet need, for some localities stop adding to the waiting list when it reaches a certain level). After housing costs, the burden of paying for child care is the single most serious threat to the continued employment and self-sufficiency of low-income parents. Many are paying 30% or more of their income for child care.

Expand child and adolescent mental health services to address significant unmet needs:

- Provide funding for the nine remaining juvenile detention centers that do not receive funds for collaborative mental health projects with the Community Services Boards (cost: \$1.2 million).
- Implement evidence-based "system of care" programs in 6 additional communities to serve 3 priority populations: those involved with the juvenile justice system; those returning from residential care, or those diagnosed with co-occurring mental health and substance use disorders (cost: \$3 million).

Address critical mental health workforce shortages:

- Increase the size of the behavioral health workforce by creating 4 child psychiatry fellowships and 4 child psychology internships with "payback provisions." These provisions require the recipients to work in underserved areas in Virginia (cost: \$493,000).
- Establish a university-based teaching center to organize, coordinate, and implement trainings for pediatricians, family practitioners, and therapeutic clinicians in evidence-based, promising, and best practices for children's behavioral health treatment (cost: \$700,000).

Provide Information and Support to families of children with mental health problems:

Build a strong statewide Family Resource and Referral Network to educate parents and professionals about children's mental health, and to increase family involvement in the development and implementation of local and state systems of care (cost: \$150,000).

Voices also supports:

Start Strong Pre-K Initiative: Funding to promote the creation of local Start Strong Councils and to establish 6 local Start Strong pre-K pilot projects, as first steps in a comprehensive initiative to ensure the school readiness of all Virginia children. Critical components include:

- blended public-private programs and funding streams, with provisions for parent payments,
- a voluntary Quality Rating System (QRS) that defines five levels of quality and provides mentors/coaches to help willing pre-K programs improve quality,
- research-based best practices to measure program quality and to assess child progress,
- expanded opportunities for professional development and career advancement, and
- provisions to expand the number of at-risk 4 year-olds served, and to add program enhancements that ensure maximum impact on at-risk children.

Clean Indoor Air: Prohibit smoking in indoor public establishments, including restaurants, thereby reducing children's exposure to second hand smoke. Second hand smoke is particularly harmful to young children, causing middle ear infections, induction and exacerbation of asthma, and lower respiratory tract infections.

Increasing the State Minimum Wage: Increase the state minimum wage (\$5.15/hour), which has not been increased since 1997.

Restricting Payday Lending: Enact meaningful reform to the payday lending industry including requiring payday lenders to adhere to a 36% interest rate cap.

Tax relief for low income families: Raise the filing threshold from \$7000 to \$12,000 for individuals and from \$14,000 to \$24,000 for couples filing jointly in order to remove 147,000 low-income people from the tax rolls, providing permanent economic assistance to the neediest taxpayers. Another 171,000 filers who currently pay no state income taxes would no longer have the burden of filing state tax returns.

Expanding access to prenatal care: Expand prenatal coverage for low income women by increasing eligibility from 166% to 200% of the federal poverty line, which consistent with eligibility for babies through FAMIS (the state children's health insurance program).

Increasing financial support for foster and adoptive families: Increase maintenance payments made to foster family homes and special needs adoption homes by 10%. Maintenance payments are the financial subsidies paid to families to support their care for a foster or special needs adoptive child.