



Families Forward Virginia
2023 POLICY AGENDA

POLICY PRIORITIES

Every public policy we advocate for focuses on ways to promote safe, stable and nurturing relationships for all children to assure that they can reach their full potential. Every family is filled with tremendous promise, and we have a shared obligation to foster their potential.

INCREASE FAMILY RESILIENCE AND SUCCESS

We support increased access to Behavioral Health Services for parents, caregivers and children, including treatment for substance use disorder, without requiring involvement in the child welfare system. This includes additional funding for VMAP (Virginia Mental Health Access Program).

Why: Behavioral health services and substance use treatment for parents reduces child maltreatment, improves family outcomes and keeps families together by preventing foster care placement. Traumatized youth need supports and services so they can heal and reach their full potential. VMAP has developed a strong, efficient and effective model of behavioral health and health integration. Proposed increases will expand training efforts beyond primary care into emergency departments and provide additional expertise to support young children and their families.

We support providing all parents and caregivers the knowledge, skills and support to raise strong, resilient and happy children. This is done through programs such as Home Visiting and parenting education.

Why: As a general rule, all parents want what's best for their children but children don't come with instruction manuals and parenting is one

of the most difficult jobs even in good times. All parents and caregivers need help learning how to raise and teach their children. Strong relationships between caregivers and children enhances children's capacity to grow up to be self-sufficient and responsible people. Studies have shown that spanking can be a source of toxic stress for children and can stunt brain development by reducing connective tissue between brain cells¹.

IMPROVE MATERNAL AND INFANT HEALTH

What: Serve more families to establish CHIP's evidence base. Now is the perfect time to invest to help CHIP become an Evidence Based Program so that it can leverage its existing Virginia funding to draw down federal funding.

Why: Virginia has been funding its own home visiting program, CHIP, for many years with great outcomes. Expanding home visiting programs is a recommendation of the 2021 VDSS Virginia Plan to Prevent Child Abuse and Neglect².

We support actively dismantling the root causes of health disparities including systemic poverty and structural racism. Economic and racial disparities have life-threatening consequences for families. Meaningful actions must combat the cultural, operational and structural barriers that have created inequities that persist today in maternal and infant health.

¹["AAP Says Spanking Harms Children." 5 Nov 2018.](#)

²[The Virginia Plan to Prevent Child Abuse and Neglect. VDSS. May 2021](#)

Why: Black women are three times more likely to die from childbirth complications than White women, and face a 70% higher³ risk of severe maternal morbidity than any other racial groups. According to Virginia's Maternal Mortality Review Team, the majority (51%) of pregnancy-related deaths in Virginia result from provider-related factors—not underlying health conditions. Being in poverty can significantly reduce access to preventive health care and maternal care. Impoverished Americans are also more likely to have comorbidities due to their likelihood of living in a food or hospital desert⁴. Health disparities span education levels, socioeconomic status, age and geography—pointing to underlying inequities and bias within the health care system that must be addressed systemically and across the life span—not just during pregnancy.

STRENGTHEN FAMILY ECONOMIC SECURITY

What: Prioritize parents in tax relief proposals by expanding the state-level Earned Income Tax Credit to make the state portion fully refundable at the maximum amount – 20% of the federal credit. Establish a state-level Child Tax Credit to provide families with dependent children an additional tax rebate for families earning under \$100,000 per year, and set a rebate of \$500 per child.

Why: These policies are recommendations of the 2021 Virginia Plan to Prevent Child Abuse and Neglect written by the Virginia Department of Social Services⁵. Improved household financial security has proven to reduce the risk factors for child abuse and neglect. Policies that strengthen family financial security can go a long way toward

reducing childhood adversity and enhancing the relationships that help children thrive. Boosting family incomes through emergency direct payments, tax credits and paid family leave can relieve pressure, helping to head off childhood adversity before it happens.

We support guaranteed Paid Sick Leave and/or Paid Family Leave for Virginia's families.

Why: Paid leave has been associated with lower infant mortality and higher rates of immunizations. Studies have found that paid leave increases exclusive breastfeeding and may improve women's economic outcomes.⁶

We support funding to increase mixed-delivery grants to public/private early education settings and increase parent choice through the child care subsidy program. We also support making the COVID-era changes to eligibility for the child care subsidy program permanent, including higher income eligibility, allowing for eligibility during job search and reducing/eliminating parent co-pays.

Why: Child care is necessary infrastructure for Virginia's economy. Affordable and accessible child care for Virginia families allows parents to work. This increases payroll taxes and enables parents to support their children while disrupting the cycles of abuse, poverty and neglect.

REFORM THE CHILD WELFARE SYSTEM

What: Prevent unnecessary foster care placements by expanding access to community based programs such as Family Resource Centers and expanding resources for kinship caregivers.

³[Racial and Ethnic Disparities in Severe Maternal Morbidity in the United States - PubMed \(nih.gov\)](#)

⁴[Poverty, race, the biggest determinants of maternal mortality according to experts - State of Reform | State of Reform](#)

⁵[The Virginia Plan to Prevent Child Abuse and Neglect. VDSS. May 2021.](#)

⁶[Jody Heymann, Aleta R. Sprague, Arijit Nandi, Alison Earle, Priya Batra, Adam Schickedanz, Paul J. Chung and Amy Raub. Public Health Reviews. 2017. 38:21.](#)

Why: Children do better in families, yet kinship caregivers receive minimal support in creating safe and supported environments for children. For those who are placed with family members, Virginia doesn't have a system to ensure their ongoing safety and permanency.

What: Boost salaries and hire additional child welfare case workers to effectively manage child-welfare and foster-care cases.

Why: Children's lives are at risk because the child welfare system is critically understaffed. High case-worker turnover rates (40% before 18 months)⁷ interfere with stability, safety, and permanency efforts for families and children. More case workers are required in local communities to protect children, reduce caseloads, and protect and supervise children who are no longer with their parents.

We support reforming laws that currently punish sex trafficking survivors and improving access to services for victims and survivors.

Why: Common practice is to treat sex-trafficking victims as criminals, as opposed to survivors that need resources and services to disrupt cycles of abuse and trauma.

We support changing policies and systems to ensure that the rights of parents, youth and children are protected and that the voices of parents, youth and children are properly heard. This includes expanding parent legal representation options for families involved in the child welfare system.

Why: Families are strengthened when we include parents, youth and children's voices and respect their rights and autonomy. We can strengthen families by building upon the strengths that exist and providing support to resolve issues that parents, youth and children have. When we elevate the voices of parents, youth and children, services and supports can be customized to meet their needs and address their barriers to success.

⁷[Department of Social Services Decision Package. "Fund Child Welfare Program Improvements and Mandates." Agency Narrative. Sept 20, 2019.](#)



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