

Voices for Vermont's Children

Promoting public policy that enhances the lives of children and youth in Vermont



2009 Legislative Agenda

Child Nutrition

Child Protection and Safety

Child Welfare

Early Care and Education

Environmental Health

Health Insurance

One Vermont Coalition

Paid Sick Days

Public Education

State Budget

CHILD NUTRITION

Voices will join with the Campaign to End Childhood Hunger to support two omnibus child nutrition bills.

- The first will put into statute promises made by the Douglas Administration to expand eligibility for the food stamp program. The gross income limit for Food Stamp Program eligibility will be raised from 130% of the federal poverty line to 185%. In addition, the bill would eliminate the asset test for the food stamp program. It is estimated that up to 30,000 more Vermonters would become eligible as a result of these changes. Because food stamps are entirely federally funded, the changes would bring in millions of additional federal dollars at minimal cost to the state.
- The second bill will improve three separate child nutrition programs. The Simplified Summer Food Program would receive a small increase from the state for the cost of each breakfast and lunch (estimated cost is \$25,000). The Child and Adult Care Food Program would receive a supplement from the state for the cost of snacks (estimated cost is \$100,000). The School Lunch Program would be supplemented in order to provide free lunch to all low-income students (estimated cost is \$352,000). The total estimated cost for this bill is \$477,000.

CHILD PROTECTION AND SAFETY

- **Foster Care and Residential Programs**

Voices will oppose cuts to stipends for foster parents and to the budgets of residential programs that serve children and youth.

- **Kinship Care and Guardianship**

Voices will support increased reimbursement for kin who take on the care of at-risk children. We will support the implementation of a subsidized guardianship law.

- **Transitional Youth**

Voices will continue its ongoing monitoring of legislation that affect youth transitioning from the custody of the state. We will work toward increased access to funding for higher education for this group.

CHILD WELFARE

- **Reach Ahead**

Voices will advocate for the immediate implementation of the Reach Ahead program, a newly designed food assistance program for low-income employed families. Implementation of this program, which will provide food assistance to the family for one year, was delayed already due to funding limitations. The Administration has proposed not funding this program.

- **Reach Up**

Voices will oppose proposals by the Administration to implement full family sanctions in the Reach Up program. Currently when a parent fails to comply with work requirements the parent loses her portion of the grant; however, the children continue to receive a reduced payment. Under full family sanctions the entire family will be terminated if the parent fails to comply.

- **SSI and Reach Up**

Voices will oppose the Administration's proposal to count the SSI payment of an aged, blind or disabled family member when determining the family's eligibility for Reach Up. Always before that money was disregarded.

EARLY CARE AND EDUCATION

Voices will continue to lead the legislative work of the **Kids Are Priority One** early childhood coalition. Work on early childhood issues will include:

- **Strengthening the Child Care Subsidy Program** to incrementally increase investment in the program by:
 - a. Bringing eligibility for the program up to current federal poverty and state median income guidelines.
 - b. Adjusting guidelines annually to match federal poverty and state median income guidelines.
 - c. Increasing the subsidy rates over a three-year period so the maximum subsidy amount is at the 75th percentile of the child care rates paid in the private market in Vermont.
 - d. Adjusting rates annually to reflect cost of living increases.
- **Supporting infrastructure for a system of early care, health and education**

Voices supports enabling legislation for the development of a unified, coordinated early childhood system to connect families, services, and programs to better serve children efficiently and effectively, identify gaps in services, plan for improvements, and identify new resources.
- **Ensuring child care quality**

Voices will encourage the use of federal stimulus funds (designated for child care quality) to improve the oversight of childcare providers in the state. Specifically, we will work for more licensers in the Child Development Division. At present, the number of licensers is well below national standards and results in inadequate oversight of regulated and licensed child care providers.

ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH

- As a member of the Alliance for a Clean and Healthy Vermont, Voices will work to address children's exposure to environmental toxins in Vermont. Voices supports the following bills:
 - a. Green cleaning legislation that will require Vermont schools to use environmentally preferable cleaning products. These products are safer for human health and the environment than conventional cleaning products. The use of "green" cleaning products by both state buildings and participating schools has demonstrated that switching to these products is cost neutral.
 - b. School pesticide legislation that will help reduce the use of the highest risk pesticides in Vermont Schools. Pesticides are poisons that intend to kill. When applied on school grounds, pesticide can contaminate the air, soil, and water and come in contact with children. This legislation requires schools to employ comprehensive Integrated Pest Management (IPM) strategies designed to address the sources of pest problems via safer alternatives.
 - c. Environmental toxins legislation that will limit exposure to Deca and BPA. Decabrominated diphenyl ether (Deca) is a toxic flame retardant that is part of a family of chemicals known as Polybrominated diphenyl ethers (PBDEs). Many of the products we use contain flame retardants designed to prevent the spread of fire. PBDEs are highly toxic and can be found in a variety of products including carpeting, clothing, mattresses, computers, and televisions.
- **Tobacco**

Voices will support the efforts of the American Lung Association of Vermont and the Tobacco Task Force to protect children and youth from exposure to secondhand smoke. This effort includes the development of a capacity-building plan to encourage voluntary adoption of smoke-free policies in multi-unit housing, including affordable housing.

HEALTH INSURANCE

Voices will oppose any increases in Dr. Dynasaur or Vermont Health Access Plan premiums.

ONE VERMONT COALITION

Voices will continue its work as chair of the One Vermont Coalition and support the legislative agenda developed by the Coalition. One Vermont is working for a balanced approach to our budget crisis, including use of federal funds and finding new revenue sources to protect crucial public services and structures. One Vermont is also working to improve transparency in the budget process.

PAID SICK DAYS

Voices will lead a coalition whose goal is to mandate paid sick days for all working Vermonters. A bill will be introduced calling for at least seven days per year for full-time employees, a pro-rated amount for part-time workers and safe days for victims of domestic violence.

PUBLIC EDUCATION

Voices will continue to monitor the work in the legislature on education funding. There is some discussion of increasing the income-based aspects of the system, which we support. We remain committed to maintaining the equity of the same education tax rate for the same per pupil spending

There is considerable legislative discussion about changes to Act 60 and Act 68. As changes in the system are proposed, Voices will work to maintain the current stable and equitable funding of our schools that allows all school children to have equal access to education, regardless of the property wealth of the town in which they live.

Voices will continue to support efforts to repeal the sections in Act 82 of 2007 that requires two votes on proposed budgets for certain school districts exceeding a certain amount of growth in their budget. This part of the law does not take into account the many factors affecting school budget increases and uses an arbitrary limit which inhibits local decision-making. As discussions continue on addressing school spending, we will support policies that take into account the true costs of what our schools are being asked to do as they educate our children.

STATE BUDGET

The state of Vermont is feeling strongly the effects of the current economic crisis facing the entire country. With the economy likely to be weak for several quarters the state needs fiscal stimulus to jolt its sagging finances. The Administration has proposed a set of budget reduction strategies that, if implemented, will undermine seriously the well being of vulnerable Vermonters of all ages. Voices will monitor proposed cuts to state supports and services for children and youth and advocate for raising revenue or using rainy funds to keep our state's essential services in place.

Voices
for Vermont's Children

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