



2019 Legislative Priorities

Economic Security

Reach Up

Increase cash assistance to Vermont's most vulnerable families to current basic needs standard and eliminate the \$115/mo penalty for families with an adult who is disabled.

Status: Progress

The FY20 budget approved by the Legislature increases Reach Up program spending by about \$2.5 million, allowing the benefit level to be updated from 2004 rates to 2008 rates, and partially addressing a reduction for families with parents with disabilities. While still far from adequate to cover basic needs, this increase will mean benefits for a typical family of three outside Chittenden County will increase by \$60 per month, from \$640 to \$700. The SSI penalty has been reduced to \$77/mo.

What you can do: Please thank Senators Jane Kitchel, Ginny Lyons, and Rich Westman for championing this much-needed boost for Vermont's lowest-income families.

Family and Medical Leave Insurance Program (FaMLI)

Provide economic support and job security to families facing a serious illness or to bond with a new child.

Status: Stalled

The comprehensive, universal paid family and medical leave bill that left the House hit significant obstacles in the Senate. After extensive discussions of the merits of the policy and what seemed to be general consensus around maintaining a strong bill, the Senate Economic Development committee pivoted, centering their decision-making on meeting an arbitrary cap of .2% on the payroll tax that will fund the program. This required several changes to the bill that undermined the goals of the policy, stepped backward from national trends, and lost support in the FaMLI coalition and in the House. Namely: elimination of the benefit for personal medical leave, reduction of the caregiving leave from 8 weeks to 6, and disallowing multiple eligible employees in a family from taking their full leave for a qualifying event. For example,

two new parents would not get a combined total of 24 weeks leave, they would have to ration 12 weeks (increased to 16 in the final version passed by the Senate) between them.

These changes, combined with difficulty in the House to generate veto-proof support for the Senate's priority minimum wage bill, placed the two chambers in a standoff. In the background loomed the probability that Gov. Scott would veto one of both of the bills. When time ran out on the session, the House and Senate had not reached agreement on compromise legislation, so the bills are on hold until the second half of the session next year. We remain concerned that the bill currently in play falls short of stated policy goals and is unnecessarily complex; with opt-in features and shared leave-taking limits in families.

What you can do: Stay tuned. We will work to build support for a bill we can be proud of that will meet the needs of children and working families over the next several months, and we will need your voice!

Minimum Wage

Ensure that wages are sufficient to meet families' basic needs.

Status: Stalled

As referenced above, the increased minimum wage bill was embroiled in the Senate/House standoff, and like paid family and medical leave it did not cross the finish line before adjournment. Disagreement between the chambers centered on how quickly the wage should be raised, and how to address the impact on small businesses, child care programs, and Medicaid-funded personal care providers. Legislative leaders have vowed to take up both the minimum wage and paid leave bills quickly when they return in January.

What you can do: Let your legislators know that 1) you support an incremental increase in the minimum wage until it intersects with a "livable wage," with automatic cost-of-living increases after that, and 2) you want the state to place proper value on the work of caring for children, older adults, and people with disabilities.

Child Care: Access and Affordability

Support increases to Child Care Financial Assistance eligibility and provider reimbursement rates. Examine how the current regulatory framework for high-quality care is impacting access.

Status: Progress

The FY20 budget contains a package of \$7.4 million in child care investments intended to make child care more affordable for Vermont families, increase reimbursement rates for child care and early learning programs, recruit and retain early educators, and lay the foundation for future expansion of the program. The budget passed by the legislature includes \$5.7 million in new base funding for CCFAP, \$1 million in one-time funds for critical IT infrastructure updates needed to administer the program in future years, and \$600,000 in one-time funds to recruit and retain early educators. (*Update courtesy of Let's Grow Kids*)

What you can do: Thank legislators for their support of this important step in the ongoing need to increase investments in early care and learning.

HEALTH

Medicaid Coverage of Doula services

Make this low-cost service with excellent outcomes for kids, mothers and families available to pregnant women on Medicaid.

Status: Bill Introduced

[H.219](#) was introduced by lead sponsor Rep. Diana Gonzalez and referred to the House Health Care committee. Voices will be working with sponsors and stakeholders on a strategy to advance this legislation in 2020.

What you can do: Contact Sarah Teel (steel@voicesforvtkids.org) to learn more or get involved.

Lead in School Water Systems

Ensure that schools have the resources to immediately test and remediate plumbing fixtures that may be contaminating children's drinking water with lead.

Status: Success

The legislature passed S.40, a bill requiring schools and child care facilities to test all drinking water outlets by the end of 2020. While child care providers are already required to do some water testing, this program would require testing all taps used for drinking and cooking, and require new, more reliable sampling measures – all of which will be paid for by the state.

In outlets where lead levels are found to be at or above 4 parts per billion, remediation will be required. There is no safe level of lead, but the legislature landed on 4 ppb action level in recognition of the practical limits of remediation. State funding will cover most/all of the costs of remediation.

What you can do: Thank legislators, especially lead sponsor Senator Brian Campion and the members of the conference committee who worked through a tough negotiation and landed on a solution that puts kids' health and safety first. (Sens. Barruth, Ingram, Hardy and Reps. Webb, Gregoire, and James).

Education

Invest in Afterschool Programs

An extensive report from the Expanded Learning Opportunities (ELO) Working Group under Vermont's PreK-16 Council has shown that \$2.5 million per year is needed to make sure every family and student who needs afterschool and summer learning can have access to these

programs. We support Vermont Afterschool's recommendation that the State make a strong investment in afterschool programs to:

- a) support the learning, emotional and social needs of children and youth; and
- b) address the systemic inequities that limit access to afterschool and summer learning programs for low-income children, youth, and families.

Status: Progress

The Advisory Council on Child Poverty and Strengthening Families included in its 2018 report to the legislature a recommendation to increase investments in afterschool and summer programs to expand high quality programs and increase statewide access.

During the session Vermont Afterschool provided an array of opportunities for policymakers and stakeholders to learn about afterschool and summer learning. They included:

- Holly Morehouse's testimony before house and senate education committees that included information about the [VT9TO26 Coalition](#) and [Vermont afterschool](#);
- A learning exchange with Dr. Hasse Siurala, an experienced youth researcher and European expert in youth policy. Dr. Siurala testified about [youth development as early prevention](#) before house and senate education committees; and
- [Vermont Afterschool's day in the legislature](#) that featured afterschool youth ambassadors from across the state.

Education Funding:

Eliminate the Property Tax on Primary Residences and Base School Taxes on Income

Voces will support a proposal to make the school funding system fairer and less complicated. While Vermont's current funding system is the most progressive in the country, it still favors upper-income Vermonters who pay their education taxes based on property value thus allowing them to pay a smaller share of their income in school taxes than low- and moderate-income taxpayers. Eliminating the property tax on primary residences makes the school tax system less regressive and simpler. First, it would be based on each taxpayer's ability to pay; and second, it would go from two systems - one for higher-income people and one for low- and middle-income people - to one system for everyone (see [Public Asset's fact sheet](#) for details).

Status: Progress

The Senate Committee on Education heard [testimony](#) from Public Assets Institute about the benefits of Act 60/68 (Vermont's education funding law) and how its progressivity can be improved by eliminating the school property tax on all primary residences.

What you can do: Stay tuned. We will work with our partners to introduce a bill in 2020 that establishes income-based education taxes for all residents.

Ethnic & Social Equity in Schools

The lack of attention to the histories and contributions of non-dominant racial, ethnic, and social groups in school curriculums contributes to the marginalization of members of these groups, and leads to a standard of miseducation for all students. Including the history and

contributions of people from more diverse racial, ethnic, and social identities can enrich students' achievement, positive identity development, and sense of awareness and connectedness to local, national, and global communities.

Voices will support the [Vermont Coalition for Ethnic and Social Equity in Schools](#) (VCESES) work to advance [legislation](#) that establishes a working group to create inclusive curriculum standards across all subjects, PreK-12.

Status: Success

Early in the session, the legislature unanimously passed H. 3. and Act 1 was signed into law March 29, 2019 ([link to video of signing](#)). In summary, [Act 1](#) establishes the ethnic and social equity standards advisory working group comprising 20 members that includes two students. A majority of the advisory working group (11) will be appointed by VCESES. The group's charge is to review and recommend to the State Board of Education standards, across all subjects, prek-12, that "recognize fully the history, contributions, and perspectives of ethnic groups and social groups" outlined in the law.

Members of VCESES worked tirelessly with policymakers and other stakeholders to ensure that a strong bill passed ([see examples of testimony](#)) and that it reflected VCESES vision for Vermont schools and students. As Amanda Garces, founder of VCESES, said at the bill signing, "every student deserves to have access to their histories and an education that represents the community they come from... that each one comes from a legacy of thinkers, creators and resisters.."

As a member of the VCESES, Voices is supporting community outreach efforts across the state to engage parents, youth, and educators in learning about Act 1 and together how to design inclusive curriculum for their schools.

What you can do: Thank legislators for their unanimous support and talk with them about why the law matters to you. Become a [VCESES](#) partner. Help support VCESES community-driven efforts to work with educators, youth and parents to design inclusive curricula.

Family & Community

Office of Child Advocate

Establish an independent oversight entity for the child protection system.

Office of Child Advocate exist in most states, including the other five New England states. The key principles of the internationally recognized ombudsman model are independence and objectivity, credibility of the investigation process, unfettered access to records, and confidentiality. offices have complete access to case files and other records, and review state actions for compliance with existing statute and adherence to policy. Where existing statute is unclear or not aligned with evidence-based practice, the office can make recommendations for

policy change. Typically, the office publishes an annual report that aggregates the complaints, points out trends (geographical, types of policy violations, etc.) and make recommendations for system reform.

Status: Bill Introduced

[H.215](#) was introduced by Rep. Noyes and Rep. Pugh and referred to House Human Services Committee. Voices will be working with sponsors and stakeholders on a strategy to advance this legislation in 2020.

Juvenile Justice

Voices will monitor and participate in reforming the juvenile justice system. This will include monitoring the work presented about the CHINS process, the raise the age initiatives, the conversations about Woodside, and the broad continuum of care for children and youth in Vermont.

Status: Progress

The Children in Need of Care and Services (CHINS) Reform Workgroup presented their [report](#) to the legislature. The multidisciplinary team met to advise how a \$3.75 million one-time settlement appropriation should be spent to reduce the need for DCF interventions and make the CHINS process more efficient and effective. Discussions around this appropriation are ongoing.

S.133, an act relating to juvenile jurisdiction was signed into law on May 30th as Act 45. This bill makes technical corrections to the chapters of Title 33 governing juvenile delinquency and youthful offender proceedings. Under Act 45, youthful offender proceedings for people ages 18-21 must be open to the public. This was intended to restore public trust in the process, particularly for the more high profile cases. Voices is pleased that the language giving sole discretion to the prosecutor for initiating youthful offender status was removed.

The discussions on Woodside are ongoing. There is one proposal to build a new facility that plan to be more responsive to the diverse needs of the kids in care. DCF is also requesting information from community providers to see if they can meet the needs of some of the children and youth more locally. This is an opportunity to discuss the full continuum of care and the budget priorities of the state to see if we are adequately meeting the needs of kids and families at the acuity that they require.

H.330 (Act 37) is an act relating to repealing the statute of limitations for civil actions based on childhood sexual abuse. Often, survivors can't process their abuse, or come forward, until it is too late. The previous statute of limitations was set at six years.