

Connecticut Voices for Children & Advocates for Connecticut's Children and Youth 2009 Legislative Agenda

I. Promote More Strategic State Planning and Fiscal Choices

A. Establish Comprehensive Long Term Planning in Connecticut

Issue: Unlike many other states, Connecticut has *no* comprehensive long-term, strategic planning process. Individual state agencies may have some plans (e.g., DECD's new economic development plan), but *no* single plan seeks to integrate planning across state agencies, from economic development to education and human services. For a \$18 billion/year enterprise to have no comprehensive plan for where it wants to go and how it wants to get there has proven problematic. Contributing to this lack of planning was the lay-off of virtually all planners in the Office of Policy and Management in FY 02-03 when the state budget was in deficit (as well as planners in many other state agencies). In the 2007 Session, we successfully urged the Legislative Program Review and Investigations Committee to make this issue the focus of one of its comprehensive studies. Its 2008 report sharply criticized the state's failure to do adequate planning, and made a set of comprehensive recommendations based on the best practice examples in some other states (e.g., Virginia)

Proposal: That Connecticut establish an office for long term planning which will span executive (OPM), legislative, and judicial branches, involve others outside government, and be linked to an academic institution.

B. Assure Stable and Adequate State Revenues, Equitably Borne by all Residents

Issue: Connecticut has passed a series of deficit mitigation measures exceeding \$1.7 billion for the current fiscal year ending June 30, 2009, in response to across the board declines in state revenues. In addition, a structural budget deficit was projected for FY 10-11 even before the economy began to fail -- the result of the use of one-time revenues to balance the current FY 09 budget, increased tax expenditures and revenue intercepts, an outdate tax code, and increased and new program costs. The 2009 General Assembly must grapple not only with the recent downturn in revenues, but also with these larger structural problems with our budget. Comptroller Wyman notes "it is the structural budget issues that must be addressed within your deficit mitigation planning if the state is to regain long term fiscal stability. To date, little has occurred at the state level to alter the long term deficit path of the General Fund budget." In February, Connecticut's Office of Fiscal Analysis released deficit projections of \$4.0 billion for FY10, and \$4.7 billion for FY11.

Proposals: CT Voices will:

- Support use of the Budget Reserve Fund to cover budget deficits resulting from the economic downturn. This will avert spending cuts that can exacerbate the economic downturn and buy the time needed to identify the spending reductions that would inflict the least harm to state residents

and businesses and lay the foundation for the strategic revenue enhancements needed to support wise public investment consistent with long-term planning goals;

- Support public investment in short-term economic stimulus initiatives, including through increased spending on our state's transportation and other infrastructure, expansion of unemployment insurance, and increased public investment in state "safety net" fuel, food, and cash assistance and child care programs;
- Support a range of new revenue options (e.g., a more progressive state personal income tax, mandatory unified reporting, an annual cap on movie tax and other credits, repeal of tax expenditures with inadequate economic benefit, well-targeted user fees) to maintain the public investment needed to keep Connecticut competitive and to safeguard the well-being of its families;
- Support efforts to make Connecticut's state and local taxes more equitable and better balanced, including reducing reliance on the property tax (by increasing state funding to cities, towns, and regions) and targeting tax increases to the Connecticut businesses and residents who have benefited most from our economy;
- Support creation of a Commission (like the Massachusetts effort last year) to examine how Connecticut now taxes its businesses and make recommendations for ways such taxation might better advance state goals of adding high quality jobs and helping Connecticut-based businesses.
- Support initiatives to increase transparency and accountability in the state budget.

CT Voices also will oppose: a) cuts in spending to early care and education, K-12 education, and higher education and to safety net programs; b) efforts to cap the growth in local property taxes, urging instead increased state aid to cities and towns and incentives for regional cooperation; c) proposals to balance the state budget by shifting costs to cities and towns, or by shifting costs to future generations by increasing the state's unfunded liabilities.

CT Voices will work with federal, state, and local officials to ensure that Connecticut maximizes the impact of funds available through the federal stimulus package (The American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009), particularly in areas such as Medicaid, unemployment insurance, and education.

II. Reduce Child Poverty

A. Adopt Measures to Reduce Child Poverty by 50% by 2014

Issue: Connecticut's child poverty rate remains high and steady, relative to the state's wealth. In 2004, the CT Child Poverty and Prevention Council set a target of reducing child poverty by 50% by 2014. Connecticut is *not* on track to achieve this target. Indeed Connecticut's 2007 child poverty rate of 10.6% (for related children) is virtually the same as the 2003 rate of 10.8% (the baseline cited in the original child poverty council report).

Proposal: The Council asked a group of experts to cull from the dozens of the Council's ideas those that are most likely to reduce child poverty. CT Voices supports the experts' recommendations:

- Income tax based assistance for workers, including a refundable state earned income tax credit
- Subsidized child care for all low income families
- Rental assistance to improve low-income families' ability to meet basic needs and reduce residential instability
- Outreach efforts to ensure that all eligible parents and children actually receive health care for which they are eligible

- Expanded investment in high quality early care and education, and adoption of full-year, full-day preschool
- Improved proportion of highly qualified teachers in low-income schools
- Increased cash assistance and other support for post-secondary education, and adoption of measures to reduce high school dropout rates
- Support high-risk families through intensive case management and employment related services
- Increase uptake of programs such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, formerly “food stamps”), child nutrition, SSI, energy assistance, and other programs providing income support
- Reducing teen births
- Removal of all ‘tax penalties’ from the CT tax code
- Avoidance of abrupt benefit changes (a.k.a. “cliffs”), particularly through programs such as the state’s Temporary Family Assistance (TFA) program, SNAP, Medicaid and housing assistance.
- Improving the prospects of fathers by helping young males complete high school and transition successfully to the labor force

We will also oppose budget/policy proposals that would *increase* child and family poverty.

III. Assure Timely and Affordable Health Care

A. Oppose cuts to HUSKY program eligibility and services, including imposition of premiums and co-pays in HUSKY A (Medicaid) and increases in HUSKY B premiums; advocate for maximization of federal Medicaid matching funds available under the federal Children’s Health Insurance Program (CHIP) and stimulus package (The American Recovery and Reinvestment Act).

B. Maintain HUSKY Performance Monitoring Funds at Current FY 09 Levels

Issue: CT Voices receives funding from DSS, through the Hartford Foundation for Public Giving, to do independent performance monitoring of the HUSKY program for the Medicaid Managed Care Council and others, and receives the encounter data necessary for this monitoring from a DSS contractor. With the “carve-out” of mental health services, pharmacy benefits and dental care; the contracting with new managed care organizations; and the advent of primary care case management as an alternative to managed care by private health plans, independent performance monitoring of the HUSKY program should continue and be strengthened.

Proposal: Funds are in the FY 09 budget; we will advocate to maintain current funding.

C. Increase, improve and systematize medical interpretation services

Issue: The Medicaid HUSKY and fee for service programs have historically provided inadequate interpreter services to recipients with limited English proficiency. Over the last couple of years a wide range of health policy and legal advocates, and community-based organizations, have advocated for development of systematic, high quality, accessible and transparent language services in order to comply with federal civil rights law and to appropriately provide essential health care to all Medicaid recipients. In 2007 legislation was passed requiring DSS to amend the state Medicaid plan to add medical interpreting as a covered service. In FY 07 General Assembly appropriated \$4.7 M in the budget for medical interpretation in Medicaid program. DSS began planning a state-wide contracted system for medical interpretation in all the state health insurance programs. Governor Rell’s FY ‘08 budget

eliminated this funding. But the 2008 General Assembly defended the program and the allocation, and the previous \$4.7 M allocation remained intact due to '08 stay-put budget.

In 2008 DSS, with community input (CT Health Foundation, Hispanic Health Council Latino Policy Institute, Greater Hartford Legal Aid and other community-based organizations):

- 1) developed Concept and RFP for a state-wide contracted entity to provide medical interpretation services (full spectrum from in-person to telephonic services)
- 2) recruited independent community-based individuals/organizations to review proposals in response to RFP

In May'08 the RFP was completed, but it stalled in DSS' Contract Compliance office. Governor Rell's '09 deficit budget eliminates \$1.175 M from Medicaid medical interpreter program.

Proposal: Defend the legislation passed in 2007 requiring the Medicaid State Plan amendment, and the budget appropriation for the service

IV. Improve Access to High Quality Early Care and Education for Working Parents

A. Defend core early care and education programs – and critical child health and safety supports – from state budget cuts.

Issue: In times of economic difficulty, cutting services to those with the greatest need can be damaging over both the short and long term. This is especially true for the already financially challenged early child care system. The extensive research showing the first three years of a child's life to be the most important in future success makes clear that letting these children slip through the cracks now, due to cuts in funding, will only create a larger economic burden in the future.

Proposal: Maintain current levels of eligibility (and concomitant expenditures) for core early childhood programming, including but not limited to the following:

- Care4Kids
- State Funded Child Care Centers
- School Readiness Programs
- State Funded Head Start
- Birth to Three System
- Family Resource Centers

B. Improve the overall structure of the early childhood care and education system

Issue: The system of early childhood care in the state of Connecticut is currently one of disorder, created of a patchwork of competing programs and funding streams with duplicative intake and reporting requirements and a severe lack of uniformity of data collection. The keys to supporting and educating the greatest number of Connecticut's children in the highest quality settings are organization and standardization.

Proposal: The following four recommendations will help work towards a cohesive and coordinated system of care:

- A unique identifier system for children ages 0-4 enrolled in any state-funded early care and education program (such as School Readiness or Head Start) or receiving any kind of state subsidy for early care and education (such as Care4Kids). Note that this system must be aligned with the public school identifier system to allow for the continuous tracking of children from early care and education programs through public school.
- A streamlined and coordinated Higher Education workforce development pathway – and specifically the completion of articulation agreements between all state universities to allow for the movement of early childhood credits.
- The creation of a system of uniform intake and reporting requirements across programs and funding streams
- The movement of the management of Family Resource Programs to the Early Childhood Bureau of the State Department of Education

C. Increase financial support for infant and toddler programs at state funded child care centers

Issue: Infant and toddler programs have struggled historically to keep their doors open as higher staff-to-child ratios for this age group (required by law) means higher expense. However, these programs are also extremely important, as recent developments in neuroscience have confirmed and emphasized that quality early care in the first thousand days of life is critical to the development of an academically and socially successful child.

Recent tough economic times have caused a crisis scenario, with multiple state-supported infant and toddler programs closing. Last January (08) the Greenknoll YMCA in Brookfield was forced to shut down its infant room to cut costs; in July a center in New Haven closed its infant and toddler program; and in January 09 Stamford's sole provider of state-funded infant and toddler slots, the Childcare Learning Centers, will shut down due to finances – and no other day care provider in Stamford is able to take on these slots, given that the state reimbursement rate for such slots is so far below the true cost of care.

Proposal: To implement a measured increase in infant-toddler rates at state-funded centers in order to allow for preservation of infant-toddler programs at these sites. Because these centers carry with them a guarantee of quality care (106 of the 110 centers have achieved NAYEC accreditation), we believe this targeted investment to infants and toddlers, though admittedly limited in scope, would produce the greatest return and is therefore the wisest use of funds in this difficult economy.

V. Improve Outcomes for Connecticut's DCF-Involved Children

A. Foster School Stability for DCF-Involved Children and Youth

Issue: Children who are put into foster care, and who are moved from one foster placement to another, commonly change schools as well as their placement. This causes further disruptions in their young lives, severing ties to friends, teachers, and school activities. Research shows that each school transition also costs 3-6 months of academic progress. The protections of the federal McKinney-Vento Act (that assure that homeless children can attend their "home school" regardless of the location of the homeless shelter in which they live) do not apply to all foster children although they also are, technically, "home"-less. This discrepancy leaves some of our states children with this academic support and allows other out-of-home youth in foster care to slip through the cracks. During this past legislative session Voices' assisted in drafting a bill based on a successful model implemented by Oregon that requires their child protective

services department to pay for transportation from the foster placement to the school of origin. This legislation was passed unanimously through both the Select Committee on Children and the Education Committee, was allocated a small pot of money by the Appropriation's Committee, and then subsequently died when no changes were made to the budget.

In the interim, federal legislation, the *Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act*, was passed, one section of which requires that state child protection systems implement exactly this school stability mandate. Voices is a participant in DCF/Department of Education Task Force re implementing this educational stability portion of the federal law.

Proposal: By state law, assure compliance with the federal law: DCF-involved children have the right to attend their "home school" when removed from their homes or when moved from one foster placement to another. If a party to the foster care proceeding believes the child should transfer schools, a Judge determines, using a best interests of the child standard, whether the child should be transported back to his/her "home school" or whether a transfer to a new school is more appropriate. DCF as the child's statutory parent, rather than the school district or SDE, pays for the cost of transportation.

B. Support the maintenance of the Department of Children and Families as a single agency

Issue: Legislative committees are currently in the process of reviewing proposals to "break off" parts of DCF's services—mental health, juvenile justice, child protection—into separate agencies or entities. Voices' strongly believes that such a move would be detrimental to the children of Connecticut. Fundamentally, such a move would constitute a change in the way that we view children who interact with the agency. Housing all services housed one roof increases the sense that we are taking a holistic look at a child and are meeting all of their different needs. If there are separate agencies with separate mandates and services the message will be that the door through which a child enters really does matter, which is not the case, and that different areas of a child's life can be separated and treated as such. Resistance to this breakup also stems from other states sharing that their experience has been when such changes are made two to three years of progress is lost as staff and resources shuffle into their new roles. This type of time loss is unacceptable and could be damaging long term.

Proposal: While we do not support breakup of the agency there are many measures that can be taken to strengthen the overall structure and the quality of support given to those children and families that engage in the agency. Strong leadership and a clarification of agency goals are necessary to improve services, hence the following proposals:

- Support the creation of an independently contracted short-term management working group, similar to the one assembled by the Governor to take a look at the Department of Transportation, to create a management analysis strategy plan
- Implement recommendations from the December 2007 Program Review and Investigations Report
- Consider statutory changes to the job requirements for higher level positions within the department

C. Improve Legal Representation Of Abused and Neglected Children (And Their Parents)

Issue: Despite an important infusion of new funds in the 2007 Session, and some aggressive leadership by Carolyn Signorelli, the Chief Child Protection Attorney, the quality of legal representation for children and parents involved in the child protection system remains inadequate. For example, the December 19, 2007 *Juan F.* Court Monitor's report found that only 14% of the attorneys appointed for children in DCF

care participated in any discussion about the child's treatment plan and just 12% attended any Administrative Case Review or Family Conference. Many attorneys continue to be paid \$500 for up to the first 30 hours of work, resulting in very little time being spent on cases.

Connecticut would benefit from a change -- from the current model that relies on several hundred independent contract attorneys to a new legal services-like model that uses both staff lawyers and social workers to staff a case and that assures better training and supervision internally. The Chief Child Protection Attorney agrees with the need for this change, and recently issued an RFP for one or more "model" interdisciplinary offices.

Proposal: The Commission on Child Protection received authorization from OPM to use \$1.5 million of its new FY 08 funds to launch a pilot program to provide, through a "legal services" interdisciplinary-style model, representation for abused and neglected children. This pilot will include an evaluation. There is concern that if the pilot cannot be launched quickly enough, some of these funds may lapse. We need to assure that the revised FY 09 budget includes any necessary carry-forward language, as well as additional funding needed to keep the pilot going in FY 09.

D. Keep Children in Homes Rather than Institutional Care

Proposal: Legislate that DCF implement a pilot "money follows the child" initiative to reduce the number of foster children and youth placed in institutions rather than families. This pilot program would improve outcomes for children and reduce state expenditures by making some or all of the funds that DCF currently spends on institutional care available to a foster family for the purchase of the services the family would need to keep the child in their home. This initiative would be similar to DSS' initiative in long-term care to reduce the reliance on nursing homes by allowing seniors to remain in their homes with the help of community-based, in-home services.

VI. Improve Outcomes in K-12 Education

A. Ensure Timely Implementation of Connecticut's 2007 Law Limiting Out-of-School Suspensions

Issue: Children cannot learn when they are excluded from school. Yet in Connecticut in 2006-2007, over 250,000 school days were lost to out-of-school suspensions. Nearly two-thirds of suspensions were for relatively minor offenses, such as attendance violations and disrespect.

Over-reliance on out-of-school suspensions contributes to high dropout rates and the achievement gap between low-income minority students and their peers. Out-of-school suspensions are also often counterproductive, as they reward misbehaving students with vacations from school. Suspending young children from school is particularly ineffective, yet data show that kindergartners and elementary school students in Connecticut are suspended for nonviolent behaviors with alarming frequency.

Research shows that preventive discipline measures focusing on positive reinforcement, and alternative disciplinary sanctions that do not involve excluding children from school – such as after-hours detention, restitution, or in-school suspension – are significantly more effective in ensuring school discipline.

In the 2007 Session, the General Assembly passed Public Act 07-66, which required that suspensions be served in school—rather than out of school—unless the "*pupil being suspended poses such a danger to person or property or such a disruption of the educational process that the pupil shall be excluded from school during the period of the suspension.*" The law was originally scheduled to go into effect on July 1, 2008. However, in the 2008 Session, the General Assembly agreed to delay implementation of the new

law until July 1, 2009 to allow schools and the State Department of Education sufficient time to develop more effective and less harmful disciplinary alternatives. Two years after enactment of this law, some school districts seek to further delay implementation, citing fiscal concerns.

Proposal: To ensure timely implementation of Connecticut's 2007 law limiting out-of-school suspensions to situations in which they are necessary, so as to improve the educational opportunity on which our economic growth depends; oppose delays and rollbacks of implementation

B. Require Publication of Truancy Data in the Strategic School Profile

Issue: Truancy is an important predictor of school failure, dropping out of school, and involvement in the juvenile justice system. To comply with federal reporting requirements, the State Department of Education (SDE) collects data about truancy in Connecticut schools; however, SDE does not publish this data.

Proposal: Require that the State Department of Education publish the truancy data it already collects on Strategic School Profiles. Strategic School Profiles are publicly-available documents (published on the SDE website) that outline the most important data about individual school and district performance each year. The Superintendent of each local and regional school district presents the district's strategic school profile to the board of education in a public meeting each year, and parents, administrators, advocates, and members of the public rely upon strategic school profiles to inform their efforts to improve the performance of schools.