

V E R M O N T

EARLY CHILDHOOD ALLIANCE

Legislative Summary for the 2016 Session

CHILD CARE FINANCIAL ASSISTANCE PROGRAM: *State Budget*

Lead: *VAEYC, Vermont Child Care Providers Assoc., and VACCRRRA, along with Let's Grow Kids*

Result: *Success*

Advocacy efforts related to CCFAP funding began in the fall and lasted throughout the legislative session, and included a wide range of grassroots outreach to key legislators. When the session began, we were prepared to request significant new expenditures to update the market rate and eligibility guidelines for the CCFAP program. For the second year in a row, we had to adjust our efforts in response to level funding in the Governor's Recommended budget.

CCFAP is designed to provide more support as more high-quality programs in Vermont join the program. Because the program continues to grow, level funding has the impact of a cut as long as caseloads are stable or rising. Service reductions and even waiting lists could result.

Our advocacy pressed both this point and the fact that the CCFAP "market rate" was severely under-funded. The outreach was extensive and gained support from legislators in both the House and the Senate. As result the budget approved by the legislature at the end of the session allocates an additional \$1 million to increase the market rate, and requires the Child Development Division to report in November 2016 on the program's financial situation, caseload projections, and the possibility of wait lists. There is also language in the budget that requires the administration to report on the cost of fully funding CCFAP (see below).

While CCFAP is still severely underfunded and providers are stressed, the Alliance's coordinated advocacy made the situation clearly better for the next Fiscal Year. Securing the \$1 million allocation in a tight budget year was not easy. Legislators are now talking about all of the issues connected to CCFAP -- market rate, eligibility, caseload, and overall affordability and access issues. We have accountability measures in place to respond to any possible shortfall for FY '17, and have strengthened our advocacy capacity. Alliance members will build on that success moving forward.

PAID SICK DAYS: *H. 187*

Lead: *Voices for Vermont's Children on behalf of the Paid Sick Days Coalition*

Result: *Success*

The House passed H. 187 last year, and the Senate began work on the bill in January. The Senate Economic Development Committee passed a revised version of the bill on a 5-0 vote. From there it went to the floor of the Senate where the Paid Sick Days Coalition successfully defended the bill against various amendments seeking to weaken it. The bill passed the Senate with a strong 21-8 vote. After a brief period where the bill was reconsidered, it passed the full Senate on a voice vote and the Senate's version was sent to the House. The House subsequently voted to concur, or agree, with the Senate version of the bill.

The bill was signed into law on March 9th, witnessed by many attending our annual Early Childhood Day at the Legislature.

AFFORDING HOUSING & REDUCING HOMELESSNESS: *State Budget*

Lead: *VT Affordable Housing Coalition*

Result: *Partial Success*

The legislative session saw a mixed result for housing issues. Vermont Housing and Conversation Board (VHCB) funding was level funded for the second straight year. While in a tough budget year level funding can be seen as a victory, this continued underfunding of the program – below statutory mandated levels – means less progress will be made addressing the housing crisis in our state.

Several smaller housing initiatives did gain funding, including an extension of the successful first-time homebuyer program and an economic development initiative in the Northeast Kingdom that should lead to additional housing. The legislature approved a \$238,000 increase for the successful Family Supportive Housing Program, which helps homeless and at-risk families secure housing and the supportive services they need to succeed.

The budget also allocated \$40,000 to provide partial funding for a study on homelessness in Vermont, including the development of a comprehensive and actionable roadmap to reduce homelessness, technical assistance to State agencies and community housing and homeless service providers, and training on best practices for housing and human services collaboration. Unfortunately, a bill that would have supported development of more housing for low- and middle-income Vermonters (H. 865) did not pass both chambers this year.

FY '17 STATE BUDGET, including Child Protection: *State Budget*

Lead: *Vermont Early Childhood Alliance*

Result: *Partial Success*

While previous state budgets made significant cuts to essential programs and services, the Governor's Recommended FY'17 Budget did not propose any significant reductions to key programs. In addition, it proposed additional spending for more child protection staff in DCF and in the court system. This funding is badly needed to reduce the dangerously high caseloads and ensure that children are protected from harm and families are provided the support they need to overcome the challenges of poverty, drug addiction, and a slow economic recovery.

The legislature largely agreed to follow the Governor's recommendations in these areas, and no program cuts were included in the final budget. While there was some haggling over the final figures, hiring should begin this summer for 35 new employees at DCF, including 28 social workers, as well as an additional judge and several employees in the defender general system. Some of the hires are expected to be delayed until later in the summer or fall.

This session there were no substantive discussions about reforming the state's tax code and providing additional revenues to support critical programs. The Senate Appropriations Committee did succeed in getting language added to the budget that directed the Administration to report on the costs associated with fully funding a short list of programs, including CCFAP.

The proposal supported by Voices for Vermont's Children to establish a new Office of Child Advocate did get consideration but did not gain enough support this year to secure funding. While the House Government Operations Committee did spend considerable time in crafting and passing a bill that would have established a new office, they were not able to persuade the Appropriations Committee to allocate funding.

In the coming years, the Alliance will likely continue to discuss how the state should balance the need for increased support for critical programs and the challenges of revenue generation. Without additional revenue, more penny-wise/pound-foolish cuts to essential programs are likely to be considered.

EQUAL ACCESS TO SPECIAL ED SERVICES: *Non-legislative issue*

Lead: *Vermont Family Network and other Alliance members*

Result: *Partial Success*

Over the last several months, the Vermont Family Network and other Alliance members have been actively engaging the Agency of Education, the Department for Children and Families, education administrators and providers, and other stakeholders in ongoing discussions about access challenges for special education services for young children and families. Progress has been slow, but the discussion has focused on identifying the problems and possible solutions. Participants have appreciated the chance to have an open, wide-ranging dialogue. Our goal continues to be to support collaborative service-delivery models involving families, providers, and administrators.

VERMONT AFTERSCHOOL & SUMMER LEARNING: *State Budget*

Lead: *Vermont Afterschool, Inc.*

Result: *Progress Made*

The Legislature authorized the Expanded Learning Opportunities (ELO) Special Fund in 2015 as part of Act 48. The purpose of the ELO Special Fund is to increase access to programs that serve preK–12th grade children and youth outside the school day on a regular basis, including before and after school, school vacation weeks, and summer. However, no funding was provided.

Advocates for the Fund worked hard during the session to gain support from legislators. While the FY 17 budget did not include funding for ELO, both the House and Senate Education Committees supported making allocations to the Fund in their budget memos to their respective Appropriations Committees. Advocacy on this issue will continue in coming months.

BUILDING BRIGHT SPACES FOR BRIGHT FUTURES FUND: *non-legislative issue*

Lead: *VT Community Loan Fund*

Result: *No Progress*

This winter, Loan Fund staff began investigations into the Fund's administration and sought options for strengthening it, including ways to revitalize the specialty license plate program. Options are all non-legislative, and include increased marketing and new visuals/symbols for the plates. Research will continue this summer and fall.

INVESTING IN I.T. AND INTEGRATED ELIGIBILITY: *Capital Bill*

Lead: *Hunger Free Vermont*

Result: *Success*

The current IT system used by the Agency of Human Services (AHS) for important safety net programs like 3SquaresVT, Reach Up, and LIHEAP is outdated and poses a significant barrier to ensuring that all low-income Vermonters can access needed safety net programs. Additionally, the current IT system is holding the State back from meeting standards for compliance in some federal programs and from drawing down all federal dollars available.

Hunger Free Vermont and the Alliance are supporting AHS as they implement a multi-year project to develop an Integrated Eligibility System that will create a more accessible safety net with greater administrative efficiencies and draw down more federal dollars.

During the 2016 session, AHS stepped back from their initial plans and developed a new proposal to the legislature for how to update IT systems. This proposal utilizes software currently in use in Hawaii, and phases in other critical system updates. Legislative committees approved this proposal, and allocated AHS the funding necessary to implement Phase 1 of the project this year. We expect AHS to make requests in the 2017-18 Capital Bill for funding necessary for Phase 2.

OTHER ISSUES

There was considerable debate during the session about an effort to revise the state's new **mandatory reporter language**, which was passed last year but has been causing a high volume of calls to DCF. The legislature failed to reach a compromise on a bill (H. 622) that would have changed the language, and the issue will be discussed this summer and fall by the Joint Legislative Child Protection Oversight Committee.

The legislature passed S.20, which establishes a new **dental therapist** designation in Vermont. Creating this new designation expands care options and increases access by providing safe, competent, and effective preventive and restorative dental care to more Vermonters.

The budget included \$100,000 in state funds matched with \$120,000 in federal dollars to support the **Dr. Dynasaur 2.0 expansion analysis**. This actuarial study will look at the costs and benefits of expanding the program to all Vermonters up to age 26. The Alliance was a member of the coalition supporting funding for the analysis.

The budget also included a number of other allocations of interest to Alliance members, including:

- \$75,000 to support the **universal school meals** program
- \$190,000 to increase the base grant for **Parent Child Centers**
- \$150,000 to restore the cuts proposed by the Governor to the fund used by **AHS Field Services Directors** to make **discretionary grants** to program recipients
- \$114,000 to reduce the \$125/month cut to certain **SSI recipients** by \$10/month