

Tips for Talking with Legislators at Early Childhood Day at the Legislature

Advocates' stories matter. Legislators want to hear from you! You have an important story and message to share and legislators are interested in what you have to say. Add your personal and/or professional stories to the speaking points below. Your experience as a professional, parent, provider, etc. provides legislators with real-world context to the issue.

Legislators are people, too. Some legislators will quickly understand the issues you present and others will not. Just like you, legislators do not always recognize the nuances of certain issues although they care about them. You can help them understand why your issue is important. Start at the beginning with your story and connect the dots to the policy solution being proposed and the outcomes for children that could be realized.

Keep your message simple and real. We've provided you with speaking points as a guide, but put them into your own words so that it doesn't sound rehearsed or forced. Avoid acronyms or lingo that legislators may not be familiar with. Also, how you order your comments does matter – we suggest you start by describing the overarching goals of the issue, briefly state the problem, and then move quickly to solutions.

Legislators make the best lobbyists. In many cases, your legislator(s) may not be on the committee that is working most closely on your issue. But it's likely that they have a relationship with one of their colleagues who is. Legislators listen to each other – consider asking supportive legislators to talk to other legislators on key committees and ask them to support your issue.

Listen. Although you have a message to deliver, listening to your legislator can give you insight into why a legislator does or does not support an issue, what their committee is collectively thinking about an issue, etc. Tune in and listen to what their concerns or thoughts are. Share feedback with the Alliance staff and lead organizations.

Be a resource. When you meet legislators, offer to be a resource to them in the future. If you are willing, share your phone or email and let them know they can contact you if they have questions. If you don't have the answer, you can work with the Alliance staff and lead organizations to get one.

Children's Integrated Services: Vital Support for Vermont's Families

THE ISSUE AND WHY IT MATTERS: Children's Integrated Services (CIS) maximizes young children's health, development, and learning by providing individualized support to families and early care and education programs. These essential and federally mandated services are designed to lessen, if not eliminate, the need for future services that are costlier and less efficient. CIS has been shown to be effective in mitigating the effects of childhood trauma for thousands of Vermont families.

Since CIS began in 2009, funding has remained flat, while the demand and actual costs to the 12 regional non-profit agencies that provide these services have steadily increased. This leads to a critical lack of capacity to serve children and families who struggle with multiple risk factors including increased child welfare involvement, increased exposure to parental opiate use, poverty, homelessness and increased autism prevalence. By fully funding CIS now, the state of Vermont will save seven to ten times that amount as a return on investment by preventing the high cost consequences of childhood trauma in adults including incarceration, chronic medical conditions, substance abuse, and suicide.

PROPOSAL: Increase investment in CIS, which would ensure continued progress on family safety and stability, healthy child development, and young children's access to quality early care and education. We support the finding of a study commissioned by the State of Vermont, which indicated that it would take an additional state investment of approximately \$1.2 million for rates to pay for the actual cost of services of \$634/month. The Governor's Recommended budget only pays a rate of \$502/month.

LEGISLATIVE UPDATE: The Governor's Recommended FY21 Budget includes level funding for CIS compared to FY20. Advocates are working to build support for additional funding, and we have the support of the House Human Services Committee, which has made fully funding the recommended \$634/month case rate a priority in their memo to House Appropriations.

TODAY'S LEGISLATIVE ASK: As budget capacity allows, increase the overall CIS case rate to as close to \$634/month as possible. If your legislators are not on the House or Senate Appropriations Committees, ask them to speak to members of the Committee.

LEAD ORGANIZATIONS: Vermont Parent Child Center Network, Vermont Family Network, and Winston Prouty Center for Child and Family Development

Universal School Meals: Eating is Elementary to Education

THE ISSUE: Every student should have access to the same things while at school, whether it's educational opportunities or food. Right now, not every student has access to school breakfast and lunch. Instead, children are divided into categories based on income that determine how much they have to pay to receive a meal at school. This means that many children don't get the good nutrition they need to learn well because their families can't afford to pay for meals or because of the shame and stigma associated with being a "free lunch kid."

When schools switch to a universal school meals model, more students of all incomes eat school meals, the social climate in the cafeteria and the entire school shifts as differences in family income become less visible, students are more ready to learn, and school administrators report more positive relationships with students' families. By requiring all public schools to provide school meals as part of a student's education, and by providing state funding to supplement the federal funding all schools receive, all students and schools will experience these benefits.

PROPOSAL: Ensure that every student can eat at school every day, regardless of their caregiver's ability to pay, by requiring all public schools in Vermont to provide universal school meals by 2025.

LEGISLATIVE UPDATE: House and Senate committees have held hearings on S. 223/H. 812, which would require all public schools in Vermont to make school breakfast and lunch available to all students at no cost. Advocates have used this opportunity to educate legislators and the public on the benefits of Universal School Meals. They do not expect movement on the bills this year, but have succeeded in making important progress in building support for the proposal.

TODAY'S LEGISLATIVE ASK: Encourage legislators to learn more about Universal School Meals, and to talk to their local school officials about the connection between good nutrition and successful outcomes in the classroom.

LEAD ORGANIZATION: Hunger Free Vermont

PCC Network Master Grant: Adequately Fund Parent Child Centers' State Service Delivery

THE ISSUE: Parent Child Centers (PCCs) deliver critical and essential services to families with young children through a Master Grant agreement with the Department for Children and Families. However, the Master Grant is not funded at the level of cost of providing these services. The Eight Core Services that the PCCs provide to families and young children help to build the five protective factors that are known to strengthen family resilience and prevent adverse outcomes. The state should provide adequate funding to ensure that families get the services they need and that PCCs can be the resource they were intended to be when they were established by the legislature.

PROPOSAL: Support S. 263, the PCC Network Bill that includes Master Grant funding increases to total \$10 million over three years for the statewide network of 15 PCCs. The bill would also adjust future appropriations to consider inflationary pressures and any services added to the Master Grant agreement, and updates statutory language that strengthens the language defining the designated Parent Child Centers.

LEGISLATIVE UPDATE: The Senate Appropriations Committee is currently considering the PCC Network bill. Advocates are also continuing to push for additional funding including a one-time appropriation to the PCCN for essential infrastructure repairs.

TODAY'S LEGISLATIVE ASK: Encourage Senators to support the PCC Network bill, including increased base and one-time funding.

LEAD ORGANIZATION: Vermont Parent Child Center Network

Office of the Child Advocate: Oversight for the Child Protection System

THE ISSUE: An Office of Child Advocate (OCA) is needed to provide independent and impartial oversight of Vermont's child protection system. An OCA will instill trust by adding transparency and giving voice to Vermont's constituents. An OCA will make our system more child-centered and improve outcomes for youth and families by listening to concerns about DCF and responding to complaints with a credible review process. Finally, an OCA will maintain independence and impartiality of all aspects for oversight over DCF while providing a systemic review for responsive public policy.

PROPOSAL: Create an OCA to turn complaints into building blocks for better child welfare and juvenile justice. The legislature should take meaningful steps to enable the creation of an OCA in Vermont as soon as possible.

LEGISLATIVE UPDATE: The House Human Services Committee has unanimously passed a revised version of H. 215, which now tasks the Joint Legislative Child Protection Oversight Committee with resolving legal and process questions regarding a proposed OCA and developing draft legislation to create an Office of Child Advocate by 12/1/20. The full House will vote on the bill this week.

TODAY'S LEGISLATIVE ASK: Ask House members to support H. 215 when it comes up for third reading today. Encourage Senators to support the bill as it is considered in the coming weeks.

LEAD ORGANIZATION: Voices for Vermont's Children

Farm to School and Early Childhood: Nourishing Children's Bodies and Minds

THE ISSUE: Vermont Farm to School is a nationally recognized initiative that supports Vermont's economy, communities, and the healthy development and learning of Vermont's children. It has been shown to influence eating habits, create healthy lifestyles, support experiential learning opportunities, improve healthy food access, support teachers' knowledge of nutrition, and address childhood obesity. As Vermont works to provide high quality early childhood services, as many children as possible should receive the benefits of the farm to school program – access to healthy foods, food and nutrition education, and community connections.

PROPOSAL: Increase annual funding to reach the goal of \$500,000 for the state's Farm to School and Early Childhood (FTSEC) program. This level would ensure early childhood settings serving children ages birth through grade 3 can access program funding for gardening and farm visits, food procurement planning, professional development, and infrastructure and equipment.

LEGISLATIVE UPDATE: The Governor's Recommended FY21 Budget level funds FTSEC compared to FY20 base funding levels. Advocates have continued to press for higher funding for FY21, and have generated some traction. FTSEC is listed as a funding priority in both House Education and Agriculture and Forestry Committees budget memos to House Appropriations.

TODAY'S LEGISLATIVE ASK: Encourage House Appropriations Committee members to support FTSEC's request for a total of \$500,000 base funding.

LEAD ORGANIZATIONS: Vermont FEED, Vermont Farm to School Network, Hunger Free Vermont, and the Building Bright Futures Early Childhood Wellness Committee

Vermonters Feeding Vermonters: Fund Fresh, Local Food for People Facing Hunger

THE ISSUE: 74,500 people in Vermont are food insecure, including 18,700 children. Lack of healthy food during early childhood is linked to health problems, developmental impairments, social and behavioral problems, and challenges in school. Hunger is related to negative health outcomes resulting in higher health care costs for the state.

PROPOSAL: Allocate \$500,000 annually to fund Vermonters Feeding Vermonters, a program to purchase locally grown, fresh produce directly from Vermont farmers to distribute to people struggling with hunger. This investment from the state would improve the health of adults and children in Vermont, provide financial security to local farmers, and strengthen the Vermont economy, all with a reduced environmental footprint.

LEGISLATIVE UPDATE: This session, advocates are spreading the word about the importance of the program to build support for funding.

TODAY'S LEGISLATIVE ASK: Encourage House and Senate Appropriations Committee members to support the Vermont Foodbank's request for \$500,000 base funding for the Vermonters Feeding Vermonters program.

LEAD ORGANIZATION: Vermont Foodbank

Medicaid Coverage for Birth Doulas: Promoting Maternal and Infant Well-Being

THE ISSUE: Vermont's birth outcomes and access to care are above average, but data still show disparities seen in perinatal care nationwide. Birth doulas have been shown to be an effective intervention for many of these disparities. Birth doulas are trained professionals who provide continuous physical, emotional, and informational support to a pregnant person before, during, and shortly after childbirth to help them achieve the healthiest, most satisfying experience possible. They also act as a conduit to information and referrals relative to prenatal health, safety, and community resources.

Currently, birth doulas are most available to families who can afford to pay out-of-pocket. However, research shows stronger beneficial effects for people who are low income, socially disadvantaged, or who experience cultural or language barriers to accessing care.

PROPOSAL: Increase access to birth doula services for parents who are covered by Medicaid. Extending access specifically to birthing people covered by Medicaid would address multiple risk factors and disparities that are of public health concern, and do so in a cost effective way. This is an evidence-based policy that can support better, safer, less expensive births; improved birth outcomes and infant health; and perinatal well-being.

LEGISLATIVE UPDATE: Legislative discussions are in a preliminary stage. At this time, Voices for Vermont's Children is focusing on gathering stakeholder feedback on different models for possible Medicaid coverage for doulas, and collaborating with Vermont's doula communities to build the foundations of an effective program.

TODAY'S LEGISLATIVE ASK: Ask members of the House Health Care and Senate Health and Welfare Committees to learn more about the issue, and reach out to doulas and other birth professionals in their community to hear their perspectives and stories.

LEAD ORGANIZATION: Voices for Vermont's Children

Child Care Financial Assistance Program: Making Child Care More Affordable for Families

THE ISSUE: The state's Child Care Financial Assistance Program (CCFAP) is a critical resource that helps Vermont families afford child care, but it has been underfunded for decades. The reimbursement rates paid to providers on behalf of families are lower than the costs to provide child care and many more families are in need of financial support. In spite of recent increased budget allocations for CCFAP, supported by the advocacy of the Alliance's CCFAP work group, there is still a long way to go to make the program work well for children, families, and child care providers.

PROPOSAL: Strengthen CCFAP to make child care affordable for families and providers. The Alliance supports its members' advocacy to make immediate and continued progress toward this goal by allocating additional funds to support necessary IT upgrades and to align the rates paid by the program with the most current data on the cost of child care.

LEGISLATIVE UPDATE: The Governor's Recommended FY21 Budget includes a \$1.3 million increase for CCFAP to bring pre-school and school age rates up to the 2015 market rate, as well as funding for the annual update of the Federal Poverty Level and \$250,000 to fund necessary technological maintenance and operations. Alliance lead organizations are asking for increased investments in a number of areas, especially one-time funds for the computer infrastructure that will support future program enhancements.

Meanwhile, the Alliance has led the effort to secure funding for Special Accommodation Grants (SAG) in both the current fiscal year (FY20) and next year (FY21). The annual Budget Adjustment Act, just passed for FY20, adds \$153,000 back into the budget to fund SAG for the remaining months of the current fiscal year. And our appeal for CCFAP funding for FY21 includes a request for \$550,000 for SAGs in the coming year.

TODAY'S LEGISLATIVE ASK: Ask members of the House and Senate Appropriations Committee to support full funding of the Governor's proposal, as well as one-time investments in IT infrastructure and funding for SAGs. Ask all legislators to encourage their colleagues on the Appropriations committees to prioritize these investments.

LEADS ORGANIZATIONS: Let's Grow Kids, Vermont Association for the Education of Young Children, Vermont Child Care Providers Association, Voices for Vermont's Children, and Vermont Child Care Industry and Careers Council

Family and Medical Leave Insurance: Improving the Health and Well-Being of Vermont Families

THE ISSUE: Nearly every working Vermonter at some point will need to take time away from their job to care for or bond with a new child or to deal with a serious personal or family illness. However, very few Vermonters have access to parental leave or personal medical leave through their employer. Federal and state laws allow certain eligible employees to take unpaid leave for these purposes, but many cannot afford to take leave when they need it. A statewide paid family and medical leave insurance program will support the health, well-being, and economic security of Vermont's children and families and ensure that future generations thrive.

PROPOSAL: Implement an equitable, universal, and affordable paid family and medical leave program.

LEGISLATIVE UPDATE: In one of the more dramatic moments of the session so far, in early February, the House fell one vote short of over-turning the Governor's veto of H. 107, a bill to create a limited leave insurance program the Alliance did not support. Discussions about possible next steps in the effort to develop a strong program for Vermont are likely to continue in the coming months.

TODAY'S LEGISLATIVE ASK: Thank legislators for their ongoing focus on this critical issue. Urge them to keep the momentum going, and to aim for passing a strong paid family and medical leave bill in the next biennium. Be sure to tell your legislators why this policy is important to you.

LEAD ORGANIZATIONS: Main Street Alliance of Vermont and Voices for Vermont's Children

Reach Up Funding: Increase Reach Up Grants to Meet Basic Needs

THE ISSUE: Investing in children is key to turning the curve on a number of issues that impact state budgets now and in the future. Children raised without enough resources experience poor health and wellness outcomes in relation to their more affluent peers. Current appropriations to the Reach Up program effectively ensure that this safety-net program meant “to improve the well-being of children by providing for their immediate basic needs” provides less than 40% of the income needed to achieve its purpose.

PROPOSAL: Increase the Reach Up cash grant to children and families incrementally until it meets 100% of the basic needs of participants, with automatic inflation indexing going forward. Any “savings” from caseload reductions should be redirected to increase benefits, rather than used to fund other state programs.

LEGISLATIVE UPDATE: Last year, the legislature approved the first increase to Reach Up in at least 15 years. This modest bump brought the maximum benefit for a family of three outside of Chittenden County from \$640 to \$700 per month. But the Department for Children and Families states that a subsistence income for this family is almost \$1,900. This means that the program designed to meet the needs of the lowest income kids in the state isn’t keeping up with the cost of basic needs.

The Governor’s Recommended FY21 budget takes caseload reduction “savings” of \$450,000 out of the Reach Up program. The Governor also proposes to substantially reduce the Reach Up transportation program that helps participants get to work. Transportation issues rank third on the list of Reach Up participants’ barriers to employment.

TODAY’S LEGISLATIVE ASK: Ask members of the House and Senate Appropriations Committees to reject the administration’s proposal to cut more than \$600,000 out of the Reach Up budget, including about \$188,000 in transportation support, and instead continue the effort started last year to bring Reach Up grants into alignment with the cost of providing for children’s basic needs.

LEAD ORGANIZATION: Voices for Vermont’s Children

Housing & Homelessness: Increase Access to Safe, Stable and Affordable Housing for all Children

THE ISSUE: As one of the key social determinants of health, safe, stable, and affordable housing is essential to children's well-being and success in life. Housing instability, homelessness, and unsafe housing often lead to negative outcomes and contribute to childhood trauma and ACEs. Increasing state investments in affordable housing, reducing homelessness, and improving the health and safety of rental housing are key to improving children's outcomes.

PROPOSAL: Secure a substantial new infusion of funding for the Vermont Housing and Conservation Board, increased funding for rental assistance and supportive services, and statewide housing code enforcement. Because of the state's chronic underfunding of housing needs, we must find equitable new revenue sources to fund them, like the proposed \$2 motel/hotel occupancy fee.

LEGISLATIVE UPDATE: Most of the housing programs advocates support face level funding in FY21. The Governor's Recommended FY21 Budget includes a significant revision to the State's General Assistance Emergency Housing Program, which is being considered by several legislative committees. At this time, these committees support delaying the program restructure until April 1, 2021 to allow for necessary planning. The budget and implementation language for General Assistance program changes will continue to develop over the next few weeks.

The Senate Economic Development Committee is also discussing a number of ways to support the development of more affordable housing.

TODAY'S LEGISLATIVE ASK: Thank members on House Committees on Appropriations, Human Services, and Housing, Military, and General Affairs for supporting the delay of General Assistance Emergency Housing Program restructuring. Ask them to continue supporting this position.

LEAD ORGANIZATION: Vermont Affordable Housing Coalition

Early Childhood Education: Strengthening the Workforce

THE ISSUE: Vermont continues to face a serious shortage of qualified early childhood educators at all levels: teachers, associate teachers, and assistant teachers. The state does not have enough qualified early childhood educators currently to fill open positions in the early childhood system, which severely constrains capacity and contributes to Vermont's severe child care shortage. Additionally, many talented and qualified early childhood educators are not entering or remaining in the field in part because of low pay and minimal to no benefits. In order to reverse this trend, the Alliance and lead organizations are advocating for three policies to support early childhood educators.

PROPOSAL:

- Expand Vermont's scholarship programs for early childhood educators. With increased state support, the programs would have the ability to expand to provide support to individuals currently working in early childhood education programs pursuing a bachelor's degree in early childhood education, in addition to those seeking an associate's degree, teacher licensure or endorsement, or participating in the state's child care apprenticeship program.
- Create an early childhood educator student loan repayment support program for early educators who graduated with a bachelor's degree in early childhood education or early special education within the past three years (2017-20). The program would provide up to \$3,000 a year for Vermont residents or those graduating from Vermont schools who are working as lead teachers and earning less than \$40,000 annually to help them make regular payments on their student loans.
- Create a wage supplement program, tied to level of education, for Vermont's early childhood educators working in regulated early childhood education programs.

LEGISLATIVE UPDATE: The Governor's Recommended FY21 Budget includes modest funding for scholarship programs, less than was provided in FY20. Active discussions on early childhood education workforce development continue at the State House, including multiple hearings in the House Commerce and Economic Development Committee. Alliance lead organizations are working with legislative champions to keep the momentum going and fund scholarships, student loan repayment, and wage supports necessary to retain current early childhood educators and attract new professionals to the field.

TODAY'S LEGISLATIVE ASK: If your legislator is a member of the House Commerce & Economic Development Committee, ask them to include early educator supports in their workforce development bill. If your legislator is on the House Appropriations Committee, ask them to adequately fund these supports in this year's budget. Ask ALL legislators to increase funding to support the dedicated early childhood educators who make such a difference for Vermont's children and families.

LEAD ORGANIZATIONS: Let's Grow Kids, VT Association for the Education of Young Children, VT Child Care Providers Association, and VT Child Care Industry and Careers Council