

V E R M O N T

EARLY CHILDHOOD
ADVOCACY ALLIANCE

2020 Legislative Agenda Results Summary

Like just about everything else this year, the 2020 Legislative Session was far from normal. The pandemic forced all activity to go to a virtual format starting on March 13, and also led to a special extra session in August and September to finish the budget-writing process. The Alliance and its members worked hard to keep the well-being of young children and families at the forefront throughout this chaotic and lengthy session.

The Pivot to COVID-19 Response

Starting in March, many advocates – including Alliance staff – pivoted their focus to emergency response measures, from coordinating direct services to advocating for [Coronavirus Relief Funds](#) to support the early childhood community.

Legislators similarly prioritized emergency response efforts, leaving little capacity for the consideration of new policy initiatives or large investments. Many of the issues on our Legislative Agenda were discussed by legislative committees informally, but not acted upon, given the other pressing needs.

Managing FY21 Budget Pressures & Preparing for FY22

Between better-than-forecasted tax revenues and federal assistance, the state was able to avoid making large spending cuts in the FY21 Budget. However, large cuts may be proposed in FY22, as the economic impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic further erode the state's tax revenues. Next session, we will continue to advocate for strong investment in the early childhood community – and a state budget that is based on needs, not revenue limitations.

Looking Forward – The Need for Systemic Change

The pandemic has had significant negative impacts on young children and families, with disparate outcomes along identity lines. As we look at these effects, we see the way this crisis has spotlighted the great need for systemic change – from a more robust state IT system to public health work with a racial justice lens. Looking forward, there's much work to be done – and it will require all of us.

Overall, the early childhood community's advocacy this session showcased the strength of the Alliance and our collective efforts. While many of our Legislative Agenda items saw only modest policy gains, our members worked tirelessly – with remarkable cohesion – to support Vermont's young children and families through these difficult times. This commitment to collaboration will serve us well in 2021.

CHILD CARE FINANCIAL ASSISTANCE PROGRAM (CCFAP): *FY21 State Budget (H.969)*

Result: Some Funding Secured

The Governor's Recommended FY21 Budget included a \$1.3 million increase for CCFAP to increase pre-school and school age reimbursement rates to align with the 2015 Market Rate Survey. It also included funding for the annual update of the Federal Poverty Level, \$250,000 to fund ongoing maintenance of the IT system, and \$800,000 to increase the number of child care slots available for infants and toddlers. All of these provisions were approved by the Legislature.

During the August/September special session, the Governor also proposed moving CCFAP eligibility determination out of community-based programs and consolidating it into other economic services program determinations. This proposal would have had a significant, negative budget impact on those community programs. It was rejected by the Legislature and not included in the final FY21 Budget signed by the Governor.

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

EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION WORKFORCE: *FY21 State Budget (H.969)*

Result: Some Funding Secured

The Governor's Recommended FY21 Budget included modest funding for continuing existing scholarship programs, though less than was provided in FY20. The Legislature's final FY21 Budget included this funding, as well as other supports for the early childhood education workforce using federal Coronavirus Relief Funds.

Unfortunately, the budgeted level of state funding will not fully meet scholarship program needs for FY21, and fails to support a badly needed expansion.

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

REACH UP FUNDING: *FY21 State Budget (H.969)*

Result: No Benefit Increases, Services Reduced

While the approved FY21 Budget did provide funding for increased Reach Up caseload due to the economic downturn caused by the pandemic, it did not make any increases to the Reach Up cash grant to children and families.

Unfortunately, the Budget also included a \$187,952 cut from the transportation services grants that help Reach Up participants overcome one of the top barriers to employment. This cut was made to meet budget targets, not due to lack of need or another programmatic reason.

LEAD ORGANIZATION: Voices for Vermont's Children

FAMILY & MEDICAL LEAVE INSURANCE: [H.107](#)

Result: Governor's Veto Sustained

Early in the session, the House and Senate moved quickly to reach an agreement on a version of a Paid Medical and Family Leave Insurance program that the Vermont FaMLI Coalition could not support. This version did not provide critical benefits including guaranteed personal medical leave to Vermonters, or any consistent level of public oversight to keep the program viable, equitable, and accountable.

The Governor vetoed the bill, and the veto was sustained by the House. The FaMLI Coalition looks forward to this issue being addressed again in the '21 session.

LEAD ORGANIZATIONS: Main Street Alliance-VT and Voices for Vermont's Children (for the VT FaMLI Coalition)

PARENT CHILD CENTER NETWORK MASTER GRANT: [S.263](#), FY21 State Budget ([H.969](#))

Result: Level Funding

Early in the session, the Senate Health and Welfare Committee took up S.263, a bill that would make much-needed updates to the state statutes that are the basis for the Parent Child Center Network (PCCN), and provide them with additional funding. The initial bill draft was revised and sent to the Senate Appropriations Committee, where it saw limited discussion and no formal action. The bill will likely be revisited in the '21 session.

The PCCN master grant was level funded in the approved FY21 Budget.

LEAD ORGANIZATION: Vermont Parent Child Center Network

CHILDREN'S INTEGRATED SERVICES (CIS): FY21 Budget Adjustment ([H.760](#)) and FY21 State Budget ([H.969](#))

Result: Cuts Averted

The 2020 Legislative Session saw a marked increase in the number of times the CIS program was discussed by committees and individual legislators. While funding was not increased for the core CIS program, the House Human Services Committee did voice their strong support for additional investment in CIS, making it their top FY21 appropriations priority.

CIS supporters also rallied strongly to secure funding for the Special Accommodation Grants (SAG) program, which helps children with special needs to stay in childcare settings. The Administration proposed defunding the program in January, a move that was rejected by the Legislature. The FY20 Budget Adjustment Act included a \$153,000 appropriation to continue funding the program through the end of the fiscal year.

The Governor's Recommended FY21 Budget included \$300,000 to fund SAGs. This spending level was supported by the Legislature. However, in the summer special session, advocates alerted legislators about the Dept. for Children and Families' (DCF) plan to use proposed FY21 SAG funds to make up for a bureaucratic error that meant the \$153,000 provided for in the FY20 Budget Adjustment Act had not been allocated. Legislators successfully pressed DCF Commissioner Brown to abandon this plan.

Instead, the FY21 Budget includes the full \$300,000 for the SAG program that was proposed – not enough to fully meet expected demand, but an amount similar to historic funding levels for the program.

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

HOUSING & HOMELESSNESS: *FY21 State Budget* ([H.969](#)) [H.739/S.257](#), [S.237](#)

Result: Partial Success

Overall, affordable housing advocates had mixed success. While some priorities were deemphasized as the Legislature focused on essential crisis response to the pandemic, others were brought to the forefront as the intersection between housing and health became more apparent than ever. The emergency response by the Legislature, state and quasi-state agencies, and housing and service providers was nothing short of extraordinary.

In the final FY21 Budget, Vermont Housing and Conservation Board (VHCB) was allocated 2% less than last year, but that cut was more than offset by CRF funds VHCB received. In addition, Family Supportive Housing, which provides intensive supportive services to homeless families with children, received increased funding allowing them to expand existing programs and start programs in new areas.

House and Senate Committees also discussed bills (H.739/S.257, S.237) that would have created a statewide professional system for rental housing code enforcement and a registry of rental housing, and provided additional funding and made changes to land use planning. A significantly scaled down version of S.237 that included several land use planning reforms did pass. H.739/S.257 did not see final action, and its subjects may be discussed in the next session.

In January, the Administration proposed shifting General Assistance Emergency Housing, a key state safety net program for families and individuals experiencing homelessness, to community providers. The Administration eventually withdrew its original proposal, in part because of pressures from the pandemic and in part because of concerns from the providers about the speed of the proposed change. The Administration has made clear its intent to shift the program to local providers as of July 1, 2021.

LEAD ORGANIZATION: Vermont Affordable Housing Coalition

VERMONTERS FEEDING VERMONTERS

Result: Discussed by Committees

While the Vermont Foodbank received Coronavirus Relief Funding (CRF) that supported a significant expansion of the Vermonters Feeding Vermonters Program, it did not secure an appropriation in the FY21 Budget.

Advocates hope to build on this one-time CRF investment – and the legislative support they cultivated this session – to secure an appropriation for Vermonters Feeding Vermonters in the FY22 Budget.

LEAD ORGANIZATION: Vermont Foodbank

OFFICE OF THE CHILD ADVOCATE: [H.215](#)

Result: Scaled-Down Bill Passed by House

The Office of the Child Advocate (OCA) Bill, H.215, was introduced in 2019 and taken up by the House Human Services Committee this year. Legislators had questions about how to best structure a Vermont OCA, and wanted an opportunity to examine the state's options in depth. The Committee decided to re-write the bill to task the Joint Legislative Child Protection Oversight Committee with resolving the outstanding policy questions and draft legislation to create an Office of the Child Advocate next year.

This revised bill was then passed by the House and sent to the Senate. Unfortunately, the bill was not a priority during the second part of the session, when legislators had very limited capacity to work on issues other than COVID-19 response. The bill did not advance in the Senate.

LEAD ORGANIZATION: Voices for Vermont's Children

UNIVERSAL SCHOOL MEALS: [S.223/H.812](#)

Result: Discussed by Committees

This session, advocates offered testimony on the bills to create a Universal School Meals program in the Senate Education and Agriculture Committees and the House Education Committee. The bills did not advance beyond committee discussion, as food security advocates pivoted to advocate for food security measures in the emergency response to the pandemic.

In response to increased food insecurity caused by the pandemic and in recognition of the central role that schools play in making sure children have access to nutritious food, federal waivers temporarily allowed schools and summer meal sites to provide free meals to all children and youth under 18 and under since the spring. This method of meal service – which operates similarly to Universal School Meals – received significant positive attention from legislators and Administration officials alike. Advocates hope to build on this momentum with future advocacy on Universal School Meals.

LEAD ORGANIZATION: Hunger Free Vermont

FARM TO SCHOOL & EARLY CHILDHOOD: FY21 State Budget ([H.969](#))

Result: Funding Decrease

The Farm to School and Early Childhood (FTS) program was funded at \$181,000 in the approved FY21 Budget. While the program's base funding remained the same as FY20, FTS saw a \$50,000 decrease from FY20 because it was not appropriated any one-time funds for FY21, as it had in the previous year.

However, FTS did receive \$100,000 in Coronavirus Relief Funds to support schools and child care programs to offer meals and FTS learning opportunities while addressing the effects of the pandemic.

LEAD ORGANIZATIONS: Vermont Farm to School Network, Vermont FEED, and Hunger Free Vermont

MEDICAID COVERAGE FOR BIRTH DOULAS

Result: No Action

Preliminary discussions regarding Medicaid coverage for doulas have continued, but no specific legislation was put forth this session. Advocates look forward to continued examination of how to best support access to doula services, so all Vermonters – regardless of their income – can benefit from the physical, emotional, and informational supports they provide.

LEAD ORGANIZATION: Voices for Vermont's Children

CORONAVIRUS RELIEF FUND (CRF) EXPENDITURES: SPECIAL SESSION UPDATE

The Alliance wrote a [detailed description](#) of the Coronavirus Relief Fund (CRF) expenditures in early childhood policy areas that were approved by the Legislature at the end of June.

During the special Legislative Session in August and September, there were several developments regarding CRF funds. Alliance members were deeply engaged in many of these discussions.

Reconsideration of Grant Limitations

The Parent Child Center (PCC) Network led a successful push to get the Administration to reconsider the restrictions placed on what could be funded by the CRF Operational Relief Grant program approved in June. These restrictions meant that a large percentage of requests for funding were being denied. After several legislative hearings, the Administration agreed to revise their guidelines not just for PCCs but for other recipients of this program, including child care providers and afterschool programs.

Temporary Child Care Hubs

The Administration worked with Vermont Afterschool and Let's Grow Kids to establish a new network of temporary child care hubs for school-age children on remote learning days, supported by CRF funds.

Frontline Workers Hazard Pay Program

The Legislature expanded this existing CRF program to cover more categories of people who worked during Governor Scott's "Stay Home, Stay Safe" Order, including those providing child care to children of essential workers. Let's Grow Kids led the support for this expansion.

Workforce Stabilization Payments

Let's Grow Kids worked hard to gain support for a new early childhood education workforce stabilization program, which would provide supplemental one-time payments to child care providers and staff. While dedicated CRF funding was not secured, the Legislature and the Administration indicated that they will seek to use unspent CRF funds for this program, should they become available before the end of the year.