

V E R M O N T
EARLY CHILDHOOD
ADVOCACY ALLIANCE

2021 Legislative Agenda – Early Session Update

This summary provides an update on the status of the issues on the Alliance’s 2021 Legislative Agenda as of Friday, February 19. Please note that all of these issues are currently under consideration, and developments continue on a daily basis that may make this information no longer accurate.

Many of the summaries refer to the House Budget development process. As of the end of last week, House policy committees had submitted their budget letters to the House Appropriations Committee, with their recommendations and requests for the FY22 Budget. These letters can be found by accessing each Committee’s individual website – find links for those [here](#).

The House Appropriations Committee will be working on their budget over the next few weeks, with a goal of completing it by March 19.

To get more information about any of these issues, please be in touch with Matt Levin, Alliance Executive Director, at matt@vecaa.org.

All of these issues will be talked about in more depth at Early Childhood Day at the Legislature – please sign up to be a part of the conversation with legislators about the issues that matter most to you! Visit [our website](#) for more information.

Reach Up Funding

The Governor’s Recommended FY22 Budget proposes to “sweep” over \$5 million in “savings” from a projected lower Reach Up caseload in FY22 to help balance the state budget. This year as in past years, advocates are pointing out that when determining grant amounts, Vermont uses income levels from 2008 and then awards just 49.6 percent of that total (the “ratable reduction”). Until the state uses current cost of living figures and eliminates the ratable reduction, Reach Up will remain an unfunded mandate, and therefore, unspent funds cannot be considered “savings.” The House Human Services Committee has discussed both expanding the general Reach Up benefit and directing funds into increased housing supports. The Committee has recommended that the Reach Up benefits in FY22 be increased by raising the allowing income level from the 2008 figure to the 2019 level, which would cost \$2.2 million.

Pandemic response funds are being directed to housing supports for the coming months. The House is also working on a bill to boost benefits to Reach Up families on a temporary basis (see “Pandemic Response,” below).

LEAD ORGANIZATION: Voices for Vermont’s Children

Transforming Early Childhood Education: H. 171, Child Care is Essential

The House Human Services Committee (HHS) has begun to take formal testimony on [H. 171](#), a bill that would begin the transformation of the early childhood education system by establishing state goals for affordability, access, and quality, and laying the foundation of our future system. The bill would also authorize new and increased investments in scholarship and loan repayment programs and in the Child Care Financial Assistance Program (CCFAP). You can find a summary of the bill [here](#).

HHS plans to vote the bill out of their committee by this Friday. Once that Committee has finished its work on the bill, a number of other House committees will likely review and possibly revise the bill.

The Governor's Recommended FY22 Budget proposes to make additional investments in CCFAP and the computer system that runs CCFAP, totaling about \$10 million. The Governor is also recommending smaller investments in capacity-building and scholarships for early childhood educators. The legislature seems inclined to support these proposals, which advocates support as well.

LEAD ORGANIZATIONS: Let's Grow Kids and Vermont Association for the Education of Young Children

Children's Integrated Services (CIS) Funding

The Governor's Recommended FY22 Budget proposes to level fund CIS. The House Human Services Committee continues to support some additional funding for the program, which would need an increase of approximately \$2.8 million to meet the program costs as estimated by the state's own analysis of three years ago. They have recommended to the House Appropriations Committee that the funding level be increased by half that amount (\$1.4 million) for FY22.

In several meetings, the House Human Services Committee has also expressed their concerns about any policy changes that might be proposed for the FY22 Budget that would weaken CIS by moving program administration to separate, segregated parts of state government. However, those concerns are not spelled out in the Committee's letter to House Appropriations.

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

Housing Programs and Funding

The Governor's Recommended FY22 Budget proposes a total of \$34.8 million be directed to the Vermont Housing and Conservation Board, including \$20 million in one-time funding, primarily for affordable housing initiatives. We are happy to report that there is a lot of good news in the Governor's housing budget including some unprecedented investments in affordable housing initiatives. The Governor also proposes increased one-time funding for weatherization programs and general rental rehabilitation programs. House committees are discussing these proposals.

The Administration has also proposed [a major shift](#) in how the General Assistance Emergency Housing aid is calculated and delivered. The timing for implementing this shift is dependent on multiple factors including the COVID pandemic and vaccine distribution, but the proposed plan is to end the motel voucher program as of October 1, 2021. The House Human Services and General, Housing, and Military Affairs Committees have recommended to the House Appropriations Committee that the implementation be delayed for one year and that additional planning be undertaken.

LEAD ORGANIZATION: Vermont Affordable Housing Coalition

Building Bright Futures (BBF) Funding

The Governor's Recommended FY22 Budget proposes level funding to BBF. The House Human Services Committee has heard testimony on the importance of BBF's work on multiple levels, and BBF's request for \$261,000 in additional funding. Their budget letter to the House Appropriations Committee supports this funding increase.

H. 171, the Child Care is Essential bill, also calls upon BBF to coordinate an analysis of the early childhood education system. The as-proposed version of the bill does provide financial support to BBF to undertake this work.

LEAD ORGANIZATION: Building Bright Futures

Special Accommodation Grant (SAG) Funding

The Governor's Recommended FY22 Budget provides level funding of \$300,000 for SAGs. However, the funding is not specifically identified in the overall Child Development Division budget.

Advocates for SAG have asked for \$200,000 of increased funding, as well as for changes that would not require any additional funding. First, they have requested that SAGs have their own line item in the budget, to ensure funding is directed as intended and to increase transparency and accountability. Second, they have asked that SAG funding be reclassified so that the grants can be provided in up-front payments, as opposed to the current system that provides payment only after invoicing. This change would make the SAG program less administratively burdensome, and make it possible for smaller providers to more easily participate.

The House Human Services Committee has expressed their support for SAGs in their budget letter to House Appropriations, asking for the creation of a new budget line for the program. However, they are not requesting an increase in funding levels.

LEAD ORGANIZATIONS: Child Care Resource, Vermont Family Network, and Winston Prouty Center for Child & Family Development

Farm to School and Early Childhood Funding

The Senate Agriculture Committee is currently working on a committee bill – “Farm Fresh School Meals for All” – that would implement a suite of Farm to School and Early Childhood related policies recommended in the Alliance’s Legislative Agenda. The [bill](#) would fully fund the annual appropriation to support the Farm to School and Early Childhood Grants Program, increasing base funding from \$171,500 to \$500,000. Senators across all political parties have praised the program’s essential support for outdoor learning and successes connecting students with nutritious, local food, especially during the pandemic.

The bill has broad support, and is expected to pass out of the Senate Agriculture Committee soon. Then, it will likely move first to the Senate Education Committee and then to the Senate Appropriations Committee, where the level of funding will be determined.

LEAD ORGANIZATIONS: Vermont FEED, Vermont Farm to School Network, Hunger Free Vermont, and the Vermont Farm to Early Childhood Coalition

Parent Child Center Network Master Grant

The Governor’s Recommended FY22 Budget provides level funding for the annual Parent Child Center (PCC) Master Grant. The PCC Network is pushing for funding increases in FY22 and in future years, to eventually reach a level that fully reimburses the community-based agencies for the services they are providing.

At the same time, the Parent Child Center bill will be introduced in the Senate in the coming days. The bill would update statutes that govern PCCs to bring a new level of formality into statute and establish clear accountability for PCCs as they deliver essential state services. In addition, the bill establishes a base funding amount for PCCs that gets closer to covering the actual cost of providing services, plus an annual increase to this base amount. The bill will be considered by the Senate Health and Welfare Committee in the coming weeks.

LEAD ORGANIZATION: Vermont Parent Child Center Network

Family and Medical Leave Insurance Program

Last month [H. 134](#), a bill to establish a strong Family and Medical Leave Insurance program, was introduced in the House. The bill has not yet been taken up by the relevant committees, as legislative leaders are first waiting to see what leave provisions may be considered on a national level by Congress and the Biden Administration.

The Vermont FaMLI Coalition is extremely grateful to the full Congressional delegation for signing on to support the federal FAMILY Act, which would provide a permanent, national leave program. Congress has also discussed a proposal to extend and expand the Families First Coronavirus Relief Act, which provides paid leave for workers impacted by the pandemic.

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

Universal School Meals

The Senate Agriculture Committee is currently working on a committee bill – “Farm Fresh School Meals for All” – that includes a number of provisions to support child food security and Vermont farmers. The [bill](#) includes language to support universal school meals by ensuring that within the next five years all public schools in Vermont offer school meals at no cost to all students. 25% of Vermont public schools were already providing universal school meals prior to the pandemic, and school meals have been available to all Vermont children for free since mid-March through the state’s pandemic response. Schools are reporting overwhelmingly positive results in terms of student’s health and readiness to learn. This bill proposes maximizing federal dollars to support school meals and requires that school districts pay the remaining costs, as is the current practice. This bill also provides \$1 million in one-time funding to school districts that may need equipment, training, or other support to successfully implement universal school meals programs, and an additional staff person at the Agency of Education to provide support to schools as they make the transition.

The bill has broad committee support, and is expected to pass out of the Senate Agriculture Committee soon. Then, it will likely move first to the Senate Education Committee and then to the Senate Appropriations Committee, where the level of funding will be determined.

LEAD ORGANIZATION: Hunger Free Vermont

Vermonters Feeding Vermonters Funding

The Governor’s Recommended FY22 Budget does not provide any base funding for the Vermonters Feeding Vermonters program. The Vermont Foodbank has requested \$500,000 in base funding for the fiscal year, and many Vermont farmers, advocates, and people experiencing hunger spoke in support of this request at the joint House and Senate Appropriations Committee public budget hearing earlier this month.

Members from both the House and Senate have spoken in favor of this proposal. If additional funding becomes available, we strongly hope that the House and Senate Appropriations Committees will give this proposal serious consideration.

LEAD ORGANIZATION: Vermont Foodbank

Pandemic Response Funding

The legislature is still waiting for instructions for how to utilize most of the pandemic response funding that was approved by Congress in December. They are also working to understand the

still-changing guidelines that impact expenditures from earlier rounds of relief, which may provide more funding and more flexibility in expenditures. Congress is also considering yet another relief package.

Many policy areas and programs are impacted by this funding, including nutrition assistance, housing, Reach Up, child care, and others.

One large package that allocates about \$140 million for housing relief [has been approved](#) and distributions will begin in the coming weeks. The House Appropriations Committee is also just passed a special spending [bill](#) to fast-track expenditures in the current fiscal year that includes using \$1.3 million in unspent FY21 funds to make a one-time payment to Reach Up recipients, as well as large investments in affordable housing and other critical programs.

It seems likely that there will at least one, if not more, fast-tracked CRF money bill that will supplement the budget bills, and move money more quickly. We will continue to track these fast-moving developments.