

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 have 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 is 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 do not have the answer, you can work with the Alliance staff and lead organizations to get one.

Children's Integrated Services: Stop the Historic Underfunding of CIS

THE ISSUE AND WHY IT MATTERS: 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: The lead organizations are working to secure an increased 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. A statewide CIS budget increase of \$2.8 million would allow the 12 regional non-profit agencies that deliver CIS to continue to meet the needs of children and families and be compensated at the cost of service delivery determined by the State.

LEGISLATIVE UPDATE: The Governor's Recommended FY22 Budget proposes to level fund CIS. The House Human Services Committee continues to support additional funding for the program and has recommended to the House Appropriations Committee that the funding level be increased by \$1.4 million for FY22 to address half the funding gap.

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.

TODAY'S LEGISLATIVE ASK: Thank House Human Services Committee members for their support. Encourage legislators to support the funding increase for Children's Integrated Services. Reach out to legislators to emphasize the importance of a comprehensive, continuous, and integrated system of services that serves our early childhood communities effectively.

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

Universal School Meals: Expand Universal School Meals to All Public Schools

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 must pay to receive a meal at school. This means that many children do not get the good nutrition they need to learn well because their families cannot afford to pay for meals or because of the shame and stigma associated with being a "free lunch kid."

PROPOSAL: Hunger Free Vermont is working to 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. 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.

LEGISLATIVE UPDATE: In late February, the Senate Agriculture Committee drafted and unanimously passed a bill – "Farm Fresh School Meals for All" – that includes several provisions to support child food security and Vermont farmers. This bill, [S. 100](#), supports universal school meals by ensuring that within the next five years all public schools in Vermont offer no cost school meals to all students. The proposed universal school meals legislation includes the creation of a new position within the Agency of Education to provide support for schools transitioning to universal school meals. Because all schools in Vermont are currently providing universal school meals in the 2020-21 school year, many schools have indicated they are interested in permanently implementing universal school meals in the 2021-22 school year, even if this legislation does not pass. The Agency of Education has indicated that they would need this position in FY22 in order to meet schools' needs. We are advocating for this position to be included in the FY22 budget, even if the full legislation does not move forward this year. The "Farm Fresh School Meals for All" bill is currently in the Senate Education Committee and if passed will move to the Senate Appropriations Committee. The bill would then move to the House for discussion and debate.

TODAY'S LEGISLATIVE ASK: Encourage Senators to vote for S. 100 and talk to local school officials, administrators, and board members about the connection between good nutrition and successful outcomes in the classroom.

LEAD ORGANIZATION: Hunger Free Vermont

PCC Network Master Grant: Strengthen and Support Parent Child Centers

THE ISSUE: Parent Child Centers (PCCs) were established in Vermont statute in the late 1990s. Since that time, the Parent Child Center Network of providers has become more formalized and has worked to establish consistency and quality in service delivery for families across the state. However, state statute and state funding has not kept up with changes in the Network and the services that PCCs provide.

PROPOSAL: The PCC Network seeks to pass legislation to bring a new level of formality into statute and establish clear accountability for PCCs as they deliver essential state services. In addition, the proposed legislation 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.

LEGISLATIVE UPDATE: 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.

The Parent Child Center bill, S. 91, has been introduced in the Senate. This bill would update statutes that govern PCCs to bring a new level of formality into statute and establish clear accountability protocols for PCCs as they deliver essential services. This bill also establishes a base funding amount for PCCs that would come closer to covering the actual cost of providing services. S. 91 will be considered in the Senate Health and Welfare Committee in the coming weeks.

TODAY'S LEGISLATIVE ASK: Encourage Senators to support the PCC Network bill, S. 91.

LEAD ORGANIZATION: Vermont Parent Child Center Network

Farm to School and Early Childhood: Increase Access to Farm to School and Early Childhood Programming

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 and Early Childhood program – access to healthy foods, food and nutrition education, and community connections.

PROPOSAL: In 2017, Act 63, the Farm to School bill, was signed into law allowing both registered and licensed child care providers to be eligible for Vermont Farm to School grants. Vermont FEED and champion organizations seek to increase annual funding to reach the goal of \$500,000 for the state's Farm to School program. This funding level ensures 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 Senate Agriculture Committee recently passed a bill, S. 100 – “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 “Farm Fresh School Meals for All” bill is currently in the Senate Education Committee and if passed will move to the Senate Appropriations Committee. The bill would then move to the House for discussion and debate.

TODAY'S LEGISLATIVE ASK: Encourage legislators to support S. 100 and full funding for the Farm to School Grants Program.

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

Family and Medical Leave Insurance: Create a Statewide Family and Medical Leave Insurance Program

THE ISSUE: At some point, nearly every working Vermonter 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 family and 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 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: The Vermont legislature will introduce a new Family and Medical Leave Insurance bill in 2021. The Vermont Family and Medical Leave Insurance (FaMLI) Coalition stands ready to work with the legislature to establish a strong, equitable, public, and affordable Family and Medical Leave Insurance program in Vermont. The coalition is also hopeful that we will see action at the federal level to pass Paid Family and Medical Leave.

LEGISLATIVE UPDATE: This past January, [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 Vermont 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.

TODAY'S LEGISLATIVE ASK: There is a strong opportunity in 2021 to move forward a federal solution for Paid Family and Medical Leave. We encourage you to reach out our federal delegation and thank them for their ongoing support for a strong and equitable paid leave program that will provide financial security to our workers and their families so they can put their health and welfare first.

LEAD ORGANIZATIONS: Main Street Alliance of Vermont and Voices for Vermont's Children, for the Vermont FaMLI Coalition

Reach Up Funding: Expand the Rental Subsidy to Support Reach Up Families

THE ISSUE: Reach Up, Vermont’s basic safety net for children and families with extremely low incomes, does not provide sufficient support to prevent deprivation. Families are receiving less than 40% of what they need for a subsistence living, and even with additional benefits like 3SquaresVT the families most in need of basic assistance are appallingly under-resourced, while expected to overcome barriers to employment and move toward self-sufficiency. Housing is the most significant unmet need, and federal COVID funds will expand the availability of emergency rental assistance for families in poverty for the next year. This creates a remarkable opportunity for Reach Up to actually meet its statutory purpose with an additional infusion of funds to raise the basic need allowance to meet the current cost of living. Vermont could substantially reduce child poverty and eradicate deep poverty for children by leveraging federal COVID funds and investing state funds wisely in Reach Up.

PROPOSAL: Voices for Vermont’s Children proposes that the basic needs allowance for families on Reach Up be adjusted to the most recent standard of need, and the benefit be raised to a level that in combination with programs like 3SquaresVT meets 100% of basic needs. Only 25 to 30% of Reach Up households have Section 8 housing vouchers or reside in project-based subsidized housing, leaving the vast majority with almost inconceivably insufficient resources (\$700/mo. for a family of three outside Chittenden County) to cover housing, transportation, and other basic living expenses. This is insufficient to cover the fair market rent for a two-bedroom apartment in most towns in Vermont, and leaves families with nothing for other costs of living, and on a perpetual cycle of eviction and homelessness.

LEGISLATIVE UPDATE: 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.

TODAY’S LEGISLATIVE ASK: Encourage legislators to support the House Human Services Committee proposal to increase the Reach Up benefit, and request a change to the needs allowance so that it is based on the current standard of need which was set December 2020. We also ask that the Reach Up benefit be aligned to fill the gap left by other assistance programs so that no child is experiencing poverty, regardless of their parent(s)’ income level.

LEAD ORGANIZATION: Voices for Vermont’s Children

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

THE ISSUE: As a key social determinant of health, safe, stable, and affordable housing is essential to children's well-being and success. Housing instability, homelessness, and unsafe housing contribute to childhood trauma, ACEs, and negative outcomes. Increasing state investments in affordable housing, reducing homelessness, and improving the health and safety of rental housing are critical to improving children's outcomes. Housing investments have been key to maintaining health and safety during the pandemic. No one can stay safe at home unless they have a safe, stable affordable home.

PROPOSAL: The Vermont Affordable Housing Coalition seeks to secure full statutory funding for the Vermont Housing and Conservation Board, increased rental assistance and supportive services, and statewide housing code enforcement. The state's chronic underfunding of housing needs means we must find equitable new revenue sources, like a proposed tax surcharge on high-end homes.

LEGISLATIVE UPDATE: 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.

The Legislature is also moving quickly to pass H. 315, which includes a number of one-time expenditures using COVID-19 relief funds. This bill would appropriate \$10 million dollars to the VHCB to provide shelter for those experiencing homelessness during the pandemic.

TODAY'S LEGISLATIVE ASK: Thank legislators for making timely investments to help alleviate homelessness during the pandemic and to support the development of permanently affordable housing. Thank members of the House Committees on Human Services and Housing, Military, and General Affairs for supporting the delay of General Assistance Housing Program restructuring, and please urge members of the House Appropriations Committee to support this delay as well.

LEAD ORGANIZATION: Vermont Affordable Housing Coalition

Special Accommodation Grants: Stabilizing Care and Education for Young Children with Disabilities and Special Health Needs

THE ISSUE: The State of Vermont has for many years offered Special Accommodation Grants (SAG) to early care and learning providers to assist with the expense of caring for children with special needs. Most often SAGs pay for a one-to-one aide to support children with special health needs, such as a feeding tube, or children on the autism spectrum or with behavioral issues who need extra support to stay safe in the early learning setting. With this extra support, children are then able to participate and benefit from high-quality early care and learning, and in turn, their parents are able to work. The SAG grants have always been in high demand across the state, and \$350,000 in annual funding is usually depleted by February or March of each school year, leaving some children without critical supports.

PROPOSAL: The lead organizations are requesting that the state fund SAGs in the amount of \$500,000, create a unique budget line item for SAGs, and re-categorize SAG funding as “emergency response” and make other program changes to allow funds to be awarded more simply and on an up-front basis. These investments will give children with special needs increased access to early childhood education, support the work of early childhood educators and CIS providers, and are in keeping with the state’s goal to provide truly integrated services for families.

LEGISLATIVE UPDATE: 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. 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.

TODAY’S LEGISLATIVE ASK: Ask members of the House and Senate Appropriations Committees to support increased funding for SAGs. Ask legislators to encourage their colleagues on the Appropriations Committees to prioritize these investments.

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

Child Care is Essential

Transforming Early Childhood Education (ECE): Equitable, Affordable, Sustainable ECE for Children Birth to Five

THE ISSUE: Child care is essential for Vermont families, but three out of five of Vermont’s youngest children do not have access to the early childhood education they need. The COVID-19 pandemic has only exacerbated already pressing challenges, making it even harder for families to find affordable high-quality care for children birth to five. And early childhood education programs struggle to find and retain qualified educators. Without a high-quality and affordable early childhood education system, Vermont cannot fully recover and grow its workforce, support young families, or set its youngest citizens up for future success in school, relationships, work, and life.

PROPOSAL: H.171, also known as the child care bill, lays the foundation for Vermont’s future child care system by advancing legislation that:

- Establishes the Legislature’s intent that by the end of 2025, a family will spend no more than 10% of its annual income on child care, families with young children will have access to high-quality early childhood education, and Vermont’s early childhood educators—the backbone of our economy—will be fairly compensated and well supported.
- Continues the transformation of Vermont’s Child Care Financial Assistance Program (CCFAP) to expand eligibility to more families, reduce family co-pays, and increase reimbursements paid to child care programs.
- Strengthens our early childhood education workforce by increasing investment in existing scholarships for current early childhood educators and creating a new scholarship program and student loan repayment support program for new early childhood educators.
- Upgrades the failing IT system used to administer Vermont’s early childhood education system.
- Analyzes the governance and administration of the early childhood education system in Vermont and develops recommendations on how to strengthen and streamline governance, administration, and accountability structures and resources.
- Creates an interim advisory committee to advise the state on the regulation and administration of the early childhood education system and to ensure that voices of those most impacted by the system are informing the state’s work.
- Charges experts with identifying stable, long-term funding sources for a transformed child care system.

LEGISLATIVE UPDATE: The House Human Services Committee (HHS) is finishing their work 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](#).

We expect that HHS will vote on the bill on Tuesday, March 9, and it will then be considered by other committees in the House, including the Appropriations Committee, before heading to a vote by the full House of Representatives, and then sent to the Senate.

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 support the initiatives.

TODAY'S LEGISLATIVE ASK: Encourage your legislators to support H. 171.

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

Other Sessions

State Budget: This year's budget development process is more complicated than usual because of the overlaps between federal pandemic response, the FY21 budget adjustment process, and the FY22 budget development process. The ECDL State Budget session will provide an update and overview of the processes used by the legislature to allocate and appropriate those funds.

Coronavirus Relief Funds: Confused about the status of federal pandemic relief funds? So is everyone else! This session will help you get updated on the status of Vermont's use of federal funding, and help you pitch your ideas to legislators in the most effective ways.