

V E R M O N T
EARLY CHILDHOOD
ADVOCACY ALLIANCE

2021 Legislative Agenda – Mid-Session Update

We're passing the mid-point of the session – the House has finalized their version of the state's FY22 Budget, and bills are starting to move from one chamber to another.

This summary provides an update on the status of the issues on the Alliance's '21 Legislative Agenda as of Monday, March 29. As always, debate and deliberations are ongoing, so some information in this Update may be outdated rather quickly.

The “end game” for this session continues to be unclear – the impact of the huge American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) on our state's budget and programs is still being understood. The legislative process could get chaotic in the coming weeks as the Legislature works to consider bills, finalize the regular state budget, and make decisions on allocating the new federal funds.

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

Children's Integrated Services (CIS) Funding

The Governor's Recommended FY22 Budget proposes to level fund CIS. With strong encouragement from the House Human Services Committee, the House approved a budget that increases funding to the program by \$1.4m for FY22. This would be the first major funding increase to CIS in years, and is approximately half of the funding needed to bring rates up to a level that would meet current program costs, as estimated by the state's own analysis of three years ago.

Advocacy supporting this new funding has now shifted to the Senate, which is beginning its work to review the House budget proposal.

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

Reach Up Funding

While the Legislature has supported proposals to make limited, one-time payments to Reach Up families to support them during the pandemic through H. 315 (see below), so far the House has not supported any long-term program enhancements.

As we reported earlier, 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. While the House Human Services Committee recommended using at least some of those funds to increase benefits now far below actual cost of living figures, the House Appropriations Committee declined to do so.

Advocacy in support of increased Reach Up funding will continue as the budget discussion moves to the Senate.

LEAD ORGANIZATION: Voices for Vermont’s Children

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

[H.171](#) passed the House on a vote of 146-1 last week. This bill takes crucial steps toward ensuring Vermont’s child care system supports children’s healthy development, working families, and our state’s early childhood educators – the workforce that supports every other workforce in Vermont. This bill also makes critical investments in stabilizing the system now, and puts Vermont on a path to achieve access and affordability for families, fair compensation and adequate supports for early childhood educators, well-coordinated and transparent governance and accountability structures, and sustainable, long-term funding for our child care system. [Click here to attend an LGKAN Action Team](#) meeting to learn more about what's inside H. 171.

H.171 has been sent to the Senate, where Senate committees will begin their work to ensure this bill is as strong as possible to support Vermont’s children, families, early childhood educators, child care programs, businesses, and continued economic recovery.

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

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 (VHCB), including \$20 million in one-time funding, primarily for affordable housing initiatives. The House Appropriations Committee approved this level of funding, which was passed as part of the budget approved by the full House last week. The Legislature also passed H. 315, which provides \$10 million in federal pandemic relief to VHCB to accelerate the creation of more affordable housing.

The Senate last week passed [S. 79](#), a bill that would improve rental housing health and safety by establishing a rental housing registry; create a statewide enforcement mechanism for the State Rental Housing Health Code; and, make permanent the Vermont Housing Investment Program which was piloted successfully last fall with Cares Act funds.

The Administration’s proposal for a major shift in how General Assistance Emergency Housing aid is calculated and delivered has been delayed for at least one year. The timing for implementing this shift was dependent on multiple factors including the COVID pandemic and vaccine distribution, but the Administration had proposed to end the motel voucher program as of October 1, 2021. Advocates and stakeholders expressed concerns over this proposal to various committees in the House, which have in turn recommended that the implementation be delayed for at least one year in order for additional planning to be undertaken. The Agency of Human Services has agreed to this delay at least until the start of FY23 (July ’22). Additional planning conversations involving all parties will continue in the coming months.

LEAD ORGANIZATION: Vermont Affordable Housing Coalition

Building Bright Futures (BBF) Funding

The Governor’s Recommended FY22 Budget proposes level funding to BBF, Vermont’s early childhood State Advisory Council. The House Human Services Committee recognized and valued the importance of BBF’s work on multiple levels, and supported BBF’s request for an additional \$261,000 in annual base funding starting in FY22.

The House Appropriations Committee unanimously voted to include the \$261,000 funding increase in their FY22 Budget, which was then passed by the House and will be considered by the Senate in the coming weeks.

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 SAGs have proposed \$200,000 of increased funding, as well as a specific line in the budget for SAGs, to ensure funding is directed as intended and to increase transparency and accountability. Unfortunately, neither of these changes were supported in the House. Advocacy will now move to the Senate.

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

Farm to School & Early Childhood Funding

The FY22 Budget as passed by the House does not include an increase in funding for the Farm to School Grants Program. [S.100](#), the “Farm Fresh School Meals for All” bill, did initially include

increased funding for Farm to School Grants as well as local food purchasing incentive programs, but the Senate Appropriations Committee pulled these elements out of the bill and instead will consider them with the FY22 Budget. [Click here to learn more](#) about the Farm to School campaign.

Senators remain committed to working toward more local food in our schools and we are hopeful that the Farm to School Grant funding will be included in the Senate’s version of the FY22 Budget.

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, [S. 91](#), is being considered by the Senate Health and Welfare Committee. 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.

LEAD ORGANIZATION: Vermont Parent Child Center Network

Family and Medical Leave Insurance Program

[H. 134](#), a bill to establish a strong Family and Medical Leave Insurance program, was introduced in the House in January. 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 all that they did to support passage of the American Rescue Plan Act, which extended the Families First Coronavirus Relief Act, as well as for signing on to support the federal FAMILY Act, which would provide a permanent, national leave program. The road ahead to get this passed into law will be challenging, but there is an opportunity to make permanent paid leave a reality. Those wishing to share their stories to support the campaign are encouraged to use the Coalition’s online story collection [form](#).

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

Universal School Meals

At the end of February, the Senate Agriculture Committee unanimously passed [S. 100](#), the “Farm Fresh School Meals for All” bill. This bill proposes to provide universal school meals to all students at no cost within the next five years. [Click here to learn more](#) about the Universal School Meals campaign.

This bill is currently on the Senate calendar for action on April 1. If it passes the Senate, we are hopeful that the House will take action on this bill before the end of the session.

LEAD ORGANIZATION: Hunger Free Vermont

Vermonters Feeding Vermonters Funding

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

The House did not include any funding for the program in their FY22 Budget. Advocacy on the issue will continue in the Senate.

LEAD ORGANIZATION: Vermont Foodbank

Pandemic Response Funding

The Legislature continues to work on various ways to spend the many millions of dollars the state is receiving from the federal government for pandemic response and recovery.

There are a number of different bills being considered and discussions occurring regarding this money, and it has been a challenge for all of us to follow. Some funds are being allocated through the FY22 Budget as well as other bills, including H. 315 (press [story](#) and more technical [spreadsheet](#)). H. 315 includes \$82,000 allocated to support the ongoing operation of the statewide diaper bank being operated by the Junior League of Champlain Valley, as well as much larger allocations to support the Vermont Foodbank, housing initiatives, and one-time payments to Reach Up families.

This bill has gone through several changes during the legislative process, but final approval is expected this week.

The state will see a very large amount of federal aid as a result of the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) that was passed last month. When benefits sent directly to individuals and municipalities are included, this could total over \$3 billion, compared to over \$1 billion that came to the state through the CARES Act. The state will also have much more time, in some

cases over three years, to spend the funds. This one-time funding will benefit many policy areas the Alliance works in – housing, nutrition, economic security, child care and early childhood education, etc. Look for more information on how these funds will be allocated in the coming weeks and months.

This complex response by the Legislature will continue throughout the session, which may be extended because of the need to consider how to allocate the funds. To find out more about funding for specific areas of interest, please get in touch with the Alliance staff directly by emailing Matt Levin at matt@vecaa.org.