

CONNECTICUT VOICES FOR CHILDREN & ADVOCATES FOR CONNECTICUT'S CHILDREN AND YOUTH 2008 LEGISLATIVE AGENDA

PROMOTE MORE STRATEGIC STATE PLANNING AND FISCAL CHOICES

I. Establish Comprehensive Long Term Planning in Connecticut

Issue: Unlike many other states, Connecticut has *no* comprehensive long-term, strategic planning process. Individual state agencies may have some plans (e.g., DECD's new economic development plan), but *no* single plan seeks to integrate planning across state agencies, from economic development to education and human services. For a \$18 billion/year enterprise to have no comprehensive plan for where it wants to go and how it wants to get there has proven problematic. Contributing to this lack of planning was the lay-off of virtually all planners in the Office of Policy and Management in FY 02-03 when the state budget was in deficit (as well as planners in many other state agencies). Last Session, we successfully urged the Legislative Program Review and Investigations Committee to make this issue the focus of one of its comprehensive studies.

Proposal: That the State set up an office for long term planning which will span executive (OPM), legislative, and judicial branches, involve others outside government, and be linked to an academic institution.

II. Assure Stable and Adequate State Revenues, Equitably Borne by all Residents

Issue: Although OFA and OPM continue to project surpluses of about \$100 million for FY 08 (far more modest than the last years' surplus), the economy appears to be slowing. We are concerned that revenues may come in less than anticipated, setting off a scramble for funds and calls for spending cuts.

Proposal: Develop revenue options (e.g., a more progressive state personal income tax, unified reporting, cap on movie tax and other credits, other revenue options) to forestall spending cuts.

REDUCE CHILD POVERTY

I. Adopt Measures to Reduce Child Poverty by 50% by 2014

Issue: Connecticut's child poverty rate remains high and steady, relative to the state's wealth. In 2004, the CT Child Poverty and Prevention Council set a target of reducing child poverty by 50% by 2014. Connecticut is *not* on track to achieve this target.

Proposal: The Council asked a group of experts to cull from the dozens of the Council's ideas those that are most likely to reduce child poverty. CT Voices supports the experts' recommendations. We will also oppose budget/policy proposals that would *increase* child and family poverty.

II. Reduce Child Poverty and Expand Opportunity by Adopting a State Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC)

Issue: The federal EITC has been found to be an extremely effective tool to reduce child poverty. All of our neighboring states have adopted a refundable state EITC that piggybacks on the federal credit; Connecticut has not done so (although CT Voices has been pressing for this since 1997).

Proposal: To establish a refundable state EITC

ASSURE TIMELY AND AFFORDABLE HEALTH CARE

I. Restore Continuous Eligibility for HUSKY

Issue: Low-income families often have significant fluctuations in income from one month to the next. This can result in losing eligibility for HUSKY one month, then regaining eligibility the next -- but having to re-apply, resulting in a gap in coverage.

Proposal: Reinstate continuous eligibility for HUSKY. This provides 12 months of eligibility, regardless of fluctuations in family income.

II. Modify HUSKY B to Spend all SCHIP funds

Issue: Federal SCHIP funds support Connecticut's HUSKY B program. For a variety of reasons, we have sent back to the federal government \$108.8 million (41%) of the \$250 million to which the state has been entitled over the past 10 years.

Proposal: To use CT's SCHIP funding that we now are leaving on the table to expand HUSKY B, including by eliminating cost sharing, eliminating caps on services, expanding benefits, changing the premium structure, etc.

III. Expand Legislative Oversight of DSS

Issue: DSS operates multiple programs without any implementing regulations, and commonly begins to operate under draft regulations without providing the public input envisioned by the Administrative Procedures Act.

Proposal: Require DSS, by statute, to share proposed regulations with oversight entities before they are published, such as Medicaid Managed Council and the Behavioral Health Partnership Oversight Council.

IV. Maintain HUSKY Performance Monitoring Funds at Current FY 09 Levels

Issue: CT Voices receives funding from DSS, through the Hartford Foundation for Public Giving, to do independent performance monitoring of the HUSKY program for the Medicaid Managed Care Council and others.

Proposal: Funds are in the FY 09 budget; we will advocate to maintain current funding.

IMPROVE ACCESS TO HIGH QUALITY EARLY CARE AND EDUCATION FOR WORKING PARENTS

I. Increase Access to Care4Kids Subsidies for Low-Wage Families

Issue: Care4Kids provides a child care subsidy to low-income working parents, allowing them to afford higher quality child care. The FY 08 budget allocates \$90 million for Care4Kids, well below the FY 02 level of \$121.6 million (or \$142.1 million in '08 dollars). This decline -- more than \$50 million in inflation-adjusted dollars -- means that fewer families have access to Care4Kids than did in FY 02 and that the subsidy has not kept pace with increases in market rates. Although the federal government recommends that the subsidy be set at the 75th percentile of current year market rates and requires that DSS do market rate surveys every two years, the current Care4Kids rate is set at the 60th percentile of 2001 market levels and has not been increased in six years. This means both that the purchasing power of the subsidy has eroded markedly and that many child care centers are in financial jeopardy, as a significant number of such centers rely on Care4Kids subsidies for their operations.

Proposal: Increase Care4Kids funding such that: a) Care for Kids is open to families in *all* Priority Groups; and b) increase Care4Kids subsidy rates so that they reach at least the 75th percentile of current year market rates by 2011. Require by statute an automatic increase in subsidy levels in relationship to market rates.

IMPROVE OUTCOMES FOR CONNECTICUT'S FOSTER CHILDREN

I. Foster School Stability for Foster Children and Youth

Issue: Children who are put into foster care, and who are moved from one foster placement to another, commonly change schools as well as their placement. This causes further disruptions in their young lives, severing ties to friends, teachers, and school activities. Research shows that each school transition also costs 3-6 months of academic progress. The protections of the federal McKinney-Vento Act (that assure that homeless children can attend their "home school" regardless of the location of the homeless shelter in which they live) do not apply to all foster children although they also are, technically, "home"-less.

Proposal: By state law, assure foster children the right to attend their "home school" when removed from their homes or when moved from one foster placement to another. If a party to the foster care proceeding believes the child should transfer schools, have a Judge determine, using a best interests of the child standard, whether the child should be transported back to his/her "home school" or whether a transfer to a new school is more appropriate. DCF as the child's statutory parent, rather than the school district or SDE, would pay for the cost of transportation.

II. Improve Legal Representation Of Abused and Neglected Children (And Their Parents)

Issue: Despite an important infusion of new funds last Session, and some very aggressive leadership by Carolyn Signorelli, the Chief Child Protection Attorney, the quality of legal representation for children and parents involved in the child protection system remains inadequate. For example, the December 19, 2007 *Juan F.* Court Monitor's report found that only 14% of the attorneys appointed for children in DCF care participated in any discussion about the child's treatment plan and just 12% attended any Administrative Case Review or Family Conference. Many attorneys continue to be paid \$500 for up to the first 30 hours of work, resulting in very little time being spent on cases.

Last year, our Yale Law students did a terrific study of models in other states, and concluded that Connecticut would benefit from a change -- from the current model that relies on several hundred independent contract attorneys to a new legal services-like model that uses both staff lawyers and social workers to staff a case and that assures better training and supervision internally. The Chief Child Protection Attorney agrees with the need for this change, and recently issued an RFP for one or more "model" interdisciplinary offices.

Proposal: The Commission on Child Protection received authorization from OPM to use \$1.5 million of its new FY 08 funds to launch a pilot program to provide, through a "legal services" interdisciplinary-style model, representation for abused and neglected children. This pilot will include an evaluation. There is concern that if the pilot cannot be launched quickly enough, some of these funds may lapse. We need to assure that the revised FY 09 budget includes any necessary carry-forward language, as well as additional funding needed to keep the pilot going in FY 09.

III. Improve Outcomes for Youth Transitioning from Foster Care

Issue: Research is clear; foster children do best when they become --as quickly as possible -- a part of a family. This can occur through reunification with their birth families, placement with relatives in guardianships, or termination of parental rights and adoption. Currently, however, close to 1/3 of all children in DCF care have a "permanency" goal that is not one of these three options. One way *other* states have assured that children in foster care more quickly achieve permanency with a family is more frequent judicial review. In Allegheny County, PA, for example, courts review the cases of children in foster care every three months. As a result, the number of children in foster care has declined markedly; children get into life-long families rapidly.

Proposal: That in addition to the periodic judicial reviews now required, that judicial reviews of cases also be triggered by certain events in a child's case that indicate that the case is not on track (e.g., more than three changes in placement in a year, more than one school transfer in a school year, placement out-of-state, overstays in shelters/SAFE Homes, school truancy/habitual truancy, or any child or youth without a preferred permanency planning goal until a preferred permanency goal is in place and good progress is being made toward that goal). There is some interest in the Judicial Branch for creating a special court hearing for youth who are nearing age 18 to ensure that they have been provided all supports necessary to transition to adulthood.

IMPROVE OUTCOMES IN K-12 EDUCATION BY ENHANCING STUDENT ATTENDANCE

I. Improve the Reporting of Truancy

Issue: Current State Department of Education data on truancy are inadequate, yet truancy is an important predictor of school failure, dropping out of school, and involvement in the juvenile justice system.

Proposal: Require each school district to report the number of “truants” and “habitual truants” (by school, grade, gender, race/ethnicity) to the State Department of Education. In addition, require school districts to report the number of parent meetings triggered by our current truancy law (under which, if a student has 4 unexcused absences in a month or 10 in a year, the school is required to have a meeting with the students’ parents). Require SDE to post this data on the SDE website in downloadable form.

II. Prevent Rollbacks in the “In-School Suspension Law”

Issue: Last Session, the General Assembly modified state law to limit the use of out-of-school suspensions by requiring that many suspensions be served “in school.” We have heard that some school districts want to amend this recently-adopted legislation.

Proposal: To oppose any attempt to roll-back the new restriction on out-of-school suspensions and requirement that many suspensions be “in school.”

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