2023-24 POLICY AGENDA

Voices for Vermont’s Children
Voices’ Vision:

EVERY CHILD THRIVING

Voices for Vermont’s Children believes in a future where every child gets to thrive. The path to that future requires bold, comprehensive, visionary solutions. As we begin our 40th year advocating for policies that improve the lives of children and youth, we’ll celebrate the progress made, and apply the lessons learned from those advances to the work that lies ahead.

During this unsettled time in the nation, with public education, bodily autonomy, voting rights and our very democracy under attack, the work of independent policy organizations like Voices is a critical resource. Our education and advocacy efforts seek to align people around something we all want - a brighter future for our kids.

We believe there are adequate resources to ensure that no child goes hungry or homeless, every child can be assured a safe and supportive home environment, and families have access to the caregiving resources they need. Voices is the only independent, multi-issue advocacy organization in Vermont operating from this perspective, and we use this unique position to convene unlikely allies, leverage top-tier policy analysis from national partners like CLASP, National Women’s Law Center, and the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, and bring Vermont data on child outcomes to light.

At the same time, Vermont’s size and style of governing means we can be on the leading edge of progressive, evidence-driven policies that can be scaled and replicated across the country. The importance of generating homegrown support for Voices’ policy research and advocacy is greater now than ever before. Not only can we push for systems change in Vermont to improve kids’ wellbeing, we can model policy solutions in our small state that can then be scaled for larger states and the nation.

Each of our current policy priorities have made significant progress during the last legislative session, and are primed for greater impact if we expand our base of support. The following briefs provide an overview of recent progress and our planned next steps, for which we seek financial support from both individuals and philanthropic partners.
Issue Area:

CHILD WELLBEING

Voices is catalyzing a shift to a reparative approach to family safety concerns. Foster care as it currently exists has not proven to be an effective way to break the cycle of family violence or create family stability. According to Think of Us, the outcomes for individuals who have experienced foster care are terrible:

- 86% of US child trafficking survivors experienced foster care,
- 60% of young people arrested have had foster care involvement,
- 47% of older youth in foster care do not graduate high school on time,
- 97% of older foster youth do not graduate college,
- 51% of young people without housing have experienced foster care.
- Former foster children are almost twice as likely as US war veterans and five times more likely than the general population to suffer from PTSD.

POLICY STATEMENT

Child and youth well-being is inextricably linked to the wellbeing of families and communities. Families need equitable access to safe and affordable housing, family support services, healthcare, and nutritious food. Child well-being is also undermined by trauma and violence. Children today are growing up in an unceasing climate of gun violence, racial violence, gender violence, economic violence, and environmental violence.

If we are to truly move toward justice as a community, we must be prepared for the deep engagement, vulnerability, and relational work this moment requires, and not fall back on retributive and reactionary responses. Vermont must improve transitional support to young adults, especially those launching into adulthood with the deck stacked against them: former foster youth, BIPOC, LGBTQI+, and those raised in economically disadvantaged families.
A CAMPAIGN FOR CHILD & YOUTH WELLBEING

Vision:
An equitable foster care ecosystem where people with lived experience direct the system to meet their needs, prioritizes prevention, and employs reparative, rather than punitive intervention.

Campaign Goals:
- Correct the budget imbalance that currently directs 93% of federal funds to foster care and only 7% for prevention and permanency.
- Create accountability around the state’s implementation of the Families First initiative.
- Ensure that youth transitioning out of foster care have the supports they need to thrive as adults.
- Upend the white supremacist cultural frame that centers on individual, rather than communal/systemic responsibility.

Strategies & Activities:
- Community organizing - building and sharing power with people impacted by the foster care system, including foster youth and both birth and foster parents.
- Public education - pulling back the curtain on the racist roots of the foster care system and the inadequacies of family support systems.
- Legislative advocacy to advance the policy solutions that emerge as priorities through our community engagement.

NOTE: This work is closely integrated with the child poverty campaign.

Source: ThinkofUs.org & The Center for Lived Experience
Issue Area:

CHILD POVERTY

Voices and our partners at the state and local level are advancing policies to ensure that every child’s basic needs are met. This ambitious, achievable, and imperative goal will require that social and economic supports are recalibrated to meet the needs of children and families TODAY. This includes safe housing, adequate food, and sufficient household income through employment or public assistance to cover the actual cost of living in Vermont. It also calls for culturally appropriate services, inclusive, welcoming schools, and well-resourced and accountable community institutions.

Income inequality has been growing for decades - destabilizing families, communities, and the economy as a whole, and forcing too many children to live out their most critical developmental years in poverty. Poverty and related adverse conditions negatively impact child health and wellbeing, and are the root cause of inequities throughout the lifespan.

Poverty and racial inequities are inextricably linked and maintained by existing systems, with children of color experiencing poverty and near poverty at nearly twice the rate of white children. Vermont must address the structural inequities in our system if we want to eliminate poverty and its destructive effects.
POVERTY IS A POLICY CHOICE.
WE CAN CHOOSE TO END IT.

Vision:
In ten years, we aim to establish a new social contract that ensures every child, youth and family in Vermont is able to meet their basic needs. No child hungry, homeless, or without the other essentials of a safe and healthy life.

Campaign Goals:
- Review the adequacy of the subsistence calculation for Reach Up, Vermont’s cash assistance program for families with very little household income, and increase the benefit to meet the documented need.
- Codify annual cost of living adjustments in statute.
- Increase availability of, and access to, affordable housing.
- Establish a universal, equitable, state-run paid family and medical leave program.

Strategies & Activities:
- Community organizing - developing advocates and activists who can mobilize around political opportunities.
- Public education - shifting the narrative to a systems’ frame, away from the prevailing frame of personal responsibility. Envisioning a Vermont where we all thrive when we all have what we need.
- Legislative advocacy to advance the policy solutions that emerge as priorities through our community engagement.

Related Partner Campaigns:
- Universal School Meals
- Early Childhood Education Transformation
Additional Focus Areas:

**EDUCATION EQUITY**

**Vision:**
All children and youth will have an appropriate and equitable education where they have opportunities to grow and thrive.

**Goals:**
- Eliminating disparities faced by students including low-income students, students of color, students with disabilities and LGBTQ students.
- Supporting young people’s self-determination as it relates to their education.
- Creating an asset based, student-centered public education system that recognizes all that young people have to offer as opposed to where there is a deficit.

**Strategies & Activities**
- Engaging parents in concrete ways as full partners in their children’s education.
- Promoting public education that is not isolated from, but fully integrated into, the local community.
- Advocating for equitable funding of our schools; funding that serves people on the basis of their specific needs (social, economic, etc.) as opposed to proposals that divide and/or enrich one community over another.

**HEALTH EQUITY**

**Vision:**
All children, youth, parents, and caregivers have a fair and just opportunity to be healthy. Disparities in health care, health outcomes, and the structural oppressions which drive these disparities, are eliminated.

**Goals:**
- Communities recognize the impacts of social, environmental, and economic factors on health outcomes, and invest appropriately in removing barriers to wellbeing.
- Increase equitable access to: healthy environments; protective factors like safe and stable housing and adequate nutrition; and comprehensive health care including mental health and oral health.

**Strategies & Activities:**
- Identify and quantify health disparities according to race/ethnicity, income, gender, age, disability, geography, and experience of current or past adverse events.
- Advance policies that aim to correct the systemic inequities that lead to these disparities and that support the health and overall well-being of the families and caretakers of children.
- Build and share power with long-standing and under-resourced networks working to address various social determinants of health.