



West Virginia's future depends on our ability to nurture **the health and well-being of the next generation of West Virginians—our children.**

As the Legislative Action Team for Children and Families, we work to advance family-friendly public policy by mobilizing support for issues that improve the lives of children in West Virginia.



Our members include the state's leading organizations working on behalf of children and families.

We actively monitor pending legislation affecting children and families, advocate for those policies and legislative proposals that benefit children, and inform West Virginians about the impacts of proposed legislation.

Now, more than ever, West Virginia children need lawmakers to be champions and defenders who are willing to focus on, support, raise their voices for, and attach their names to legislation that would improve the lives of children and families.

Too often, policymakers and interest groups invoke protecting children in bills that would fail to strengthen—or worse, outright harm—families.

For our member organizations, the following issues are the ones most vital to West Virginia children and families, and we call on lawmakers to prioritize protecting and strengthening the programs that help kids thrive. →

2024 Priorities

West Virginia Legislative Action Team
for Children and Families



Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program

SNAP is the nation's most effective anti-hunger program. Between 2014-2018 SNAP benefits lifted 20,000 West Virginia children out of poverty. Restrictions to SNAP inevitably ensnare children and families, as most beneficiaries live in households with children, and reductions in benefits push more people to the charitable food sector, which when strained has fewer resources for children.

- **We will support legislation that reduces barriers to SNAP and increases the number of families served by the program**, while opposing efforts to increase bureaucratic red tape and program restrictions.



Medicaid and CHIP

Medicaid and the Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP) provide comprehensive health coverage for 225,000 West Virginia children. Research shows a parental "welcome mat" effect, where coverage increases among children when their parents are eligible as well. Simply put, moving to "whole family coverage" through Medicaid results in more enrollment for children.

- **We will support efforts to allocate pre-pandemic levels of state funding for Medicaid**, while opposing any policies that would reduce benefits, make fewer people eligible, or impose additional bureaucratic barriers to the program.



Temporary Assistance for Needy Families

TANF is the state's only cash assistance program to low-income families, proven to help families in poverty maintain stability, promote children's healthy development, and reduce child maltreatment. In June 2023, only about 5,000 West Virginia households received TANF through WV Works, in part, because West Virginia has some of the harshest TANF restrictions of any state.

- **We will support policies that reduce barriers to TANF and increase the number of families served by the program**, while opposing efforts to increase bureaucratic red tape and program restrictions.



Child Care Assistance for Families and Providers

There are currently an estimated 26,000 West Virginia children under 6 who need but cannot access child care due to affordability and accessibility issues. While federal COVID relief funds allowed the state to extend child care subsidies to more families and to increase resources to child care centers, those federal resources have expired.

- **We will support effective efforts that will expand access to child care and stabilize availability** through increased state funding for child care and reimbursement of child care centers based on enrollment and actual costs of care, while opposing efforts to lower state funding or increase teacher-to-child ratios.



Juvenile Justice

West Virginia has the second highest juvenile incarceration rate in the country where every year, around 4,000 juveniles end up before a judge. And often it's incidents in schools that lead kids into the juvenile justice system in the first place, commonly known as the "school-to-prison pipeline." Another persisting trend is that our schools are twice as likely to suspend or expel Black students as white students.

Juvenile incarceration, suspensions, and expulsions do nothing to address underlying issues of poverty or trauma, but do make it more likely that a child will be incarcerated as an adult. Furthermore, these punitive measures exacerbate economic and racial disparities and do nothing to help people, families, or communities heal when one person harms another.

- **We support efforts that increase access to mental health care for youth and trauma-informed practices in schools** as well as efforts that decrease suspensions and expulsions. We also support second look sentencing for young people ages 18-25 who were convicted of more serious crimes.

2024 Priorities

West Virginia Legislative Action Team
for Children and Families



Infant and Maternal Health

A state's infant and maternal health rates are a proxy for overall societal health. According to the most recent data available, infant mortality in West Virginia exceeds the national average, and Black babies are twice as likely to die in their first year of life as white babies. The state's publicly available data on maternal mortality is not disaggregated by race, but nationally Black women are 3 times more likely to be impacted than their white peers.

We will support efforts to strengthen data collection related to infant and maternal mortality; increase supports for families like paid leave and access to culturally appropriate care; and increase funding to evidence-based programs like early childhood home visitation.



Public Education

Nearly 250,000 West Virginia children receive the education in the state's public schools. Our public schools serve all students equally regardless of race, gender, religion, special needs, and LGBTQ+ status, among other factors. We believe that our public schools need more resources, not fewer.

We will support efforts to increase pay for public school employees and to increase resources for our public schools. We will oppose efforts to weaken reporting mechanisms for home schooling, microschools, and private schools or to divert more tax dollars to private schools that do not meet the same accountability requirements as our public schools or accept students with special needs or regardless of religion.



Unemployment Insurance

Unemployment insurance is an earned benefit that helps families stay afloat during economic downturns by providing replacement income for families to spend on their basic household needs. Economic shocks, including job loss, put families at increased risk of child welfare involvement. Robust unemployment insurance benefits mitigate the impact of these economic shocks and can reduce instances of neglect that result from increased stress related to inability to provide for one's children.

We will oppose efforts to cut unemployment insurance benefits by reducing the number of weeks available or increasing bureaucratic barriers to the program.



Domestic Violence

In West Virginia, marital partners cannot be charged with some sexually violent crimes due to a marital exception in state code. Under current code, if a marital partner makes sexual contact in an abusive manner, they cannot be charged with a sexually violent crime. However, if the same abusive behavior was perpetrated by a non-married partner, the perpetrator could be charged with a sexually violent crime.

We support efforts to criminalize spousal sexual abuse by eliminating West Virginia's spousal sexual abuse legal loophole that restricts criminal prosecution for sexual abuse charges for spouses or live-in partners.

