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## End of Legislative Session Update

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**Though state legislative and budget decisions affect children, children do not participate in the political process.** Connecticut Voices for Children continues to be a vocal advocate for data-driven policy solutions and strong state investments in children and families. We work toward a future in which every child in Connecticut, regardless of circumstance, is given a meaningful chance to succeed. This legislative session, we saw important progress in ensuring healthy child development, educational achievement, and family success. Throughout the session, we partnered with peer organizations in support of key legislation to expand economic opportunities and meaningful choices for Connecticut's children and families. With our data-informed advocacy, strong partnerships, and philanthropic support, many of these bills were signed into law.

### Family Wellbeing

In concert with Legal Assistance Resource Center of Connecticut and others, we were successful in helping prevent loss of health insurance coverage for almost 9,000 low-income parents. The final budget rejected the Governor's April proposal to reduce parent eligibility in HUSKY A (Medicaid) to 138 percent of the federal poverty level (%/FPL) from 155% FPL. During the budget negotiations we released a brief that detailed the impact that last year's reductions had on parent eligibility (from 201% FPL to 155 % FPL), the full of effect of which will not be known until almost eighteen thousand parents receive cut-off notices, effective August 1, 2016. In August 2015, when almost 650 parents lost HUSKY coverage, only one in four signed up for a qualified health plan through Access Health CT (AHCT). Three in four parents did not enroll or dropped AHCT coverage and may be uninsured. Research has shown that eligible children are less likely to retain coverage when parents are uninsured. We will continue to monitor the effects of the 2015 rollback of parent coverage on low-income families. We will work with the Department of Social Services, Access Health CT, and community-based providers to develop effective strategies for outreach and application assistance.

We worked hard to prevent deeper cuts to health services than those originally proposed. For example, the final budget reduced the fees paid for children's dental services by five percent rather than the ten percent proposed by the Governor, and reduced funding for behavioral health services in the budgets of Departments of Children and Families, Mental Health and Addiction Services, and Developmental Services, again by lower amounts than first proposed by the Governor. We will continue to monitor the impact that reductions in dental fees and other cutbacks have on access to health services and supports for children and families.

This session, Voices also worked to make Connecticut the fourth state to pass Paid Family Medical Leave, which would enable parents to spend crucial time with their newly born infant or newly adopted child. While the legislation ultimately did not pass, this was an important year to build momentum for this critical two-generation policy.

## **Equitable Education**

This year, Connecticut Voices for Children supported several bills addressed at improving educational quality for Connecticut's students. One bill, passed as Public Act 16-41, implements the recommendations of the Minority Teacher Recruitment Task Force. The state seeks to address some of the barriers to recruitment and retention of diverse teachers, including standardized testing requirements not associated with the job and the difficulty of transferring out-of-state credentials into the state. Our teaching workforce should reflect the diversity of our students, and we will continue to investigate this issue in our research and advocacy moving forward.

We also supported the Education Committee's bill to establish a task force on school climate, despite concerns about the inclusion of designees with proprietary interests in the subject matter. In April, we collaborated with Connecticut Juvenile Justice Alliance, Connecticut Legal Services, and Center for Children's Advocacy to send a letter encouraging the Education Committee to ensure that the task force assumed the well-established national framework of school climate, and included the full range of experts working on this issue nationally and in our state. Though the bill did not pass this session, we will continue to support this effort going forward. As the state looks to improve school climate for all of its students, this effort should include national best practice and data-informed approaches.

We advocated for legislation that would increase critical access early care and education for Connecticut's children. Specifically, we supported an effort to expand Care 4 Kids, Connecticut's largest child care subsidy program, to homeless children and parents pursuing higher education. While neither policy passed, our advocacy shone a light on the limits of flat-funding child care. We also supported legislation that would put Connecticut into compliance with new federal Child Care Development Fund regulations, importantly advocating for a high-quality approach to early care and education.

## **Youth Opportunity**

We worked to ensure that young people involved in the juvenile justice system receive the rehabilitative and therapeutic supports they need through juvenile justice reform. As a member organization of the Juvenile Justice Policy and Oversight Committee's (JJPOC) Diversion Workgroup, we participated in the development of recommendations included in H.B. 5642, one of the key juvenile justice reform bills passed this session. The bill will serve to disrupt the school-to-prison pipeline in the state by limiting the overuse of expulsions, improving educational transitions for youth involved in the juvenile justice system, and requiring state agencies to better track outcomes of youth enrolled in juvenile justice programs. Another key juvenile justice reform bill, the Governor's Second Chance Society bill, which will raise the age of juvenile jurisdiction from 18 to 21, has not yet passed, though legislators have indicated that they plan to raise the bill during the special session. If passed, the bill would effectively divert thousands of 18-, 19-, and 20-year-olds out of the adult criminal justice system and into the more rehabilitative juvenile system.

We also worked to elevate youth voices in child welfare advocacy. We held our fifth annual Youth at the Capitol Day forum in January, at which ten youth advocates shared their experience in foster care before an audience of agency staff, legislators, and other policymakers. Following this event, we partnered with the Center for Children's Advocacy in support of S.B. 180, which makes youth-driven recommendations regarding the creation of foster family profiles, youth councils at congregate facilities, and surveys for youth leaving their placements. One key aspect of the bill, requiring the state to provide transportation for youth to attend their permanency hearings, was removed due to budgetary concerns; we plan to investigate the issue further and continue to advocate for this youth involvement going forward.

## **Fiscal Policy**

Connecticut Voices worked tirelessly to bolster future opportunities for children and families despite the ongoing fiscal crisis. First, we worked to hold spending through our tax code accountable by advocating for a more robust review process for tax expenditures, which total over \$7 billion in lost revenue annually. We were partially successful, working with the Office of the State Comptroller and Pew Charitable Trusts to pass a bill (H.B. 5636) that would evaluate business tax incentives, which now sits on Gov. Malloy's desk.

Voices provided budget analysis and revenue recommendations to policymakers and other advocates interested in adequate funding for social services intended for vulnerable children and families. While the extent of the fiscal crisis facing Connecticut limited the state's ability to avoid deep cuts to state programs, lawmakers adopted some Voices recommendations to avoid some of the deepest budget cuts to public services that help children and families. We could not be prouder of the work we have done and continue to do to make certain that every child and every family has the opportunity to thrive in Connecticut.

To read our testimony in support of these important initiatives, please visit [ctvoices.org/advocacy/legislative-testimony](http://ctvoices.org/advocacy/legislative-testimony).