



2017 Legislative Session Review

Legislative Brief
November 2017

*Connecticut Voices
for Children's Staff*

Even though state legislative and budget decisions affect children, children do not have the right to participate in the political process. Connecticut Voices for Children speaks with and for children, advocating for data-driven, strategic investments that will enable every child in Connecticut to have a meaningful chance to succeed.

This legislative session, the overriding focus on the state budget deficit crowded out other important legislative discussions. Nonetheless, the General Assembly did consider and pass a significant number of bills that affect the wellbeing of children, families and communities across the state.

Fiscal Policy

The state fiscal woes dominated the agenda this year. The projected budget deficit grew from \$3.6 billion at the start of the session to nearly \$5 billion by June. The General Assembly failed to pass a budget by the end of the regular session; legislators did not reach a bipartisan agreement until October, after a long and contentious debate.

The final budget agreement largely relies on short-term gimmicks and short-sighted spending cuts to close the deficit. The Children's Budget – the share of state spending on children and families – reached a record low, declining from 29.5 percent of the

budget in fiscal year 2017 to 27.8 percent. For the first time, state spending on fixed costs (debt service, retiree health care, pensions, and bonding) took a larger share of the budget (29.5 percent) than what the state spends on children and families.

In addition to the budget cuts, the General Assembly also approved sweeping changes to the state's constitutional spending cap, expanding the categories of spending covered by the cap and making it more likely that the state's growing fixed costs will crowd out other essential programs, services, and investments. In addition, changes in bonding rules and restrictions on how the General Assembly can use money raised through the income tax have the potential to dramatically reduce its ability to shape the budget or reach strategic goals.

The approved budget has little in the way of new taxes; 80 percent of the new revenue comes from a tax on hospitals designed to increase federal Medicaid funding. The only significant tax changes reflect upside-down priorities: reducing the Earned Income and Property Tax Credits that benefit lower-income working families, while reducing the estate tax – a shift that only favors the wealthy.



The decrease in the Children's Budget represents a break with Connecticut's commitment to children and families, and will have serious negative consequences, both in the short term and the long term. This budget will tie the hands of future legislators and hamstring the state's ability to make children and families a priority.

Throughout the budget debates, we argued in support of a balanced budget characterized by a commitment

Key legislative successes:

- Passed: [H.B. 7316 An Act Concerning Evaluation of Business Assistance and Incentive Programs](#) - [Testified in support](#).

Equitable Education

Education has long been the cornerstone of Connecticut's prosperity. Public schools can provide opportunities from preschool through college to help all children fulfill their potential, increase social mobility, reduce poverty, and fuel economic growth.

This year, Connecticut Voices for Children supported several bills focused on providing quality, equitable education for all children in Connecticut. In early care, we successfully advocated for S.B. 954, a bill that instructs the Department of Education and the Office of Early Childhood (OEC) to develop a plan to implement a universal preschool system in Connecticut by 2022. The General Assembly also approved S.B. 912, a bill that expands the group of early childhood educators who are considered qualified to work at centers receiving state funds: alleviating the state's shortage of early childhood teachers. In addition, we successfully beat back efforts to weaken or dismantle the OEC by transferring some of its programs to other departments (H.B. 7006).

Education funding remains a key point in the ongoing budget discussions, as the state strives to redefine how it allocates funding to school districts. Connecticut Voices

Key legislative successes:

- Passed: [S.B. 912 An Act Concerning Revisions to the Staff Qualifications Requirements for Early Childhood Educators](#) - [Testified in support](#).
- Passed: [S.B. 954 An Act Concerning the Development of a Plan for Universal Preschool](#) - [Testified in support](#).
- Defeated: [S. B. 952 An Act Concerning the Sharing of Federal Funding Between the Office of Early Childhood and the Department of Social Services](#) - [Opposed in testimony](#).
- Defeated: [H.B. 7006 An Act Restoring Oversight of the Care 4 Kids Program to the Department of Social Services and Allowing for the Transfer of Federal Block Grant Funds to the Program](#) - [Opposed in testimony](#).

to equity, a transparent process, and sustainability. Our advocacy helped limit some of the most severe cuts included in a series of austerity proposals and helped to ensure passage of new legislation that improves state and business accountability by requiring the Department of Economic and Community Development to submit to an annual evaluation of all its economic development activities, including all tax incentives, by the Auditors of Public Accounts.

unsuccessfully advocated for an adequacy study on the true cost of education (H.B. 7270), and proposed an ambitious statewide tax system (H.B. 6678) to fund education.

The final budget flat-funded education funding for the 33 lowest-performing districts, and cut the budget of the rest by five percent on average. Even if this funding allocation protected the poorest districts, state education funding remains inadequate to serve present and future needs. In addition, legislators added some additional funding to the Care 4 Kids program, enough to partially reopen enrollment.



Youth Opportunity

Children do best when they live in stable, supportive families. Our work at the Capitol this session focused on ensuring that all children and youth have their social, emotional, physical, and educational needs met by their families, schools, or communities so they can develop to their full potential.

We celebrate a few positive policy changes including bills regarding sexual orientation conversion therapy, the trafficking of minors, and sexting.

H.B. 6695 prohibits licensed professionals from engaging in sexual orientation conversion therapy with any person under eighteen in the state. Conversion therapies are ineffective and place vulnerable youth at greater risk of depression and suicide. The bill prohibiting such therapy received overwhelming support in both chambers, and has been signed into law by the Governor.



H.B. 7309 significantly increased the penalties for sexual trafficking of minors. We also successfully advocated for a bill that will prevent children under the age of thirteen from being punished more harshly than children over that age for engaging in sexting behaviors (H.B. 6002).

We additionally succeeded in a system-level defensive action: helping to defeat S.B. 1040, a bill that would have required the judicial branch to report to the school superintendent of the town where a juvenile resides after he or she is convicted of a sex offense, as it lacked key privacy protections and stood in contrast to research and policy grounded in youth brain development, rehabilitation, and recidivism.

The session still left some questions unanswered. As the state moves to close the Connecticut Juvenile Training School, the Legislature also voted to move juvenile

justice programs from the Department of Children and Families to the Judicial Department. This process will require immense coordination to ensure the safety of children in the state's care and the public. In addition, although S.B. 894 - a bill to promote collaborative stewardship for the child welfare system - failed to pass, we are hopeful the General Assembly will pass a similar measure this coming year.

Key legislative successes:

- Passed: [H.B. 6695 An Act Concerning the Protection of Youth from Conversion Therapy](#) - [Testified in support.](#)
- Passed: [H.B. No. 6002 An Act Concerning "Sexting" by a Child](#) - [Testified in support.](#)
- Passed: [H.B. 6297 An Act Establishing a Task Force to Study Voluntary Admissions to the Department of Children and Families](#) - [Testified in support.](#)
- Passed: [H.B. 7309 An Act Concerning Human Trafficking.](#)
- Defeated: [S.B. 1040 An Act Concerning Notification to Boards of Education and Local Police Departments of the Release of a Juvenile Sexual Offender](#) - [Opposed in testimony.](#)

Family Wellbeing

The state budget dominated the conversation on everything related to health and human services. The final budget brought the loss of health insurance coverage for almost 9,000 low-income parents, following policy changes that reduce parent eligibility for HUSKY (Medicaid) to 138 percent of the federal poverty level (%/FPL) from 155% FPL. The budget also reduced access to basic dental care for parents and other adults on HUSKY, reduced eligibility limits for seniors and disabled adults, and cut substance abuse and mental health treatment funding.

In the long term, we can expect that confusion about which family members are covered and how much they must pay will lead to reduced use of preventive care and long-term costs associated with the failure to intervene early. This budget reflects short-term thinking that will make our state both less healthy and less equitable.

This budget also takes steps towards maximizing federal reimbursement for healthcare received through schools. These efforts include requiring schools to determine the insurance status and Medicaid eligibility of students

receiving certain services and to encourage eligible families to apply for Medicaid.

Budgetary matters aside, we were successful in our advocacy for S.B. 126, a bill that establishes a statutory definition for a “community health worker” and requires the State Health Innovation Model (SIM) office to study the feasibility of creating a certification program for community health workers in the state. Community Health Workers help individuals and families navigate the healthcare system and improve their overall health. They utilize their knowledge of a community’s experience, language, culture, and needs to facilitate communication between providers of social and health care services. We also were able to stop a bill that would have made low-income college students ineligible for Medicaid (S.B. 341).

Unfortunately, our advocacy for legislation that would impose an excise tax on sweetened beverages and sodas (S.B. 35 and H.B. 7314) with the aim of curbing consumption for obesity prevention and raising money for early care and education was unsuccessful.

Key legislative successes:

- Passed: [S.B. 126 An Act Concerning Community Health Workers](#)
- Defeated: [S.B. 341 An Act Concerning Medicaid Cost Savings for Students](#)

