

Community Forum Toolkit 2008



BUILDING BETTER LIVES



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What is a Community Forum?

A Community Forum provides an opportunity to bring together candidates, state elected officials and communities to share ideas about what matters most to them. This year, we can help make children's issues a top priority by focusing attention on state and local election issues and the impact they have on the children of Illinois. Children need advocates who raise their voices to let our elected leaders know it's best to invest in long-term solutions that prevent problems and meet diverse community needs. By organizing a Community Forum this fall, you will increase the strength and number of those voices and help us build better lives for future generations of Illinois children.

What are the goals of a Community Forum?

A Community Forum serves to:

- **Educate** candidates and elected officials about the needs facing children and families in your communities and find out where candidates stand on those issues.
- **Raise the profile** of children's issues and emphasize that Illinois voters care about children and will hold their elected officials accountable.
- **Build relationships** with your current and future elected officials so that you are seen as a local expert and resource on children's issues.
- **Energize** those who attend to become more involved in future advocacy efforts on behalf of children and families.
- **Build broad support** for children's issues by linking with other people and organizations across Illinois.

What does it take to have a successful Community Forum?

Through Voices for Illinois Children's experience working with legislators, candidates and communities, we have learned that elements of a successful Community Forum include:

1. A number of visible co-sponsors
2. A clear focus on children's issues
3. A room filled with community members
4. Candidates and current representatives who actively participate in the discussion
5. Participants who engage in the dialogue and ask questions

For more information, please contact Sheena Panoor at 312-516-5573 or spanoor@voices4kids.org.

"When parents, educators, community advocates and policymakers join around a common cause, we can make a difference in the lives of children."

- Jerry Stermer, President
Voices for Illinois Children



Recommended Timeline

<p>Two Months Before</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Reach out to groups that support children and family issues to co-sponsor the Community Forum. Make sure the co-sponsors understand that they are accountable for bringing out a specific number of community members. 2. Invite the candidates by calling their local offices. Clarify that the event is a bipartisan discussion (not a speech or debate) about children’s issues with constituents. Offer several dates between Sept. 8 and Oct. 31. Avoid national, state and religious holidays. 3. Choose a location that is convenient and accessible. Select a room that will make the size of your group look larger.
<p>One Month Before</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Send a confirmation letter to the candidates to reconfirm the date, time and location. 2. Invite community members. Spread the word in your community by using the sample flier. 3. Choose a moderator. Suggested moderators include local newscasters, school superintendents and faith leaders.
<p>Three Weeks Before</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Order Discussion Guides, Kids Count data or other desired information from Voices, or access the materials at voices4kids.org.
<p>Two Weeks Before</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Reconfirm the date, time and location with the candidates by calling their offices. 2. Contact your local League of Women Voters (if not already involved) or other group to provide voter registration.
<p>One Week Before</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Contact Voices if you would like help contacting the media. 2. Print out copies of the sign-up sheet (available from Voices). 3. Meet with all of the co-sponsors to go over logistics and the schedule for the day. 4. Make sure you have: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • One volunteer to take photos of the event • A note-taker to record the event • Enough microphones and any needed audio-visual equipment
<p>After the Forum</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Send thank you letters to the candidates, co-hosts, moderator and participants — their voice is important to developing a strong community of child advocates. 2. Send completed sign-up sheets and photos to Voices and let us know how your forum went.



Inviting the Candidates

Sample Phone Script for Inviting Candidates and Elected Officials

Hello, my name is [Your Name] and I'm calling to invite you to participate in the [Your Community] Community Forum. The Forum will focus on children's issues, and the event is designed to be a discussion, not a speech or a debate. We've also asked [Candidate/Elected Official Name] to attend.

The purpose of the Forum is to give voters an opportunity to hear your ideas and share their thoughts about how we can work together to improve the lives of children and families. We're expecting around _____ people from the community to attend.

This event is one of many Community Forums being held around the state, co-sponsored by Voices for Illinois Children, a statewide, non-partisan advocacy organization.

The Forum will be held on [Date] at [Place] beginning at [Time]. We hope you will be able to join us. I'll send you a letter confirming the date.

Thank you.



Inviting the Candidates

Sample Response Letter

[Date]

[Your Address]

[Candidate's Name]

[Candidate's Address]

Dear [Candidate's Name]:

Thank you for agreeing to participate in our local Community Forum that will focus on children's issues. The Forum is designed to be a discussion, not a speech or a debate, and it is scheduled to take place on [date] at [place] beginning at [time]. We, as a community, believe that children do well when they grow up in strong, supportive families, and that families do well in supportive communities. We look forward to a discussion of how we can work together to assure the future well-being of children and families in our district and across the state.

Our Community Forum is one of many across the state being sponsored by Voices for Illinois Children. Voices works across all issue areas to improve the lives of children of all ages throughout our state so they grow up healthy, happy, safe, loved and well educated.

I appreciate your participation in our Community Forum and look forward to seeing you on [date, time, place and address]. In the meantime, please feel free to call me at [telephone number] if you have any questions.

Sincerely,

[Your Name]



[Your Community] Community Forum

As the election approaches, join us for a conversation about issues affecting children and families with candidates for the Illinois General Assembly.

Let's make children's issues a top priority for elected officials!

[Date]
[Time]
[Location]

We will be joined by [insert candidate names here].

Event Sponsors:

For more information, please contact [your name] at [your number].



Invest in Our Future: There are More Than 3.2 Million Children in Illinois

Illinois families are struggling to meet their children's basic needs.

- One in six Illinois children currently live in poverty, many of them in rural and urban areas of the state. The child poverty rate has been slowly increasing since 2000.
- The poverty rate for female-headed households with children rose to 37 percent in 2005-2006 — a five percentage point increase since 1999.
- On average, more than 37,000 families received cash assistance through AFDC/TANF per month in 2006.

Not all Illinois children are prepared for success in school, the workforce and beyond.

- Illinois consistently ranks 49th in the nation for the size of the per-student spending gap between the state's wealthy and poor school districts.
- Less than 80 percent of Illinois high school students graduated with a regular diploma four years after starting 9th grade in 2004-2005.
- One in 19 public school students in grades 9-12 dropped out of school between one year and the next in 2003-2004 — the highest event dropout rate among Midwestern states.

We must do more to safeguard children's social, emotional and physical well-being.

- One in five Illinois children has a diagnosable mental illness. More than two-thirds of these children receive no services at all.
- One in six children in low-income families were without health insurance in 2005-2006 — the highest proportion among Midwestern states.
- Seven out of every 1,000 children died before their first birthday during the years 2002-2004. Among African-American babies, 15 of every 1,000 babies born those years died.
- Almost nine percent of babies born in 2005 were of low birthweight (less than five and a half pounds).

Many Illinois children and youth continue to be at risk.

- More than seven out of every 1,000 children — more than 24,000 children — were abused or neglected in 2006.
- African-American children continue to be overrepresented in the Illinois child welfare system. They comprise about 18 percent of the overall child population but about 61 percent of the substitute care population.
- Fewer than one in five foster children in Illinois achieved permanency in 2006.
- On average, one in 13 Illinois teens between the ages of 16 and 19 were not in school and not working between 2004-2006.

Source: "Illinois Kids Count 2008," Voices for Illinois Children

Illinois children's lives have improved dramatically thanks to good public policies, but there's still more work to do!



State Policy Discussion Guide

Education

Illinois has made significant public investments in early childhood development and learning programs. Research shows that kids in preschool are more likely to be good readers, graduate from high school and attend college. Illinois' landmark Preschool for All program has helped give tens of thousands of children a leg-up, yet thousands more children still lack access to early learning opportunities. Many of these children who enter school unprepared will never catch up with their classmates.

Similarly, many K-12 students lack access to a high-quality educational experience. Too many schools struggle with out-of-date textbooks, overcrowded classrooms and buildings that are falling apart. Inadequate resources make it difficult for teachers to prepare students for success in a rapidly changing world. Illinois' school-funding system has helped create significant disparities across the state: despite recent increases in schools' General State Aid, per-pupil spending varies widely from district to district — as does academic achievement. Illinois consistently ranks second-worst in the nation for the size of the per-student spending gap between the state's wealthiest and poorest school districts.

Questions:

- How would you help ensure that the families of all young children in your district and throughout Illinois have access to high-quality preschool programs and other early learning experiences?
- How would you help ensure that Illinois schools can prepare *all* students with the skills to succeed in college and the high-tech jobs of the 21st century? How would you ensure that at-risk and special-needs students receive the supports necessary for their success?



Health

A child's future depends on a healthy start. When children have access to quality health care, the benefits go far beyond their physical health to include increases in their likelihood of academic achievement and other future successes. Yet too many children and adolescents face barriers to affordable, convenient and high-quality health care. Illinois has greatly expanded access to health care for low-income children through Medicaid, the State Children's Health Insurance Program and the All Kids insurance efforts. However, the proportion of children without health insurance in Illinois is still the highest in the Midwest. In addition, minority children are less likely to have health insurance than white children.

There is also an urgent need to address children's mental health and strengthen their social and emotional development. When youngsters struggle with social and emotional difficulties, every aspect of their lives can suffer. One in five Illinois children has a diagnosable mental illness, yet more than two-thirds of these children receive no services at all. Many mental health problems are preventable or can be minimized through early interventions. Illinois must continue to support ever-improving efforts to build a comprehensive, coordinated mental health system that includes a range of strategies — prevention, early identification and intervention, and treatment services for children of all ages.

Questions:

- What are your views on supporting programs that would ensure that all Illinois families and their children have access to high-quality health care — such as an expansion of Family Care insurance or other ways of ensuring affordable health coverage for all families?
- What measures would you favor to increase Illinois children's social and emotional health supports and build a strong, statewide mental health system that includes prevention, early identification and intervention, and treatment for children of all ages?



Family Economic Security

Low- and middle-income families in Illinois face an uncertain economic future. Unemployment is on the rise, and the family poverty rate is increasing. Too many families also lack basic “assets,” from college educations to decent housing to savings accounts. Meanwhile, our current state and local tax structure is too regressive, treating low- and middle-income Illinoisans very unfairly. One effective solution would be to improve upon existing supports such as the Illinois Earned Income Tax Credit, which helps offset some of the disproportionate tax responsibility borne by low-income, working families. Illinois also could increase the outdated standard exemption of its personal income tax, and create a state version of the federal Child Tax Credit, in order to provide families with even more relief. Additionally, state leaders could pursue other new policies to help Illinoisans build assets and save for important day-to-day needs or unexpected emergencies.

Questions:

- What measures would you support to ease the unfairly large burden of state and local taxes borne by low-income families, and to help them better meet their households’ daily needs?
- What policies would you consider to boost access to critical assets — such as affordable housing, college education, and savings accounts — that so many families must struggle to obtain and maintain?

State Fiscal Integrity

A wide range of state services depend on a solid base of revenues — from schools and roads to prevention programs and health and human services. None is truly secure as long as our current tax structure remains unable to keep up with even the most basic costs of inflation and population growth. Lower-income households pay a greater percentage of their income in state and local taxes than wealthier households. A fundamental fiscal challenge for Illinois government is how to generate revenue to meet both ongoing obligations and newly emerging needs without increasing the already unfair tax responsibility of low- and middle-income families.

Questions:

- Will you remain open-minded to weighing every possible option for fixing our state’s fiscal and policy problems — including fair consideration of whether to raise taxes?
- What are your views on reforming Illinois' outdated revenue system to improve adequacy, fairness and stability?



Federal Policy Discussion Guide

Education

Research suggests that 85 percent of a child's brain development occurs in the first three years of life, making early childhood supports essential to helping children reach their full potential. Because parents are a child's first and most important teachers, parent-coaching programs can help families thrive. Home visits by trained professionals help parents enhance children's readiness to learn, improve their health and reduce the rate of child abuse.

The Education Begins at Home Act would establish the first dedicated federal funding stream for quality home visitation at the state and local levels. In our state, the new funds could be used to expand the highly effective Healthy Families Illinois and Parents Too Soon programs. In addition, the bill would fund home-visiting programs for families with English-language learners or with members in the armed forces, as well as strengthen the home-visitation component of Early Head Start.

Overall, a first-rate education empowers children to think critically and provide them with the tools to succeed in a quickly-changing world. Yet too many students – from preschool through high school – lack access to a high-quality educational experience. Despite efforts to erase achievement gaps among students, significant disparities persist.

Since 2002, the No Child Left Behind Act has been at the heart of federal efforts to boost academic achievement. The Act requires states to set performance requirements and provide detailed reports on student outcomes, and aims to expand options for students attending low-performing schools. But the federal government has never committed the full funding that was initially promised to NCLB efforts – and some critics complain the Act places far too much emphasis on test scores.

Questions:

- Would you support the Education Begins at Home Act to extend home-visiting and parent-education efforts to young, at-risk children? What additional early childhood supports would you like to see strengthened, and how?
- What measures do you support to ensure that all children have access to high-quality educations that allow them to succeed in the modern workforce?
- What opportunities do you see for improving the current version of NCLB?



Federal Policy Discussion Guide

Health

The evidence is indisputable: A child's future depends on a healthy start. Good physical health is a necessary piece of the puzzle for children to thrive. However, too many families struggle to afford the care they need, and more than 6 million low-income children are uninsured in the United States.

In Illinois, the All Kids program has helped address some of this need. But the success of All Kids depends on strong federal-state partnerships. The federal effort known as SCHIP – the State Children's Health Insurance Program – provides the framework and resources for such efforts. Each year, this program provides 65 cents for every \$1 spent on SCHIP coverage in Illinois. Last year, about 345,000 Illinois children relied on SCHIP to keep them healthy – yet more than 17 percent of the state's low-income children remain uninsured.

SCHIP was reauthorized until 2009 without providing for much-needed additional funding. The reauthorization did not take into account rising health care costs or growth in enrollment, and did not provide the resources needed to increase the enrollment rates of eligible children.

Questions:

- How would you strengthen SCHIP to provide accessible, affordable, high-quality health care to all children who lack it?
- What other strategies would you pursue to help families access reliable and affordable health insurance?



Family Economic Security

Earned Income Tax Credit

The federal Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) is a tax benefit that rewards work by allowing low-wage workers to keep more of their own money at tax time. Studies have shown that the EITC is an effective tool for reducing poverty, but advocates continue to recommend improvements to its structure. Currently, workers without qualifying children, some of whom are non-custodial parents, receive a much smaller EITC than workers with qualifying children. In addition, the EITC imposes a “marriage penalty” on low-wage, dual-income married couples, which means that these couples often receive a lower overall EITC by filing jointly than they would if they had remained single and filed as individuals. Also, families with three or more children, who are more likely to be low-income and have greater financial needs, receive the same credit as households with only two children. Another concern is that the EITC is underutilized by millions of eligible workers because of lack of information about the credit as well as literacy and language barriers. Improving the structure of the EITC and expanding access to more low-wage workers would provide families and communities with more of the help they need and close the ever-increasing gap between stagnant wages and rising prices.

Child Tax Credit

The federal Child Tax Credit (CTC) is designed to offset some of the costs associated with raising children and lessen the tax burden for working families. It is a per-child tax benefit of up to \$1,000 for qualifying parents who have children under 17 years old. Although the CTC is viewed as an important measure to help reduce child poverty, there are key flaws in the credit’s current structure that leave out millions of low-income working families and prevent others from receiving the full tax benefit.

First, the CTC is only available to parents who earn more than a specific income threshold, excluding some of the families who face the greatest financial hardships. For those parents who do qualify, the credit is only “partially refundable,” which means that parents do not automatically receive the full difference between the \$1,000 credit and what they owe in taxes. Second, the income threshold increases each year with inflation. Because very low wages rarely keep pace with inflation, many families who qualify for the CTC one year may receive a reduced credit or even become ineligible the next year. Several proposals have been introduced in Congress to decrease and freeze the qualifying income threshold. Action on these proposals is pending. Unless the CTC’s structure is improved, millions of low-income working families will continue to be excluded from the benefit or receive a smaller tax benefit than eligible families with higher incomes.

Questions:

- How might we improve upon and expand the Earned Income Tax Credit to more eligible families?
- What are your views on measures to extend the full Child Tax Credit to more families and make it fairer and simpler – such as making the credit fully refundable, reducing the eligibility threshold, and “de-indexing” the eligibility threshold so that it no longer increases with inflation?