OUR POLICY AGENDA FOR 2008

Improved early learning opportunities
Education funding reform
State EITC increase
... and more

INSIDE THIS ISSUE:

MAKE KIDS A TOP PRIORITY WHEN YOU VOTE – p. 03
HOME VISITING BENEFITS – p. 05
EXTENDING PRESCHOOL FOR ALL CRUCIAL – p. 06

Join the Voices online advocacy network at www.voices4kids.org
Over two decades ago, when the founding board members of Voices for Illinois Children asked me to take on the role of staff director, I realized they weren’t kidding. They were serious about changing the priorities in our state, where children and family programs had been routinely shortchanged. We had fallen into a pattern of accepting a status quo that didn’t work for kids, or families, or our collective future. More children were falling behind and more families were struggling. Research showed that Illinois children ranked in the bottom 20 percent in every national study.

Those founding board members were smart enough to know that children do well when their families do well, and that families do well when communities support them with strong economic policies and access to decent health care and good education. Clearly, there is no silver bullet, no single strategy that will provide the next generation with the strong beginning that we want for them. Realizing that, we work across the various issues that affect children – education, health and development, family economic security, and state fiscal accountability.

As we know all too well, changing public priorities in Illinois is no small task. We’re proud to have played a role in shaping dramatic improvements in public policies for children. Preschool for All has opened the door to early education for tens of thousands of our youngest children. The state earned income tax credit (EITC) puts a little more money into the pockets of working parents. And the All Kids health insurance program has been expanded to provide coverage for virtually all uninsured children in our state.

Still, we are challenged to keep working to achieve fundamental changes for Illinois children – changes that are necessary for the future prosperity and well-being of our state. As a community, we still haven’t figured out how to provide a world-class, top-notch education for all children in our state. Time and again we’ve reported the painful details of the inequities in our classrooms, schoolhouses and school districts. There is no lack of good plans for educational reform. With our many partners in the A+ Illinois campaign, we have offered frameworks and recommendations for moving ahead, for closing the embarrassing and self-defeating achievement gaps among our students. The bold Burnham Plan for a World-Class Education released in May 2007 provides a blueprint for reforming school quality and fiscal accountability in Illinois (see www.ieanea.org/burnhamPlan.aspx).

But our state policymakers sadly ground down in gridlock last year, once more leaving us with the status quo in public education and walking away from the potential of long-overdue reforms benefiting children and families. As we all know, the gridlock also undermined services for families, such as access to affordable housing, public transportation and other community supports that make it possible for parents to spend quality time with their children.

It is a new year in Springfield. Throughout this issue we highlight our policy goals for 2008. We are committed to doubling our efforts, to leaving no stone unturned in our quest to help all children in Illinois – no matter where they live or what their family makeup – grow up healthy, happy, safe, loved and well educated. Please join us. Attend an election year forum, write a letter to a legislator, serve on a community committee, do whatever you can to raise your voice for Illinois children. We all need to be heard.

OUR MISSION—Voices for Illinois Children champions the full development of every child in Illinois to assure the future well-being of the people of the state. We work with families, communities and policymakers to ensure that all children grow up healthy, nurtured, safe and well educated.

"Make no little plans. They have no magic to stir men's blood . . . Make big plans; aim high in hope and work.” — Daniel Burnham
Elections’ importance to the well-being of children and families is often overlooked, but cannot be overstated.

Many decisions about schools, taxes, social services and countless other concerns begin – or are affected greatly by – the men and women we choose as state leaders. This Nov. 4, not only will Americans choose a new president for our nation, but Illinoisans will consider candidates for all 118 state House of Representative seats and about 40 of our 59 state Senate seats.

It is everyone’s responsibility – and privilege – to become an informed voter and learn about the issues that matter most to kids and families. It is everyone’s job to not only question candidates about their platforms but also urge their strong support for communities’ needs.

That’s where Voices for Illinois Children comes in. Voices is nonpartisan and endorses no candidates for office. But we do endorse policy approaches that help to build better lives for children. To strengthen our democracy, we help voters make informed election decisions and call for positive action from state leaders.

Voices will work with the A+ Illinois campaign and other partners this year on voter-education efforts such as election forums, where voters will have a chance to hear and question candidates for statewide offices. Nine such events took place before the state’s Feb. 5 primary contest. If you’d like to help host a forum in your area during the general election season, please contact us at 312-456-0600 or info@voices4kids.org.

The 2008 election year will be significant also for the “constitutional convention” referendum that will appear on ballots statewide. Every 20 years, voters have the chance to choose whether to authorize election of a so-called “con-con” to study our existing 1970 Illinois constitution – a convention that could recommend changing all or parts of the state charter. There are strong arguments for and against this idea, and Voices will share them with voters in the months to come.

Watch Voices’ website at www.voices4kids.org for occasional updates on election-year news and events – and how you can help make children’s needs a top priority at the polls this fall.
ALL KIDS: STRONG RESULTS IN FIRST YEAR

By Larry Joseph

Since the late 1990s, Illinois has made substantial progress in expanding public health insurance coverage for low-income children through Medicaid and the State Children’s Health Insurance Program (SCHIP). In July 2006, the state began implementation of the All Kids program, an ambitious effort to provide coverage for uninsured children regardless of family income level, health status, or immigration status. The benefit package is nearly identical to the services covered by Medicaid and SCHIP in Illinois (formerly KidCare). Families are responsible for monthly premiums and co-payments on a sliding scale based on household income.

Data from the first year of All Kids implementation suggest that the program is off to an impressive start. In June 2007, about 55,000 children were enrolled in All Kids expansion. In addition, participation of children in Medicaid and SCHIP increased by well over 100,000 compared with the previous year. Sustaining this progress in expanding access to health care for children will be a formidable challenge for Illinois.

HEALTH POLICY GOALS

• Ensure affordable health care for all families
• Strengthen children’s mental health care
• Expand home-visiting programs for at-risk infants and toddlers
• Increase supports for abused and neglected children

FOSTER KIDS ARE OUR KIDS: REACHING OUT TO THE COMMUNITY

By Laura Winn

Voices for Illinois Children, with 60 child welfare agencies across the state, has entered the second phase of the “Foster Kids Are Our Kids” campaign. The 2006 campaign launch highlighted the message “Don’t write me off.” The second phase, “Help make foster care better,” launched in 2007, continues to challenge negative perceptions and encourage the public to support children in foster care.

“Each and every one of us shares in the responsibility of helping all Illinois children reach their full potential,” says Jerry Stermer, president of Voices for Illinois Children. “All children – especially those in foster care – need a strong support system and lasting relationships. As a community we must ensure that foster children have the necessary supports to succeed in life.”

The campaign, which is anchored by WGN and the Illinois Broadcasters Association and a website (www.fosterkidsareourkids.org), emphasizes the need for community involvement in the lives of foster children. The message appears in television and radio spots, over 1,000 Chicago transit and Metra ads, and ads in newspapers and on Chicago-area movie theater screens.
Every child should grow up safe, healthy, and happy.

HOME VISITING SUPPORTS NEW PARENTS

By Laura Winn

Dora knew little about parenting. Her family had never talked to her about sex, and she rarely left home for social reasons. Despite having unprotected sex, Dora never thought she would be a young mom. Yet, two months after her 16th birthday, Dora and her boyfriend learned they were going to have a baby. “I was in denial about it for a month. I thought I knew a lot,” Dora explains, “but I didn’t.” To add to the shock, her friends and family were unsupportive, leaving her feeling alone and abandoned.

The first years of a child’s life are crucially important for brain, cognitive and social-emotional development. And these years are stressful for parents, even for parents with lots of resources. Many parents, especially teen parents like Dora, need practical, emotional and educational support. Healthy Families Illinois (HFI) provides home-visiting services by family support specialists, who help parents not only deal with the challenges of caring for a new baby but also foster the optimal development of their infants and toddlers.

Dora found the support she needed at Teen Parent Connection, a DuPage County Healthy Families provider. After the birth of Dora’s daughter, Jocelyn, the family support specialist worked with her to set goals and to do better as both a parent and a student. “We started with small goals like getting an A in a class and getting my daughter on a regular sleep schedule. Later we moved to larger goals like filling out college and financial aid applications and finding a preschool for Jocelyn,” Dora said. “I learned what to do when she cried and how to make educational toys from things I already had. Gradually I learned how to fend for myself.”

Now a third-year accounting student at DePaul University, Dora works in the prevention program of Teen Parent Connection, talking to high school students about avoiding teen pregnancy. Jocelyn, Dora’s now 4-year-old daughter, is learning her letters and colors in preschool. She still attends the child care facility that the family support specialist found for her three years ago.

Healthy Families Illinois began receiving state funds in 1997 and has grown to serve 54 communities and more than 3,000 families statewide — a small percentage of the families that might benefit from home visiting. It has demonstrated strong results. For instance, at the end of 2004, over 91 percent of participating HFI children were fully immunized, received routine well-child visits and had a regular source of health care.

Funding for Healthy Families has been increased by only 3 percent since 2003 and remains stagnant at $10 million. Along with other child advocates, we propose that funding for this important program be doubled to $20 million in the FY2009 budget.
Illinois’ landmark Preschool for All legislation has opened the door to early education for tens of thousands 3- and 4-year-olds. These children are entering kindergarten better prepared for academic and social-emotional success in school. But preschool expansion will end—and possibly be reversed—in 2008 unless the program is made permanent. Continuing Preschool for All by eliminating the “sunset” provision is one of our top policy priorities for 2008.

Prior to Preschool for All, state-supported early childhood education was available only to “at-risk” Illinois children – and it fell far short of serving all eligible children. Preschool for All, passed in 2006, established the goal of gradually extending high-quality preschool access to every 3- and 4-year-old child whose parents choose it.

Despite the lofty goals and intentions, the legislation included some important limitations:

- Growth would take place as resources were made available to support new and expanded programs. Full implementation of Preschool for All required an investment of at least $45 million in new funding in each of three years: FY2007, 2008, and 2009. That goal was achieved for FY2007, but for the current year, FY2008, the allocation is slightly less than $30 million. To recover lost ground, Voices for Illinois Children and other advocates are calling for an increase of $60 million in the Early Childhood Block Grant in the FY2009 budget.
- At-risk children would remain the first priority. Programs serving primarily middle-income children would be given second priority for available funds, and any remaining funding would be shared with other qualified and approved programs.
- Preschool for All efforts would be assessed before a “sunset” date of June 30, 2008.

If the sunset clause is not removed this spring, Illinois’ state-supported preschool efforts will revert to their former, at-risk-only status. This, in turn, threatens to close the door to pre-k for thousands of children whose programs have been approved for funding in the past two years. The uncertainty is bad for children, families and the preschool programs that serve them.

Our progress in enrolling more children in early education and improving the quality of their preschool experiences more than merits making Preschool for All a permanent policy effort.

In addition, Preschool for All “sets aside” 11 percent of all funding for services to at-risk families of infants and toddlers. In 2007, state officials were able to help only six of 145 programs that applied for new birth-to-3 resources – far too little for work that’s so critical to helping youngsters prepare for success in school and in life. Voices and other child advocates propose gradually increasing the set-aside for developmental services for at-risk infants and toddlers from 11 to 20 percent.
**FISCAL REFORM DESPERATELY NEEDED**

By Larry Joseph

A fundamental fiscal problem in Illinois is how to generate enough revenue to meet the state’s ongoing obligations and emerging challenges without putting an undue burden on low-income and middle-income families. Voices’ Budget & Tax Policy Initiative (BTPI) has been developing a policy strategy for fiscal reform that would link a higher individual income tax rate to a reform package with three components: (1) a higher personal exemption, which would benefit all households and would make the state income tax structure more progressive; (2) a more generous state Earned Income Tax Credit targeted at the working poor; and (3) a state version of the federal child tax credit to provide additional relief for both low-income and middle-income families. Taken together, these relatively straightforward changes would enable the state to make progress toward the goals of generating new revenue and enhancing tax fairness.


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**BUILDING A NEST EGG FOR EVERY CHILD**

By Maneesha Date Jacoby

Having even a few thousand dollars in assets connects people to the economy, raises their economic expectations, and allows them to plan for their futures. Research has shown that given the opportunity and support, low-income individuals will save, build assets, and connect to the mainstream economy. Voices, along with other statewide partners in the Illinois Asset Building Group, has encouraged establishing Children’s Savings Accounts (CSAs) in Illinois to help families build assets. Opened at birth with an initial deposit, CSAs would provide families with an incentive to start saving from the moment a child is born. Once a child reaches age 18, the funds could be used for specific designated purposes such as education or training.

The Children’s Savings Account Task Force, established by the legislature and approved by the governor in 2007, will review and make recommendations about children’s savings account program options. The goals of the CSA program will be to increase the levels of financial literacy and savings in the state and to increase the number of children in Illinois who own assets, attend post-secondary education or training, purchase a home, or open a small business.

For more information on the Children’s Savings Account Initiative, please visit http://www.illinoisassetbuilding.org.

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**STATE FISCAL REFORM POLICY GOAL**

- Improve adequacy, fairness and stability of the state revenue system

**FAMILY ECONOMIC SECURITY GOALS**

- Improve the state Earned Income Tax Credit
- Stabilize child care access for working families

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**VOICES WELCOMES NEW BOARD MEMBERS**

Patricia B. O’Brien, MD, MPH, is a vice president with the AON Corporation. She brings to Voices extensive experience in health care, including six years of clinical practice and over 15 years of sales and consulting to top health care companies. A graduate of Northwestern University, Rush Medical College, and Columbia University, Dr. O’Brien is widely published in her field and is a frequent speaker at national and international health care forums. She resides in Chicago.

Bryan Samuels is Chief of Staff for the Chicago Public Schools. Mr. Samuels’ career in public service has spanned 18 years in a variety of settings, including government, nonprofit, and private consulting. Most recently, he was the director of the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services, where he was known for his intense focus on improving the quality of the child welfare system through research, innovation, and an outcomes-driven approach. He is a resident of Chicago.

Nancy K. Bellis is president and chief executive officer of Business Law Partners. She has over 25 years’ experience both in law firms in New York and Chicago and as corporate counsel for companies such as Diamond Technology Consulting and Sears Roebuck. Ms. Bellis earned a juris doctorate from the University of Virginia School of Law and an undergraduate degree from Yale University. She is often a guest speaker at national law conferences on the subject of securities law disclosure requirements and serves on the planning committee for the Ray Garrett Jr. Corporate and Securities Law Institute. Ms. Bellis is a Chicago resident.
Historic data show that sustained investments in public policy have profoundly improved child well-being. This is the over-arching message of Illinois Kids Count 2008 data book, which examines 20 years of health and well-being indicators for children.

The Kids Count data book will be released on March 27 and will be the topic of a symposium on March 28. This daylong event will reflect on how public policies have helped improve Illinois children’s lives over the last generation and will envision a better world for the next generation. For more information about Kids Count and the symposium, call 312-456-0600.

Do you want to learn more about the issues or how to support our policy agenda for kids? Visit www.voices4kids.org to
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- Contact your legislator

RAISE YOUR VOICE FOR CHILDREN!

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