

## Findings and Recommendations for Improving Foster Care in Virginia

### Adopted Recommendations

#### Finding 1:

Supporting a Child Welfare Training Academy would assist local departments in ensuring that their workforce is prepared. This would strengthen Virginia's ability to provide safe and stable environments for children and families by reducing turnover in the local workforce and extending the time that local departments of social services' (LDSS) staff remain focused on their mission.

**Recommendation 1:** Introduce a budget amendment for the establishment of a centralized training academy model for family services specialists to better prepare staff for the difficult work of social services, increase retention through training and development of new staff, and provide a more structured and consistent foundation training program. The academy should ensure adequate technology to accommodate both in person, virtual, and blended training options.

#### Finding 2:

Child welfare stipend graduates are more likely to remain employed at their agencies and have more effective skills, knowledge, and abilities. However, it has been a challenge to attract and connect stipend graduates to smaller, more rural local departments of social services.

**Recommendation 2:** Encourage Virginia Department of Social Services to create more partnerships with additional colleges and universities, which would provide more opportunities for students to participate in different regions of the state.

**Recommendation 3:** Introduce a budget amendment to increase the number of stipend slots offered to students enrolled in a full-time social work program with a commitment to work at a Local Department of Social Services.

#### Finding 3:

Liability insurance for foster care private providers has seen a steep increase over the past few years. Options for liability insurance are becoming more limited.

**Recommendation 4:** Request the State Corporation Commission put together an informational report on what it would entail to enable the expansion of group self-insurance pools in Virginia to permit nonprofit and for profit private foster care agencies the ability to join a group self-insurance pool with permission of a locality for the purposes of liability insurance for foster care services. In this report, the Bureau of Insurance shall detail what

steps would be necessary to accomplish such a change, including any necessary amendments to the *Code of Virginia*. This report shall also provide any warranted additional recommendations for the Commission on Youth's consideration. This report shall be completed and made to the Commission on Youth by November 1, 2024.

**Recommendation 5:** Request the Department of Social Services form a work group to study the issues, concerns, and policy options presented by the Commission on liability insurance. Included in the work group shall be: The Office of Children's Services, the State Corporation Commission, Virginia Association of Licensed Child Placing Agencies, Foster Family-Based Treatment Association, Virginia Department of Treasury, Virginia Bar Association, Virginia Municipal League, Virginia Association of Counties, Virginia League of Social Services Executives, VAcorp, Virginia Risk Sharing Association, CSA Coordinators State Group, insurance agencies and brokers, Virginia Trial Lawyers Association (VTLA), and other relevant stakeholders. This work group shall report back and make recommendations to the Commission on Youth by November 1, 2024.

**Finding 4:**

The current electronic resources for students are challenging to find, which can be discouraging for foster youth to explore post-secondary education options, whether it be college, vocational, or trade school.

**Recommendation 6:** When established, request Virginia Department of Social Services to provide information on the iFoster platform to include information from universities and colleges on what supports they provide former or current foster care youth. Resources on iFoster should include workforce development assistance, educational opportunities, housing and living stipends, or discounts, financial supports, internship and employment opportunities, and other resources that are available in Virginia. Information on Virginia's Workforce and other initiatives of the Secretary of Labor should be included on the iFoster platform to assist foster care youth with obtaining meaningful employment. Encourage all state and local agency employees working with foster care children, join and use the iFoster App with their foster care clients, assist foster care youth in subscribing to the App themselves, and remain current with newly added or updated resources.

**Finding 5:**

High school foster care youth do not always have the same community support to help them explore post-secondary options. Currently Great Expectations programs are in all 23 community colleges in the Commonwealth to help students with these challenges. This programming has proven to be effective in helping students apply for schools and transition into new programs. Although Great Expectations is currently in all community colleges, there is little programing to help foster care youth at 4-year institutions.

**Recommendation 7:** Introduce a budget amendment to fund a position at the Virginia Community College System (VCCS) to coordinate services for foster youth involved with the Great Expectations Program to improve access to higher education at 4-year colleges and universities. This position shall work with the State Council of Higher Education for Virginia (SCHEV) and the Council of Independent Colleges in Virginia (CICV) to find partnerships with 4-year colleges and universities willing to support the foster care population in obtaining a 4-year degree.

**Recommendation 8:** Request the Council of Independent Colleges in Virginia to partner with Great Expectations to have a smooth transition in order to achieve a 4-year degree, and provide a point of contact for foster care youth.

**Finding 6:**

Foster care youth who age out of the system and attend college or vocational training face many challenges including financial concerns.

**Recommendation 9:** Introduce a budget amendment to expand the Virginia Tuition Assistance Grant Program to include additional money for former foster care and homeless youth who were in care or experienced homelessness after the age of fourteen.

**Finding 7:**

Faster Families Highway provides a platform for those interested in becoming a foster parent to be connected with Local Departments of Social Services. A review of the highway would be helpful in determining if improvements could be made in the recruitment of foster families.

**Recommendation 10:** Request the Virginia Department of Social Services to review the Faster Families Highway by conducting a survey of local departments of social services to ensure that the platform is providing the local departments of social services with the information that they need and that the questions for the interested foster care families are appropriate. Request that Virginia Department of Social Services provide a tab on the platform with helpful marketing information that is readily available for promoting foster care. Information that is sent in “Tool Kit Tuesdays” should be placed on the platform and templates should be developed to promote best practices in the recruitment of foster families.

**Finding 8:**

When a foster care child experiences an emergency situation, the foster family may need additional supports. Enhanced payments assist both the local departments of social services and the foster family in assuring that the child remains in an appropriate placement.

**Recommendation 11:** Introduce a budget amendment for the continuation of the Exceptional Circumstances Payment pilot program. The program shall provide funding in emergency situations for up to \$3,000/month for up to 3 months to ensure a safe and stable placement for children/youth in foster care.

**Finding 9:**

One of the symptoms of the opioid epidemic track has been a huge increase in foster care in the areas most impacted by the epidemic. According to recent data, 30% of foster care admissions are linked to parental drug abuse.

**Recommendation 12:** Request the Virginia Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Services, in coordination with the Department of Social Services, assess the barriers to availability of substance use treatment services across Virginia's localities and make recommendations for ways that community services boards and local departments of social services can collaborate and have systems in place to address a parent's substance use and prevent the removal of children from the home into the foster care system.

**Recommendation 13:** Request the Virginia Opioid Abatement Authority provide technical assistance to local governments, including local departments of social services, that were disproportionately impacted by the opioid epidemic.

**Finding 10:**

Teens in foster care face significant barriers to obtaining a driver's license. These young people often miss out on age-appropriate adolescent experiences and opportunities made possible by driving that create a sense of normalcy, which helps them make a successful transition to adulthood.

**Recommendation 14:** Introduce a budget amendment to provide support for the development and implementation of a statewide drivers' licenses program for youth in and formerly in care in obtaining a driver's license.

**Finding 11:**

Local departments of social services across the state have seen an increase in the use of relief of custody as a way to deal with a troubled teen or child.

**Recommendation 15:** Direct the Commission on Youth to review concerns surrounding the increased use of temporary and permanent relief of custody to place a child in foster care. The Commission shall convene an advisory group to assess this concern. This advisory group shall include the Department of Social Services, Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Services, Department of Juvenile Justice, the Court

Improvement Project, Local Departments of Social Services, Community Services Boards, and other relevant stakeholders.

**Finding 12:**

The Department of Social Services should continue to find ways to improve informal kinship care.

**Recommendation 16:** Request that the Department of Social Services review the following proposed recommendations on informal kinship care:

- Make available a stipend for informal kinship care families, similar to the stipend that foster care families get.
- Create permanency plans for children in informal kinship care situations.
- Make available the information regarding informal kinship care arrangements, and allow formal kinship care arrangements to occur more easily.
- Virginia should be collecting data related to informal kinship care.