

Improving Foster Care in Virginia

Draft 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: Support 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.

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: Amend the *Code of Virginia* to give qualified immunity to private foster care agencies and their foster care workers that contract with localities for acts of negligence that result from their services. The intent is to align private agency immunity with the local departments of social services.

Recommendation 5: As a response to the increasing cost of verdicts, amend the *Code of Virginia* to apply a monetary cap for negligence cases resulting from the placement of the child by a private foster care agency. The cap should be set at \$500,000.

Recommendation 6: Request the State Corporation Commission form a work group to study 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. This group shall analyze the feasibility of such a change, run sample cost savings analysis scenarios, and review any other barriers as contemplated by the group. Included in the work group shall be: the Virginia Department of Social Services, Virginia Association of Licensed Child Placing Agencies, Foster Family-Based Treatment Association, Virginia Department of Treasury, Virginia Municipal League, Virginia Association of Counties, VAcop, Virginia Risk Sharing Association, CSA Coordinators State Group, insurance agencies and brokers, and other relevant stakeholders. This work group shall report back and make recommendations to the Commission on Youth by November 1, 2024.

Recommendation 7: Request the Department of Social Services form a work group to study the issues, concerns, and above listed policy options. 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, VAcop, Virginia Risk Sharing Association, CSA Coordinators State Group, insurance agencies and brokers, 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 8: 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. 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 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 programming to help foster care youth at 4-year institutions.

Recommendation 9: Request Great Expectations to explore potential partnership and expansion of programming to include public 4-year colleges and universities. Great Expectations programs at community colleges would partner with the nearest colleges to help start new programs.

Recommendation 10: 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 11: 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:

Virginia needs more positions dedicated to expanding programs and working with universities and Great Expectations to ensure that the efforts to increase and improve foster care youth's access to higher education is attainable and executed efficiently.

Recommendation 12: Introduce a budget amendment to fund a position at either State Council of Higher Education Virginia (SCHEV) or the Virginia Department of Education, dedicated to ensuring that the expansion of Great Expectations is done efficiently and to continuing to explore other ways to improve opportunities for foster care youth aging out of the system as well as former homeless youth.

Finding 8:

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 improvements could be made in the recruitment of foster families.

Recommendation 13: Request the Virginia Department of Social Services 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 9:

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 14: Introduce/support 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 10:

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 15: 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 16: 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 11:

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 17: Introduce/support 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 12:

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 18: 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.