

Voices
for Vermont's Children



2016 Mid Session Legislation Update

March 4, 2016

Paid Sick Days Legislation to be signed by Governor Shumlin, Wednesday, March 9th.

After a decade of organizing and advocacy, Voices for Vermont's Children, with the VT Paid Sick Days Coalition and its partners, won the fight to get paid sick days legislation passed in Vermont. On Wednesday, February 17, the House completed the final step in the legislative process by voting to agree with the Senate's amendment to the bill. The vote was a solid 81-64.

As we celebrate Vermont becoming the fifth state to pass paid sick days legislation, we want to take the opportunity to acknowledge the many years of incredible organizing and advocacy of our Coalition members. It took a great deal of outreach, the voices of families, working Vermonters, supportive businesses, and the commitment and courage of policymakers to pass this important legislation. Our Coalition was indefatigable throughout the many legislative fights over the years and we should all be proud to have been part of this effort. Our Coalition and stakeholder partners are listed [here](#).

A special shout out to our key partners (and coalition members) in this work, Vermont Workers' Center, Main Street Alliance - VT, and Rights and Democracy.

What does the Healthy Workplaces legislation (H. 187) do?

When signed into law, Vermont's paid sick leave bill will allow many working Vermonters who do not currently have paid sick time to earn paid time off to care for their individual or family's health/safety needs. Beginning in July 2017, workers will be able to start earning 1 hour of paid time off for every 52 hours

worked. For the first 2 years, employees may earn up to 24 hours (3 days). After that, employees may earn up to 40 hours (5 days). Employers may require a waiting period of 1 year or 2080 hours (whichever comes first) before allowing employees to utilize their earned sick time.

What can paid sick leave be used for?

Workers can use their sick leave to:

- * Recover from or receive treatment for an illness or injury,
- * Care for a family member when they are ill,
- * Obtain diagnostic, routine, preventive, or therapeutic health care,
- * Take necessary steps for their safety as a result of sexual abuse, domestic violence, or stalking.

Are there any employee exemptions?

Employees expected to work 20 weeks or less in a year (seasonal or temporary workers) and workers who work an average of 18 hours or less a week are exempted from this legislation. In addition, employees under the age of 18 are exempted.

What does this mean for working families?

Currently, an estimated 60,000 Vermont workers do not have the ability to earn a single day of paid sick time or paid time of any kind. Too often, this means that these workers have to make the difficult choice between going to work sick, sending their child to school or childcare sick or sacrificing their wages. The Healthy Workplaces law will establish a minimum standard of paid leave that employers must provide employees for the purpose of addressing their health or safety or that of their families. We know that families will be healthier and more economically secure as a result of this legislation.

Increasing access to oral health care in Vermont

Voices has long been concerned with health disparities that are masked by Vermont's relatively good record on providing health care. One of the most significant disparities exists in access to oral health. Because oral health is integral to overall health, the lack of access to dental care in Vermont undermines the health and well being of children and adults alike. We know that when parents don't access dental care, their kids are less likely to as well.

Our current effort to expand the dental team with a dental therapist who will provide preventative and basic restorative care is gaining support in the House after passing the Senate last year. [Continue reading here.](#)

Status of the Bill: The House Human Services committee held hearings in January, and convened a joint hearing with House Government Operations in mid-February to take testimony from [Dr. Leon Assael](#), Dean of the University of Minnesota School of Dentistry, during his visit to Vermont. Human Services will resume their deliberations as soon as possible after returning from break.

Office of Child Advocate

For several years, Voices for Vermont's Children has advocated for an Office of Child Protection Advocate to provide independent oversight of the child protection system. This office is a necessary component of an effective and constantly improving system, to make sure that as a state we are doing all that we can to keep our children safe.

We are also convinced that Vermont's child protection system and the network of community services that support families are woefully under-resourced to the point of crisis. We hesitate to create more layers of accountability without giving DCF and service providers the resources they need to fulfill their responsibilities. For that reason, our testimony in support of establishing an Office of Child Protection Advocate comes with a caveat: strengthening and supporting the core infrastructure of DCF is a mandatory first step in ensuring that Vermont children are protected from abuse and neglect.

Read our full [testimony here](#).

Status of the bill: H.522 has had two days of hearings in House Government operations. There appears to be traction in the committee to pass this out before crossover, with testimony from a number of stakeholders supporting the need. The committee may consider changing the name of the office from Child Advocate to Child Ombuds based on testimony from the Washington State program. In its current form, it does not appropriate funds, instead directing the Administration to find funding within its existing budget. Voices has expressed concern that without adequate resources (for both the Ombuds office and the system it will oversee) the model will not be effective.

Budget

Voices for Vermont's Children stands with the many organizations serving and giving voice to Vermonters who are being left behind by an uneven economic recovery in asking the legislature to increase investments in children and families.

Almost 16% of Vermont children (more than 18,000) are living below the poverty line, a higher rate than what was seen during the recession. Almost half of these are living in

what's defined as "extreme poverty:" less than 50% of the FPL. We are talking about 9,000 children struggling for survival in a state that prides itself on being a leader in child wellbeing and health. Families need economic security in order to create safe, healthy environments for children.

[Read on for more about social determinants of health and Voices' specific budget requests.](#)

Status of the Bill: House Appropriations continues to take testimony from administration officials on department budgets, and completed a series of public hearings around the state. Advocate hearings also took place prior to the Town Meeting break. Policy committees have also submitted memos with their recommendations on the parts of the budget pertaining to their jurisdiction. The Human Services committee's priorities overlapped Voices' in three places:

1. Support for the Governor's recommended investments in the DCF Family Services division (ranked most important);
2. Support for increasing Child Care Financial Assistance Program (child care subsidy) to come closer to market rates (ranked important); and
3. Restoring the \$125 cut to Reach Up for recipients on disability (ranked lower priority).

When the legislature reconvenes the committee will aggregate all of this input into a budget bill that will come to the floor in late March.

Foster Parents' Bill of Rights & update from VFAFA

As Vermont has struggled with significant tragedies over the past few years in the child welfare arena, identifying ways to support and improve all parts of the system has become increasingly necessary. Senators Rebecca Balint (D - Windham) and Peg Flory (R - Rutland) introduced a Foster Parent Bill of Rights as a standard to guide, clarify, and create unity across the state of Vermont. In the words of VFAFA (Vermont Foster and Adoptive Families Association) President Dan Boyce, "The voices of foster parents are essential for the system of care in Vermont to be effective, and the Bill of Rights is a step in strengthening that voice."

The rights outlined pertain to all parents licensed to provide care for children in the custody of the Vermont Department of Children and Families, but the inherent values are applicable to caregivers everywhere regardless of association. Some of the improvements that were identified relate to a lack of consistency across the state in terms of how foster parents are valued, with a resulting lack of consistency in outcomes. This Bill of Rights is designed to provide a uniform set of values that would set a standard to improve outcomes for the families, children, DCF staff, and our state as a whole.

Highlights from the bill include the right to be treated with dignity and respect, the right to participate in court hearings, the right to participate in planning visitation, and safety considerations like the right to have personal information kept confidential.

Currently, 17 States have enacted a Bill of Rights for foster parents. Vermont's bill aligns well with new prudent parenting standards that were included in recent federal legislation Preventing Sex Trafficking and Strengthening Families Act of 2014 (H.R. 4980).

Senator Rebecca Balint says, "It takes a lot of courage, determination and love to be a foster parent. Let's do everything we can to make the system work better for these families. It is not a partisan issue. It's about caring for and supporting the Vermonters who care for some of our most vulnerable children."

Voices is supporting VFAPA as they work to create a reasonable standard for the foster parents of Vermont.

Update from the Vermont Early Childhood Alliance

Blue Ribbon Commission Assesses the Costs of Quality

The Blue Ribbon Commission on Financing High Quality, Affordable Child Care met on Thursday, February 18th to discuss the factors that drive the cost of quality child care. The following summary comes from a report prepared by Let's Grow Kids.

Nutrition was identified as an important part of child development that is a key driver of the cost. Anore Horton, Nutrition Initiatives Director at Hunger Free Vermont, told the Commission that more than one in five Vermont children live in "food insecure" households. Ginger Farineau, Early Childhood Nutrition Specialist at Hunger Free Vermont, explained that the federal food program, Child and Adult Care Food Program, is sustainable only for child care centers where the majority of children are from low-income families—bringing in enough federal funding to pay the true costs.

Commissioners also addressed two other major drivers of the cost of quality child care: attracting and retaining qualified professionals; and, accounting for the age distribution of the children in the program. Jen Horwitz, Policy & Research Director at Let's Grow Kids, presented hypothetical child care budget models to illustrate the cost of high-quality care, as developed by a working group that included Let's Grow Kids, Vermont Birth to Five, and the Vermont Community Loan Fund.

Commissioners from the "Definition of Quality" subcommittee shared draft definitions of high-quality care encompassing four areas: Child health and safety; Early care, education

and child development; Family and community engagement; and Leadership and management systems.

The Commission's next meeting will be Thursday, March 17th, 10:00 am – 12:30 pm in the Fourth Floor Conference Room of the Pavilion Office Building in Montpelier. [Click here to learn more about the Commission.](#)

Michelle Fay, Voices' Associate Director is the child advocacy representative to the Blue Ribbon Commission.

A quote from Gandhi, recently shared by a board member:

“First they ignore you, then they ridicule you, then they fight you, and then you win.”

About Voices

Voices is a statewide child advocacy organization whose mission is to promote public policy that enhances the lives of children and youth in Vermont.

To learn more about our organization, [please visit our website.](#)

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