

2021 LEGISLATIVE AGENDA

Focus: Policy priorities that will support our state's equitable response to and recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic, offering relief to all children and families.

EARLY CHILDHOOD

Recommendation: Set the market rate for early childhood education subsidy at the statewide average.

Child care is an essential service for thousands of children and families, and it is particularly crucial during the COVID-19 pandemic. North Carolina's child care providers are in crisis as they struggle to stay open to serve families with inadequate revenues.

State lawmakers should approve funding to set the child care subsidy reimbursement rate for qualifying early childhood care and education programs to either the statewide market rate (for their star level and for the age of the child receiving subsidy) or the established county market rate, whichever is more. In so doing, the statewide market rate would serve as a floor for reimbursing providers and create greater equity in funding across the state. This will allow communities to more quickly recover from COVID-19 and ensure greater sustainability moving forward.

HEALTH CARE

Recommendation: Merge the NC Health Choice program with NC Medicaid. This step would reduce administrative duplication, and ensure continuous, quality coverage for enrolled children – particularly those with special health care needs.

Recommendation: Extend postpartum coverage for Medicaid recipients from 6 weeks to 1 year.

Recommendation: Address student mental health, suicide prevention, and physical health needs by appropriating at least \$10M to decrease the dire shortage of school nurses in North Carolina.

Recommendation: Close the “coverage gap” by accepting federal funds to expand the NC Medicaid program.

COVID-19 is unlike any health crisis our state and country have ever experienced before. The effects of financial uncertainty and social isolation are taking a toll on families across the state. Addressing the diverse needs of our state's most negatively impacted populations is critical to ensuring that we are all able to make a strong recovery.

The measures we recommend will increase access to health care for those who need it most right now:

- Young children with special health care needs;
- Pregnant women;
- Youth in need of crisis support; and
- The more than one million North Carolinians – including hundreds of thousands of parents and caregivers – currently weathering this pandemic with no health coverage whatsoever.

FAMILY ECONOMIC SECURITY

Recommendation: Establish reasonable accommodations for all pregnant workers, mirroring the federal Pregnant Workers Fairness Act (H.R.2694).

Recommendation: Provide direct cash assistance to families hit hardest by the pandemic through a re-established NC Earned Income Tax Credit, or similar mechanism.

Before the COVID-19 pandemic struck North Carolina, 40% of children in our state lived in low-income families struggling with poverty. Unprecedented levels of unemployment have resulted in even more families unable to afford basic needs. Nationally, nearly four times as many women than men have left the workforce – largely due to caregiving and health concerns. This harms families and shrinks the talent pool available to our employers.

To support the health and safety of workers who are pregnant or nursing and keep them in the workforce, we recommend following the model set by 36 other states and the federal Pregnant Workers Fairness Act (H.R.2694). Employers would be required to provide reasonable accommodations – such as a stool to sit on, a bottle of water, or a break when needed – with exemptions for certain small businesses. To further help families keep a steady income and recover from the economic effects of COVID-19, we recommend tax relief targeted to those with the highest need.

CHILD WELFARE

Families are under unprecedented stress due to the social isolation and economic distress associated with COVID-19. The economic and health measures proposed above will help to insulate families against some of the pressures that are strongly associated with toxic stress and child maltreatment. In addition, NC Child supports the following two measures unrelated to the pandemic:

Recommendation: Prohibit marriage before the age of 18.

Recommendation: Ban corporal punishment in NC public schools.

Every school district in the state has now prohibited the use of corporal punishment in our public schools. North Carolina is overdue to strike language from our state statutes allowing school personnel to use physical harm to discipline students.
