



**Sparking Reform:
Highlights of Our Work
2007 to 2012**



From the Executive Director

Connecticut Voices for Children focuses on eliminating barriers to the health and well-being of Connecticut's children and families, especially those in low-income communities. The systems that affect children in Connecticut need the benefit of non-partisan information, community voice, and collaborative advocacy to work at their best.

At Connecticut Voices we identify challenges facing children and families, gather and analyze data, develop policy solutions, and write reports to share our findings and recommendations. As a catalyst for change, we work with state agencies to find administrative policy solutions, and educate legislators, news media and the public. When changes to laws are necessary, we collaborate with others to urge legislative reforms. Even when changes are won, we sometimes have to defend them against subsequent efforts to reduce their impact.

Our activities are affected by the political climate, local and national trends, and unforeseen economic forces. So we are patient, even when progress is difficult. Our role as a team player in a long-term process is crucial to our ability to craft and execute effective multi-year strategies for policy change. The examples in this summary of our work show how Connecticut Voices for Children is a leader in changing the ways our communities treat our children, and improving the lives those children lead.

Jamey Bell, JD
September 2012



Youth in foster care speak to policymakers at a forum co-sponsored by CT Voices.




A postcard from our campaign to educate policymakers about the need for foster youth to maintain contact with siblings.

Maintaining Connections for Children and Youth in Foster Care

- **Keeping brothers and sisters connected.** For children removed from their homes due to parental abuse or neglect, their relationships with their siblings become even more important. When youth in foster care identified improving visitation with siblings from whom they had been separated as their top priority for reform, we brought their voices to policymakers and news reporters at a 2011 Capitol forum. We led a campaign to convince legislators to enact the ideas raised at the forum into law, and now this new law will ensure that separated siblings in foster care can visit each other regularly.
- **Keeping children in family settings.** Extensive research shows that children need to grow up in families to develop properly. Yet, historically, Connecticut had one of the highest rates in the nation for the use of congregate care – i.e., group settings – for young children in the care and custody of the Department of Children and Families (DCF). Working with state partners, Connecticut Voices advocated for policy changes that would prohibit placing children under age six in congregate care unless it was medically necessary. The Commissioner of DCF adopted this policy in 2011 and within the next year, Connecticut nearly halved the number of children under 12 in congregate care, and also decreased the percentage of all children in congregate care.
- **Ensuring children's educational stability.** When a child is removed from his home due to abuse or neglect, everything in that child's life changes. He is separated from his parents, home, and possibly his siblings. Many times, he is also removed from his school, resulting in the sudden loss of connections to friends, teachers, and

other caring adults. Research shows that frequent school changes, which are harmful to all children, are particularly devastating for children in the foster care system, who are already at high risk for academic failure. And youth in foster care identified school stability as one of their top priorities for policy change. So, over several years, Connecticut Voices and other advocates worked with the state Department of Education and Department of Children and Families to persuade lawmakers to change the system so that the default decision is for children to remain in their schools when placed in foster care, or if their foster placement changes.

Improving Access to Early Childhood Education

- **Improving investments in early education.** Quality early care and education produces powerful returns for children and our state. Our annual progress reports on early education in Connecticut have made this case at the Capitol and in the press. With coalition partners, we defended against budget cuts for many years, and successfully advocated in 2012 for budget increases that will result in many hundreds more children getting access to early education opportunities.
- 
- **Streamlining Connecticut's early care and education system.** Connecticut's poorly coordinated patchwork of early care and education programs has long been the source of confusion and complications for both providers and parents. The state's publicly-funded early care and education programs rely on multiple funding streams controlled by multiple agencies with a variety of reporting and eligibility requirements. Through our annual progress report and advocacy, Connecticut Voices has called for creation of a coordinated and comprehensive system. In 2011, Connecticut legislators approved new legislation that requires the State to create a plan for a more streamlined, coordinated early care system that improves quality and access to care. Connecticut Voices remains actively involved as the data and policy partner in this planning process.

An early childhood advocate on our work:

“The suggestion was also made to increase the budgets and the number of sites of the family resource centers. With Voices at the table raising the question of how the funds would be spent, we were able to talk about adding funds to existing sites where budgets were being constantly ratcheted down. Voices always has a good sense about whether or not an idea can work - where the challenges will be and how to address them. They come to the table with ability to see the big picture.”

Supporting At-Risk Children and Youth

- **Ensuring age-appropriate treatment of juveniles in the criminal justice system.** Connecticut’s former approach to criminal justice ignored the fact that 16 and 17 year olds are not fully mature adults, that most juvenile offenders have mental health and developmental needs that are not well addressed in the punitive adult system, and that youth provided with developmentally appropriate services in juvenile justice systems are less likely to reoffend. For several years, Connecticut Voices and other members of the Connecticut Juvenile Justice Alliance fought for legislation to raise from 16 to 18 the age for treating offenders as adults in the justice system. Legislation successfully passed in 2007, with 16 year olds added to the juvenile justice population in 2011, and 17 year olds in 2012.
- **Keeping kids in the classroom through reform of suspension laws.** Our 2008 research indicated that out-of-school suspensions were surprisingly common in Connecticut, and that nearly two-thirds were for relatively minor offenses,



such as skipping school and showing disrespect. Students who are suspended are disproportionately those who need educational opportunities the most, including students from low-income districts, black and Hispanic students, and special education students. Overreliance on suspensions is not only ineffective, but can be counterproductive in terms of student behavior and educational outcomes. The report gained widespread attention among news media and policymakers, and we used it as a basis to successfully advocate for preservation of legislation that limited out-of-school suspensions to situations in which they were necessary. We also researched best practices used by school districts across the state to decrease out-of-school suspensions, and created a “toolkit” for schools and districts looking for ways to improve their systems.

A juvenile justice advocate on our work:

“I went to a meeting yesterday where a police lieutenant and a deputy at the school district were denying disciplining kids, telling us There’s no problem here! We don’t arrest kids! When you put real data in front of them that’s been digested and formatted so they can see the numbers clearly, it changes the conversation from, ‘Do we have a problem?’ to ‘What can we do about the problem?’ Without that data everything could still be denied.”

Broadening K-12 Education Opportunities

- **Ensuring that Connecticut tracks the progress of all our children.** Connecticut Voices’ K-12 education agenda focuses on broadening understanding of the state’s educational testing system, and how it influences opportunity for at-risk students. Connecticut increasingly relies on standardized tests to evaluate progress in our schools. Our research found that the exclusion of thousands of students with disabilities from reported Connecticut Mastery Test results distorted reported trends in test scores. Statewide improvements in Connecticut Mastery Test scores reported by the State Department of Education between 2008 and 2009 were largely the result of the exclusion of students with disabilities from these standard test results,

rather than overall improvements in performance. Our report drew attention to the collateral impact and unintended consequences of using only data from standardized tests to evaluate public education. These consequences included losing students in the testing system, and distorted measures that presented a false picture of improvement.



- **Illuminating real educational growth.** In order to broaden the discussion of how to assess educational progress, in 2012 we analyzed Connecticut students’ “vertical scales” scores, another “growth” measure for the state mastery tests. By following the same group of children over time, vertical scales allow us to understand how students perform on state tests in one grade compared to the next grade, despite more difficult and different content. Our study found that on average, students are making progress on the vertical scale measures, even though this growth may not be reflected on the “standards-based” level reports that are more typically the focus of educational reports. Also, we found that while racial and ethnic minority students had lower vertical scale scores, on average, than white students in 3rd grade math and reading, black and Latino and English Language Learning students on average experienced a comparable amount of improvement on vertical scales, compared to the statewide average. By exploring an alternate indicator, our report is helping to reframe the discourse on public education. We can rethink how schools and other institutions can intervene in the lives of children and families because the problem identified is different: kids want to learn and they are learning, but they start out at vastly different points in terms of preparation and resources.

Improving Access to Health Care

- **Expanding access to health coverage for Connecticut families.** Connecticut Voices, with its coalition partners, advocated for many years to expand health coverage for children and families in the state’s HUSKY health insurance program. In 2007, Connecticut policymakers responded, expanding income eligibility for parents and pregnant women. Research in other states showed that children are more likely to be insured when their parents also have access to insurance coverage, and the Connecticut experience bore this out: after the expansion, thousands more uninsured and underinsured children, parents, and pregnant women gained coverage through HUSKY.
- **Helping families maintain health coverage for infants.** As part of Connecticut Voices’ work in monitoring the performance of the HUSKY health insurance program, we studied HUSKY enrollment trends and found that confusion about notices from the Department of Social Services (DSS) and procedural snafus were leading to thousands of children losing HUSKY coverage. Age triggers a review of HUSKY eligibility for babies turning one. Just prior to the first birthday, DSS sends the family a notice stating that coverage will be discontinued for the baby. Babies who turned one were about twice as likely as other children to have had gaps or lost coverage. To address this problem, Connecticut Voices staff have met with community agencies and health care providers to discuss practical tips for helping families avoid gaps in coverage, and presented our findings to agency staff and policy makers. In 2012, DSS publicly committed to resolving this problem.
- **Fostering collaboration and problem-solving.** A first step toward improving access to health care for the state’s children and families is better communication. Four times per year, Connecticut Voices brings together stakeholders from around Connecticut in statewide meetings to foster information-sharing, collaboration, and problem-solving. As the convening organization for the Covering Connecticut’s Kids and Families network, we host these meetings, which enable “on the ground” community groups to obtain information and tools for assisting their clients in



getting and keeping health coverage and access to needed services. In turn, they provide valuable real-time feedback to state government officials about what is and is not working in their local communities.

A community health clinic director on our work:

“Voices’ data are instrumental in how we decide to target our outreach. Using the data means moving away from spraying flyers all around and praying people will show up, to learning how to target efforts and resources for more effective results.”



CT Voices participates in Governor Malloy's ceremony celebrating the signing of the state Earned Income Tax Credit bill.

Building Family Economic Security

- **Providing a boost to working families.** The federal Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) helps more children escape poverty than any other single federal program. To build on the success of this credit, reward work, and help make Connecticut's state and local tax system less regressive, Connecticut Voices advocated for years for a state EITC. In 2011, this proposal became law and in 2012 families began to receive the new credit.

- **Tracking the economic well-being of Connecticut families.** Through our annual State of Working Connecticut reports, we track how Connecticut families are faring in our economy, providing comprehensive reports on trends in wages and employment at the state and local levels. Each year when the Census Bureau releases new estimates of poverty and health insurance coverage, we provide a same day analysis of the latest state and local trends for reporters and advocates. These data reports are widely reported by news media and are a year-round resource for advocates, nonprofits, and policymakers concerned about family well-being. We have also been invited by policymakers to be an informational resource to task forces, including the Child Poverty and Prevention Council and the Children in the Recession Task Force.
- **Working toward a more adequate minimum wage.** In the face of a minimum wage that is worth less in real terms today than 40 years ago, Connecticut Voices has collaborated with national and state partners to increase the state's minimum wage. During the 2012 legislative session, we worked closely with the National Employment Law Project, Economic Policy Institute, Working Families Party, and organized labor to publish a report showing the inadequacy of the current minimum wage and to advocate for a substantial increase. While our legislation passed the state House, it fell just short in the Senate. We will continue to pursue this initiative.



Advocating for a More Fair, Adequate, and Transparent Budget

- **Making Connecticut's tax system more fair and adequate.** In a fair tax system, the state's wealthiest residents would pay a larger share of their income in taxes than middle-income and poor residents. But in Connecticut's upside-down tax system, Connecticut's low-income residents pay twice the share of their income in state and local taxes as the wealthiest 1%. Connecticut Voices has helped to document and educate policymakers about the regressive impact of our state and local taxes,

and has advocated for a more progressive tax system. In 2009, the legislature and Governor passed a progressive income tax package that raised rates for the wealthiest residents and established an earned income tax credit. This reform helped to make Connecticut's tax system more fair, close an historically huge state budget deficit, and preserve funding for vital services for children and families.

- **Ensuring economic development dollars are well-spent.** Tax credits are spending through the tax code. Connecticut relies heavily on tax credits to promote economic development, but for years, there was no regular, systematic review to evaluate which tax subsidies were working in creating high-quality jobs and which were not. To improve transparency and accountability in job creation efforts, Connecticut Voices drew attention to this issue among policymakers and advocated for a review commission. In 2012, Governor Malloy created such a commission, charged with improving the fairness and efficacy of business taxes and tax credits. In addition, reports on tax credits from state agencies have begun to include in-depth economic analyses of how many jobs Connecticut's tax credits are actually creating, and at what cost.

A labor organizer on our work:

“A standout example of the role Voices can and has played is the 2009 effort it led, one year into the Great Recession. The economy in Connecticut was in the tank, and it looked to be a long way from recovering. Many were calling for very extreme measures to close the state's record budget cap, and Voices was one of the most effective organizations to express concretely how that would harm the people of the state.”

To learn more, read our publications or donate to support our work, please visit www.ctvoices.org.

Connecticut Voices for Children is grateful for the generous support of hundreds of individual donors, as well as of state and national foundations. Foundations and other organizations recently supporting Connecticut Voices' work include:

Annie E. Casey Foundation
Center on Budget & Policy Priorities
Community Foundation for Greater New Haven
Connecticut Health Foundation
Corporation for Enterprise Development
Economic Policy Institute
First Focus
The Fund for Greater Hartford
Hartford Foundation for Public Giving
Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative
Lone Pine Foundation
Melville Charitable Trust
Robert Wood Johnson Foundation
San Francisco Foundation
Sassafras Foundation
Seedlings Foundation
State of Connecticut Department of Social Services
Stoneman Family Foundation
The Tow Foundation
Universal Health Care Foundation of Connecticut, Inc.
William Caspar Graustein Memorial Fund

CONNECTICUT
VOICES
FOR CHILDREN

33 Whitney Avenue
New Haven, CT 06510
www.ctvoices.org