



# CHILDREN'S 2007 Legislative Agenda

Improving the life of a child... Protecting the future of Connecticut

## HIGHLIGHTS OF BCAC'S LEGISLATIVE PRIORITIES

### Address the Achievement Gap by Correcting the Inequities in State Education Aid and Expanding Preschool

Today's students are tomorrow's workforce. Improving education for Bridgeport's 22,000 public school children contributes to the economic vitality of both Bridgeport and its surrounding communities. Participation in quality preschool can improve school performance. More than 30% of Bridgeport's children have not attended preschool before entering kindergarten. Furthermore, the outdated, broken state education aid formula shortchanges Bridgeport schools by more than \$20 million a year – more than any other school district in the state – making Bridgeport THE MOST UNDERFUNDED SCHOOL DISTRICT in Connecticut.

### Provide Health Insurance to the Uninsured

There are more than 400,000 Connecticut residents, including 70,000 children, who are uninsured. People without health insurance are much less likely to go to the doctor or get a prescription filled than those with health insurance. They are more likely to wait until there is a crisis and end up in the emergency room. In the past five years, treatment for the uninsured in hospital emergency rooms rose 41% in Connecticut. Last year, 31 hospitals admitted 11,000 uninsured patients, costing the state \$165 million.

### Expand After-School Programs

After-school programs provide a safe place for children while parents work and a variety of enrichment activities, including sports and recreation, creative arts, and community service. Children without after-school care are left alone an average of 25 hours each week. Participation in after-school programs decreases risky behaviors such as juvenile crime, drinking, and drug use. This school year, Bridgeport after-school programs served 500 fewer children than last year.

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THE ISSUE	THE DETAILS	BCAC SUPPORTS
<b>Affordable Housing</b>	<p>The affordable housing crisis in the City of Bridgeport is deepening as housing prices increase. Families need to earn nearly \$18 an hour, more than double the minimum wage, to afford the fair market rent for a two-bedroom apartment in Bridgeport. One in four Bridgeport renters is paying more than half their income for rent, forcing them to make steep cuts in other basic necessities.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>■ Funding the state Rental Assistance Program (RAP) by an additional \$4.9 million in FY 08 and \$8.4 million in FY 09 to return it to its prior service level of 2,600 families.</li></ul>
<b>After-School Programs</b>	<p>Quality after-school programs provide many benefits for children. After-school programs can improve school attendance, academic performance, and social-emotional development. After-school programs help prevent juvenile crime, which triples between 3:00-6:00 p.m., the hours immediately following school dismissal. In spite of the many benefits after-school programs offer, nearly half of Connecticut after-school programs report they either have lost funding over the past two years or that funding has remained stagnant.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>■ An additional \$4.5 million in state funding for after-school to serve 6,000 more children across Connecticut.</li></ul>
<b>Child Care and Early Childhood Development</b>	<p>There is a lack of child care in Bridgeport, particularly for infants and toddlers. There is licensed care for only one out of every ten infants and toddlers who need it. Children who participate in quality early care and education programs are less likely to repeat a grade or drop out of school than those who do not. However, one in three Bridgeport children enter kindergarten without preschool experience.</p> <p>Early intervention through the Birth-to-Three Program can improve school performance for young children with developmental delays or disabilities. Over 26,000 additional children statewide could be served by expanding eligibility to include high risk factors.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>■ Preschool expansion for all Bridgeport children.</li><li>■ Eligibility for Care4Kids to 75% of the state median income and an increase in child care reimbursement rates to reflect current market prices.</li><li>■ Higher state subsidies to support the development of programs for infants and toddlers modeled after Early Head Start.</li><li>■ Eligibility criteria for the Birth-to-Three Program to include such high risk factors as premature birth, high lead levels, and mild hearing loss; and case management to facilitate the transition of children with complicated medical needs to the public schools.</li></ul>

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## THE ISSUE

## THE DETAILS

## BCAC SUPPORTS

### Education

Bridgeport students face many challenges. More than 95% are economically disadvantaged. Nearly 40% come from homes in which English is not the primary language. And 12% are both poor and in need of special education services. The current ECS formula has discriminated against Bridgeport school children for more than a decade and needs to be updated to the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Because of the outdated formula, Bridgeport has become the most underfunded school district in the state. This year, Bridgeport schools cut \$11 million from their budget, forcing the elimination of 32 teaching positions, and the closing of two schools and redistribution of hundreds of students to already overcrowded schools. Funding for textbooks and supplies, equipment repairs, professional development, and teacher support were all slashed. This year's huge cuts followed more than \$6 million in cuts last school year and more than \$5 million in cuts the preceding school year.

- Reforms to how state education funding is distributed that include:
  - using the number of children who qualify for free/reduced price school meals as the measure of poverty
  - giving increased weighting for ELL students who come from homes in which English is not spoken
  - raising the foundation level to one that reflects the actual cost of educating students
  - basing special education reimbursement on real costs
- Incentives such as hiring bonuses and tuition assistance to attract quality teachers and reduce teacher turnover in severe need school districts.

### Family Self-Sufficiency

The most successful federal program in reducing child poverty is the federal Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC). The federal EITC has been found to reduce child poverty for young children by nearly 25 percent. More than 50,000 Connecticut households may be eligible but fail to apply for the federal EITC. Connecticut does not have a state EITC, although 20 states do, including 7 in New England.

- State Earned Income Tax Credit to help thousands of Connecticut families escape poverty and attain economic self-sufficiency.
- Cost-effective funding to programs to help more Connecticut households apply for the federal EITC.

### Health Care

One in ten Connecticut residents – 400,000 – does not have health insurance. Over 70,000 children do not have health insurance. The lack of health insurance for so many Connecticut residents costs more than \$1.2 billion in emergency health care and lost productivity each year. Community health centers, school-based health centers, and hospital clinics need adequate state support to provide primary care to low-income families.

Children living in poverty are at higher risk for exposure to lead. Lead poisoning can lead to irreversible intellectual, motor, and behavioral disabilities if not identified early. Children who are lead poisoned are at high risk for school failure. Lead poisoning is treatable if diagnosed early.

- Universal health care coverage that is consistent with the principles of the Institute of Medicine.
- Continuous eligibility in the HUSKY program to reduce administrative costs and allow low-income children to keep their benefits when their family income fluctuates.
- Funding increases for school-based health centers, community health centers, and hospital clinics that provide primary health care to low-income families.
- Lead testing for all children under age six and onsite investigations of confirmed cases exceeding 10 ug/dL; a state program providing financial assistance to help residential property owners with lead abatement.

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### Mental Health

One in ten Connecticut children has a mental health disorder. Left untreated, children with mental health disorders suffer academically and socially. Early identification and intervention is much more cost effective than crisis treatment. Although Bridgeport is the largest city in Connecticut, it receives far less funding from the Department of Children and Families than Hartford and New Haven, preventing the development of critically needed community-based children's mental health services.

- Correcting the huge inequities in state funding for children's mental health programs that have severely shortchanged Bridgeport's children.
- Expansion of mental health services for young children, including early identification, screening, intervention, and treatment.

### Substance Abuse

Children are less likely to end up in foster care if their parents receive substance abuse treatment and support to maintain recovery. Substance abuse treatment has been shown to decrease criminal activity 80%, increase employment by nearly 20%, decrease welfare assistance 11%, and homelessness 43%. Many low-income substance abusing women have experienced trauma, including child abuse, sexual abuse, and domestic violence, resulting in high rates of co-occurring mental health and substance abuse disorders.

- Housing options for substance abusing women and their families, and for women who are dually diagnosed (substance abuse and mental health), including residential treatment, therapeutic shelters, recovery housing, and permanent supportive housing.

### Welfare

In Bridgeport, 4,183 residents, including nearly 3,000 children, are on Temporary Family Assistance (TFA). Many parents on welfare have severe barriers to employment, including high rates of learning disabilities and low literacy skills. Nearly 95% of Bridgeport parents on welfare are unable to pass the competency tests needed to receive job training under the Workforce Investment Act (WIA).

- Exemptions from time limits for parents with disabilities who can only work limited hours.
- Safety Net services for families who lose cash assistance as a result of time limits.
- A new TFA program to provide income subsidies to families who are meeting the federal work requirements, remain poor, yet are disqualified from receiving further cash assistance.
- \$2.3 million more for Jobs Services to expand vocational skills training, adult basic education programs, and subsidized employment for welfare recipients.



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