



CHILDREN'S 2008 Legislative Agenda

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

HIGHLIGHTS OF BCAC'S LEGISLATIVE PRIORITIES

Support School Success: Expand Preschool and Correct the Inequities in State Education Aid

Too few of Bridgeport's 22,000 school children are afforded basic opportunities for success. More than 30% of Bridgeport's children have not attended preschool before entering kindergarten, and four out of five students attend a school in need of improvement. Over the last four years the district has had to make \$24-26 million in budget cuts. Last year, the state made a start in addressing inequities in state funding; however, additional changes to the education cost sharing formula are needed that adequately reflect the costs of educating English language learners, low-income students, and special education students.

Reduce Child Poverty

30% of Bridgeport's children live in poverty. This is a core problem that cuts across all of BCAC's legislative priorities. Connecticut has set a goal of reducing child poverty by 50% by 2014. BCAC strongly supports legislation to implement the state Child Poverty and Prevention Council recommendations.

Provide Health Insurance to the Uninsured

There are 325,000 Connecticut residents, including 49,000 children who are uninsured. Sixty percent of employees working in small businesses do not have health benefits through their jobs. In fact, 2 out of 3 Connecticut residents without health insurance are working. The uninsured have poorer health outcomes and are up to three times more likely to die earlier than those with health insurance. Direct and indirect health costs for the uninsured in Connecticut total up to \$1.3 billion each year.

Expand After-School Programs

After-school programs can improve academic performance, support working parents, and help to keep young people from getting into trouble. Children with working parents who have no after-school programs are left alone up to 25 hours each week. Juvenile crime triples between 3:00 pm and 6:00 pm, the hours after school when children are unsupervised. In Bridgeport, 9,350 children ages 6-11 have a working mother, but only 2,600 are served in Bridgeport after-school programs.

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Affordable Housing	<p>Low income families throughout Connecticut struggle to afford high housing costs. When the state opened its waiting list for RAP and Section 8, over 48,000 applied for approximately 1,000 subsidies. In Bridgeport, the affordable housing crisis is deepening as housing prices increase. Families need to earn nearly \$18 an hour 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. Homeownership is also in jeopardy in Bridgeport. Bridgeport is the hardest hit locality in Connecticut by the sub-prime mortgage crisis, with over 5,000 sub-prime loans, and increasing numbers of foreclosures.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">■ Restore funding to the state Rental Assistance Program (RAP) to at least return to its prior service level of 2,600 families, requiring an additional appropriation of \$5.4 million in FY 09.■ Provide assistance to the current victims of predatory lending and impose higher standards on the lending industry to prevent this crisis from recurring.
After-School Programs	<p>After-school programs help kids do well in school and stay out of trouble, and allow parents to work without worry that their children are safe. Juvenile crime triples between 3:00 pm and 6:00 pm, the hours after school when children are unsupervised. In 2006, over one third of all juvenile arrests in Bridgeport involved children under the age of 15. Increasing state funding for after-school programs is a common-sense way to address juvenile crime and improve academic performance. The legislature should build on 2007 investments in after-school programs, and direct funds to severe need school districts.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">■ Increase funding for after-school programs, with a focus on programs that have evidenced-based academic enrichment, as well as recreation and arts activities.
Child Care and Early Childhood Development	<p>There is licensed care for only one out of every ten infants and toddlers in Bridgeport and what is available is not always affordable to low-income working parents. Working parents are often forced to make a decision no parent should have to make – to leave their children in unsafe or poor quality environments so that they can work and provide for their basic needs. 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. More working parents need access to state supported childcare subsidies that can help them pay for quality early care and education. In addition, the state reimbursement rate must be high enough to encourage a qualified workforce.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">■ Increase Care4Kids funding to meet the childcare needs of low-income working families earning up to 200% of federal poverty and to reflect current childcare market rates.■ Increase the state childcare reimbursement rate to achieve equity between the salaries of childcare center staff and the salaries of teachers in public school pre-school programs.

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THE ISSUE

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Education

Bridgeport students face many challenges. More than 95% are economically disadvantaged, 40% come from homes in which English is not the primary language, and 10% are both poor and in need of special education services. All students can learn if they are provided targeted, quality educational supports to help them make progress. Bridgeport schools, however, do not have the necessary funding to provide these supports. Four out of five Bridgeport students attend a school that is failing to meet federal minimum standards for academic progress, and more than 1 out of 5 high school freshmen drop out of school before graduating. Bridgeport schools are also plagued by discipline problems with over 14,000 school suspensions in the 2006-2007 school year. Despite the needs, over the last four years the school district has had to make \$24–26 million in budget cuts.

In addition, Bridgeport's school buildings are aging, deteriorating and overcrowded. Greater state investment in school infrastructure and increased accountability for timely and effective use of those funds is needed.

- Revisions to the Educational Cost Sharing (ECS) formula to provide fair state education funding across all school districts based on: the number of poor children in the public schools; the number of students who come from homes in which English is not spoken; and special education needs.
- State support for the development of in-school suspension programs that address the issues that lead students to act out in school and engage parents as partners in improving student behavior and school performance.
- Increased accountability for progress in school repair and construction projects to ensure that projects are completed in a timely way.

Family Self-Sufficiency

The most successful federal program in reducing child poverty is the federal Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC). Connecticut does not have a state EITC although 20 other states do, including 4 in New England. Recently, a panel of outside experts commissioned by the Child Poverty Prevention Council recommended implementation of a state earned income tax credit to help meet the state's goal of reducing childhood poverty in Connecticut, while also rewarding work.

An income-based credit is only effective if individuals are in fact employed and earning dollars. However, many parents on and transitioning off of Temporary Family Assistance (TFA) 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). More targeted education and training supports are needed to help these parents succeed in the labor market.

- State Earned Income Tax Credit to help thousands of Connecticut families escape poverty and attain economic self sufficiency.
- State investment in basic education and literacy, English language instruction, and GED preparation to help parents develop the foundation skills for today's employers.
- State investment in occupational skills training in key workforce shortage areas, matching parents transitioning from public assistance to employment opportunities.

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Health Care	<p>Lack of health insurance has serious health and financial consequences. People without health insurance are more likely to delay preventative health care and medical treatment until there is an emergency that requires more expensive care. Businesses, particularly small businesses, struggle to address rising health care costs and remain profitable. 60% of employees working in small business do not have health benefits through their jobs. Even families who have access to health insurance through the HUSKY and Medicaid programs have a hard time finding providers for needed care. The low HUSKY and Medicaid reimbursement rates lead many medical specialists to opt out of these programs.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">■ Universal health care coverage that is consistent with the principles of the Institute of Medicine: comprehensive; affordable; sustainable; continual regardless of employment or marital status; and promotes high quality health care.■ Higher HUSKY and Medicaid fee-for-service reimbursement rates for medical specialists so that more doctors will participate.
Mental Health	<p>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 less funding from the Department of Children and Families than Hartford and New Haven, preventing the development of critically needed community-based mental health services.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">■ Correcting the 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	<p>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 by 80%; increase employment by nearly 20%; decrease welfare assistance by 11%; and decrease homelessness by 43%. There is serious inequity in the availability of treatment options in Bridgeport, with nearly three times as many state-funded treatment beds available for men as are available for women.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">■ Affordable housing options for substance abusing women and their children and for women with dual substance abuse and mental health disorders, including therapeutic shelters, residential treatment, recovery housing, and permanent supportive housing.■ Equity in state funding for substance abuse treatment services between women and men.



2470 Fairfield Avenue
Bridgeport, CT 06605
(203) 549-0075
FAX (203) 549-0203
www.bcacct.org

Public Policy Task Force Co-Chairs
Marta Calderon and Margie Powell

Legislative Liaison
Margaret Flynn-Khan