



Ahlquist Center 2022 State Policy Priorities

Our Policy Mission

Children's Home & Aid advances the well-being of children by investing in families to disrupt the systemic and multi-generational cycle of racial, social, and economic inequality. While we helped create the modern child welfare system, that system has not and will not tackle the root causes of child abuse and neglect. We must recognize that poverty and systemic racism are existential threats to child well-being, a threat too often predicted by the zip code where you live or by the color of your skin. **Therefore, the Ahlquist Center will lead and advocate for robust policies and social supports which are antiracist, equitable, and directed at creating social capital, economic mobility, and systems designed to insure children, families and communities thrive.**

Strengthening Families and Communities

Making Diapers More Affordable for Families (SB3461)

For families with small children, knowing how many diapers you have and how much they cost can be a constant struggle. The average toddler in the United States goes through six to ten diapers per day at an average cost of \$70 to \$80 per month, and we know that number increases for infants. According to the National Diaper Bank Network, one in three families in America cannot afford enough diapers to keep their infants and toddlers clean, healthy, and safe. And with prices continuing to rise, lower-income families are spending more and more of their income on diapers. If Illinois is going to be the best place to raise a family, policymakers need to advance diapers to make diapers more affordable. We support legislation to provide a monthly allowance for Illinois families with low-income to purchase diapers.

Expanding the State Earned Income Credit (HB4920/SB3774)

The COVID-19 pandemic continues to highlight how many Illinoisans are one crisis away from instability. The state Earned Income Credit (EIC), along with the federal Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC), are effective and practical tools to combat poverty and inequality. Right now, too many hard-working Illinoisans are ineligible for the state credit. We support legislation to expand the EIC eligibility to include young people ages 18-24, those who file their taxes with ITIN numbers, and caregivers of qualifying dependents. Modernizing the EIC will not only improve economic security for hard-working Illinoisans but will put more money in the hands of those who need it the most.

Developing an Equitable Children Saving's Account Program (HB4843/ SB3991)

In 2019, Illinois established a statewide children's savings account program. While the legislation was a good first step, the program has yet to be fully implemented. We support legislation to require the program to be fully funded, collect geographic and demographic information of participants, and provide bonus seed deposits to children from low-income households. Without action, there is a risk of further intensifying the historical inequities of college savings account programs. In addition, we will work with our fellow advocates to explore additional ways to provide bonus seed funding for children's savings accounts with American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) funds.

In addition, we support the following legislation:

- Increase TANF grant to families (HB4423/SB3123)
- Establish the Low Income Broadband Assistance Program (HB3275/SB1557)
- Prevent landlords from refusing to rent to tenants based on source of income (HB2775/SB2492)
- Protect low income taxpayers from having their tax refund intercepted due to debt from local fines and fees (SB2985)
- Remove barriers for employment for people with criminal records (SB995 SA1)
- Reduce the sales tax rate on diapers and other basic needs (HB1828, HB2387, HB3999, HB4881, SB2056, SB4057)
- Launch pilot program to establish a race-blind removal procedure at DCFS (HB4299/SB3720)

Increasing Opportunities for Older Youth and Young Adults

Increasing Access to Driver's Licenses for Youth in Care

Driving is a quintessential part of the teenage experience. However, due to the constraints of the child welfare system, youth in care face significant barriers to receiving a license. We are currently administering a pilot program with the Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) where eligible youth in the agency's care can have certain driving related expenses paid for. We are monitoring the implementation of the pilot program to identify additional barriers for youth in care to receive their license and promote policies removing those barriers.

Creating the Youth Voices Fund to Cultivate Youth and Young Adult Participation in State Government

According to the latest Census figures, approximately one out of every five Illinois residents is between the ages of 10 and 24. Nearly every governmental system impacts this age group, yet their influence is minimal. Youth themselves are the most qualified to say how different systems and policies impact their day-to-day lives, however, we expect youth to contribute their voice and time for free. When we do not compensate youth for their time, the youth able to engage are not representative of Illinois youth at large. The proposed Youth Voices Fund will fairly compensate youth and young adults for their involvement and participation in state boards and commissions to ensure the full range of youth experience in Illinois is heard by state government.

In addition, we support the following legislation:

- Raise the age of detention to 13 (HB3767)
- Move youth ages 18-21 charged with misdemeanors from adult to juvenile court (HB111)
- Prohibit life without parole sentences for most youth who were under the age of 21 when their crime was committed (HB1064)
- Ban the use of solitary confinement for those under 21 (HB3738)

- Makes firearm sentencing enhancements discretionary for offenders under 18 **(HB2989)**
- Expand MAP grants to cover certificate programs at community colleges that lead to employment in a high-demand industry **(HB703/SB1643)**

Ensuring Families Have Access to High-Quality Early Care and Education

*Increase Access to the CCAP Program for Child Welfare-Involved Families **(HB4242 HA1 /SB3747)***

Better connecting children and families involved with the child welfare system with high quality education is a cornerstone of our work. One barrier is while the children whom we want to serve are known to DCFS, the state's early care and education infrastructure is housed in the Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP) at the Department of Human Services (DHS). Building on historic legislation we spearheaded in 2018, this legislation extends automatic CCAP eligibility to three populations: families receiving Intact Family Services with children between the ages of 6-13, children in foster care, and children with caregivers in the Extended Family Support program. By establishing automatic CCAP eligibility for these populations, we will make it easier for both parents, caregivers, and providers to navigate a potentially complex system.

*Provide More Resources to Extended Support Families **(SB3853)***

The Extended Family Support Program is designed for relatives to care for related children who are at risk of entering the foster care system. Many of these caregivers are older and not used to having younger children in the home. They would often benefit from additional services and support. However, as the program is currently constructed, providers can only offer limited support with establishing permanent guardianship. Opening doors to full home visiting programs and services have shown time and time again to result in positive outcomes for children and caregivers. We will work with DCFS to provide caregivers with the support and resources through community navigators and parent partners so they can care for their related children and prevent them from entering the child welfare system.

In addition, we support the following proposal:

- Require public universities to offer on-campus child care for student-parents **(HB84)**

Enhancing Children and Young Adults Access to Mental Health Services

Increased funding for early childhood care and education mental health consultants

We know families experienced significant stressors and trauma during the pandemic and have more complex needs than ever before. Infant/Early Childhood Mental Health Consultations are shown to boost children's social-emotional well-being in their classrooms and reduce the likelihood of suspensions/expulsions. However, there are not enough mental health consultants to meet the needs of child care centers and licensed child care homes. Now more than ever, these extra supports are necessary to meet the needs of children and their families. This is especially true in communities with limited economic and employment opportunities and who have experienced systemic oppression.

In addition, we support the following proposals:

- Reform Medicaid's Mental Health Assessment to better serve patients **(HB5033/SB3438)**
- Fully fund the Campus Mental Health Act **(HB5424/SB4055)**

Giving Our Programs the Resources to Succeed

Advocate for Continued Funding for the Youth Budget Commission at \$100,000

We support an appropriation of \$100,000 to support the work of the Youth Budget Commission (YBC). The Commission, created by legislation championed by Children's Home & Aid, is tasked with creating a yearly analysis of the State budget across six developmental goals - *stable, safe, healthy, educated, employable* and *connected*. The YBC advises the Governor, General Assembly and State agencies on approaches to improve and expand existing policies, services, programs, and opportunities for youth and young adults ages 8-25. With a particular focus on racial disparities and supporting disadvantaged youth, the resulting analysis is used to develop comprehensive policy recommendations supporting our goal of ensuring youth are stable, safe, healthy, educated, employable and connected. These continued efforts, along with an engaged community of advocates committed to the premise that all youth can thrive, will help ensure that Illinois youth become self-sufficient adults who lead exceptional lives.

Championing the Human Services Workforce (HB4720/SB3925)

As we begin to understand the long-term ramifications of the pandemic, one thing that is clear is the demand for our services is greater than ever. Yet, like in many industries, we are facing a significant workforce shortage. It is becoming increasingly difficult for human services employers of all types to remain competitive in the market. We will advocate for reforms that promote employment in the human services field and allow us to retain dedicated staff.

In addition, we support the following proposals:

- Automatically increase DCFS rates to account for inflation **(HB3288/SB115)**
- Expand access to community mental health care **(HB4238)**
- Amend Child Care Act of 1968 to expand degree and credential requirements for supervisors **(HB5044)**
- Increase funding for the entire early childhood system by 10 percent