

## FAMILIES FIRST 2011-2012 ADVOCACY AGENDA

### I. State Budget and Resources

Georgia's budget crisis continues, requiring Families First to place the highest priority on protecting critical services for families and children. Revenue shortfalls that have led to service cuts threaten budgets for Families First's programs as well as our clients' access to health care, child protection and placement services, family planning, family violence shelters, and mental health and substance abuse services, to name a few. After years of budgetary belt-tightening, funding for essential services has not kept pace with population growth; the recession led to an unprecedented decline in state revenues. The state's current budget predicament is exacerbated by deep problems in the revenue structure. Recognizing this, the General Assembly created the Special Council on Tax Reform and Fairness for Georgians to conduct a long overdue study of the state tax system. Families First will:

- Continue its leadership role in the 2020 Georgia alliance to prevent budget cuts in critical services affecting Georgia children and families by assuring that Georgia takes a balanced approach that includes providing sufficient revenue to fund these key services. Kim Anderson continues to serve on the Steering Team.
- Continue monitoring the work of the Special Tax Council and action on its recommendations.
- Continue efforts to increase transparency of the tax system, building on the passage in 2010 of legislation we supported requiring the state to publish a Tax Expenditure Budget.

### II. Child Welfare

As a leading provider of services to children in jeopardy, Families First monitors and promotes positive changes in state policy and resources affecting services for children in placement. Ongoing budget pressures again this session will probably prevent funding increases in the near term. While new funding for important services will remain on our agenda, the focus this session will be on encouraging adequate state funding to maximize opportunities for federal funding for child welfare services in Georgia. These are the priorities:

- Continue to work in collaboration with the Office of the Child Advocate and other organizations to monitor Georgia's implementation of the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008 and to support state funding to maximize federal dollars for related programs and services.
- Support additional funding for Independent Living Program services and benefits for youth beyond age 18.
- Monitor adoption legislation and policy.
- Work in coalition with EmpowerMENT and others to pass legislation creating a tuition waiver for current and former foster youth. Nineteen states currently offer these waivers, which increase access to higher education for foster youth by waiving their tuition and fees at colleges and vocational schools under certain conditions. Georgia currently provides supplemental educational funding for all foster youth attending public or private colleges until age 26, but these state funds are limited, and the funding was

reduced in the FY 2010 and FY 2011 budgets. A waiver would cover tuition and fees, and would free up funding so that supplemental funds could stretch further and pay more for such expenses as housing and books.

### **III. Health Care**

Access to affordable, quality, secure health care is one of the major concerns of Families First clients, most of whom have low or moderate incomes. Lack of insurance coverage is associated with higher rates of death and disability, low achievement for children in school, absence from work, and family financial distress. While some of our families have insurance through their workplaces, those in lower wage occupations are less likely than others to have employer-sponsored coverage. Medicaid and PeachCare are life savers for those of our families who can qualify. Research has shown these programs constitute the most workable and cost-effective approach to achieving coverage for this group, and this is reflected in the new health reform law, the Affordable Care Act (ACA). Families First has long advocated expanding access to care, having had a major role in creating PeachCare, for example. Among other things, we have sought to change state policy on Medicaid for working parents because at this time they can qualify only if their incomes are less than about \$11,000 for a family of four. In 2014, the ACA will extend Medicaid to these parents and to other adults under age 65 with incomes below \$29,000 for a family of four. Our work this year will emphasize protecting access to Medicaid, PeachCare and insurance for those who are now eligible, improving access where possible, and working to insure that systems are in place to implement the ACA in the interest of the clients that Families First serves. Priorities are as follows:

#### **1. PeachCare and Medicaid**

- Maintain PeachCare and Medicaid eligibility guidelines at current levels.
- Maintain open enrollment for all eligible children.
- Prevent imposition of premiums for children ages 1 to 5.
- Work to address administrative barriers that contribute to slow and interrupted enrollment and promote policies that improve systems. In particular, seek implementation of twelve months of continuous coverage for children in Medicaid and PeachCare. Alabama, Mississippi, North Carolina and South Carolina all have adopted a twelve-month coverage period in both Medicaid and their Child Health Insurance Programs instead of terminating enrollment during the year when family income fluctuates or paperwork is not filed. In Georgia, managed care organizations report that 30,000 to 50,000 enrollees, most of them children, drop off each month because of administratively burdensome recertification and reporting issues. Stabilizing children's coverage can improve their health and reduce hospitalizations for conditions like asthma.
- Protect and improve service coverage.
- Support provider reimbursement increases to improve access.
- Support and monitor implementation of the Medicaid family planning waiver. It allows women of childbearing age with incomes below 200% of poverty to receive family planning services; it also includes special services targeted to women who have given birth to a very low birth weight baby in an effort to reduce the number of low-weight births. The program was approved through the budget process and is now enrolling women.

#### **2. Health Insurance**

- Protect current insurance requirements for preventive care, especially for women and children (e.g., well-child care, immunizations, pap smears, mammograms.) These are hard-fought consumer protections that have been targeted for repeal in past legislative sessions.
- Support mental health parity.

#### **3. Health Reform, the Affordable Care Act**

- Monitor implementation of the ACA in Georgia to assure that insurance exchanges, the subsidy process, and other systems are designed to meet the needs of Families First clients whether they obtain coverage through employers, insurance exchanges, or Medicaid and PeachCare.
- Develop a series of discussions related to healthcare reform over the next 12 to 18 months for constituencies of Families First

#### **IV. Juvenile Justice**

##### **1. Revised Juvenile Code**

Children in families under stress may engage in delinquent acts that bring them in contact with law enforcement. Outcomes for children entering the juvenile justice system are even worse than those of other Georgia children in school performance, employment, violent deaths and other measures compared to other states. Georgia's Juvenile Code, the set of laws governing treatment of children who enter the system, does not reflect modern research on child and adolescent brain development. Judges and other professionals find it disorganized, confusing and difficult to apply appropriately. A coalition called JUSTGeorgia has studied the issues and proposes a revised Juvenile Code. The General Assembly has held hearings, and a revised bill will be offered in 2012. Families First will work as part of the coalition to enact the changes.

##### **2. Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children**

Atlanta and other areas of Georgia have been recognized as an epicenter for child prostitution and other forms of human trafficking. Current state laws are inconsistent in the treatment of sexually exploited children thus limiting access to rehabilitative services, special immigration status, and freedom from detention. Several other organizations, including Georgia Women for a Change are working to end child prostitution and protect those who have been victimized. HB 200 passed in 2011.