



## **VECF Position Statement Early Childhood and COVID-19**

To Early Childhood Stakeholders:

The Virginia Early Childhood Foundation recognizes the cascading impact from COVID-19 and the strain it is causing, and we are especially concerned for vulnerable families and the providers who partner with them in caring for and supporting young children. We are hearing from many of our local and service partners who are struggling to provide appropriate response and supports and need information and guidance to help discern solutions that are practical, feasible, and ethical.

As we strive to advocate for and provide important details and updates from state agency colleagues about early childhood programming, services, and resources, we're guided by priorities that provide a compass for us as Virginia grapples with these issues over the foreseeable future as the world tries to flatten the curve of the coronavirus spread and impact.

- First, health and human life. We should take immediate action to protect every one – including early childhood professionals like early educators and home visitors.
- Next, economic impact. We should buffer losses and gaps from the crisis for the livelihood of individuals and businesses large and small – including the child care industry.
- Third, we should ensure critical supports especially for vulnerable families and for early childhood service providers including food & nutrition; mental health needs; and special education needs.
- Finally, we should maintain a steady, hopeful, and reasonable eye on the horizon, when we'll have the opportunity to integrate what we've learned in the COVID-19 era to rebuilding and strengthening our early childhood systems.

As we all know, the early childhood "system" is complex and these priorities are riddled with ethical dilemmas. To ensure that the Commonwealth of Virginia responds as swiftly and effectively as possible to the COVID crisis, VECF has made specific requests of the state and is working to coordinate private sector partner response to support them:

1. First, the Governor and Health Commissioner should appoint Jenna Conway, Chief School Readiness Officer, to coordinate across multiple relevant agencies Virginia's thoughtful and comprehensive response related to early childhood services.
2. Next, and aligned with recommendations from the National Association for the Education of Young Children, Virginia should call for and strongly encourage child care centers to consider closure for the next several weeks, similar to the mandate for K-12 schools, out of deference for the health and safety of early childhood teachers and staff. At the same time, the agencies should work to ensure and communicate economic protections for these small businesses and individuals (e.g., continuation of payments, access to disaster relief, zero- or low-cost loans, unemployment, etc.).



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For parents impacted by these closures, employers and public programs should do all possible to help these parents stay home without loss of income or benefits. Employers who need parents at work to sustain essential operations should work with state and local agency, community leaders, and providers to identify child care solutions that limit risk.

3. Virginia should quickly and thoughtfully develop a plan for child care for essential workers including first responders. For those child care programs and staff who are counted on to provide this service, essentially first responders themselves, there must be increased “hazard” compensation (to recognize the critical services they are providing at personal risk) and additional guidance and supports for on-site practices that could reduce the risk of infection and protect both the adults and children who interact in these settings.

We are grateful for Virginia’s public sector leaders who have been diligently working to be responsive to the crisis as well as for private sector leaders (business/employers, philanthropy, local non-profits, Smart Beginnings network) who are assertively creating solutions in their communities.

We are privileged to serve as a connector among these efforts, and will continue to leverage opportunities for cross-cutting communication as we all work together to address the immediate and plan for the future.

### **Our current priority commitments include:**

- a) hosting regular briefings with state agency leaders for early childhood stakeholders, sharing the latest guidance and information as well as providing a forum for feedback and questions and**
- b) coordinating community collaboratives focused on solving for emergency child care for essential workers.**

With leadership from the Northam Administration and the legislature, Virginia has taken steps to strongly support increased access to quality early childhood services and a state structure as backbone. None of us could have anticipated this type of crisis situation that would add a critical layer of complexity to how we live in to that potential.

Now is the time to bring focused attention, offer resources, and join together to find solutions in this critical environment, which will inform measured steps toward a stronger, more resilient early childhood system for our future.

Thanks again to our dedicated public and private leaders and to the many stakeholders across the state who are committed to supporting the best guidance, supports, and actions feasible on behalf of our children, families, and early childhood professionals.