

Missed Opportunities: Legislators Still Have Work To Do to Deliver in Key Areas for Kids

June 13, 2016 – State lawmakers finished a couple of positive developments for kids in recent months, including adopting the FY2017 budget before adjourning for a 12-week summer recess last week. But, the budget -- starting Oct. 1, 2016 once Gov. Snyder signs it -- missed opportunities for important improvements for children and families.

Some good news: The nearly \$55 billion plan includes \$165 million for Flint's infrastructure needs and for supports to promote children's healthy development after dangerous lead exposure. On top of an earlier emergency allocation, this is an important beginning for city families and will require all of us to stay vigilant. We must remain watchful to ensure children harmed in the Flint water crisis continue to receive the services they need, like *Early On*, and integrated services for them and their families for years to come. And, we need to make sure that how we address the disaster in Flint also leads to a more productive conversation about what kids and families need in communities around our state that face significant challenges.

While the long-anticipated Third Grade Reading bill didn't clear the Legislature – it remains in a conference committee -- lawmakers allocated \$25 million for early literacy initiatives to boost Michigan schoolchildren's reading levels, which are among the worst in the nation. This represents essentially the same level of funding as in the current fiscal year, and while continuing some good investments, also fails to invest in other [critical evidenced practices](#).

Other important investments in the recently passed budget included an expansion of Healthy Kids Dental to all eligible children across the state; an increase in counties providing family reunification services to those who have had their children removed through the foster care system; continued focus on increasing access to Career and Technical Education programs and developing competency-based education efforts critical for the most challenged learners; and expanding the minimal clothing allowance to all children living in families receiving cash assistance.

Disappointedly, the budget did not include minimal funding to cover a study aimed at identifying additional Medicaid dollars to pay for *Early On* services for children 0 to 3 with development delays and disabilities. The recent Flint allocation is the only state funding for this early intervention program that supports young children's healthy development.

The Legislature also moved a \$671 million rescue plan for Detroit Public Schools that will clear the district's age-old debt. But without adequate funding to fix the problem, according to the Senate Fiscal Agency, no support from Democrats in the House or Senate or support from Detroit leaders including the mayor, the plan's long-term viability remains an open question.

Distressing, too, is the Legislature's continued failure to direct state matching dollars needed to maintain Michigan's full federal allocation for the child care subsidy program for families of

low-income – resulting in our returning over \$20 million unused in the current fiscal year. Michigan is the only one of a handful of states that returns any federal child care funds, which is unacceptable considering Michigan has one of the worst child care systems in the nation. Investing the needed state matching funds will result in nearly \$30 million that could be used to strengthen needed supports to working families and quality programs for children ages 0-13. As the economy continues to improve, the ability of low-income workers to pay for child care will continue to compromise their ability to work and fill the demands of a growing economy. Michigan's failure to address this lack of investment is an issue that advocates including Michigan's Children will continue to fight for.

Two other sets of legislation important to children, youth and families also didn't make the cut before the Legislature left town, passing only through the State House, but not the Senate. The Children's Assurance of Quality Foster Care Act, HBs 4976-4978, introduced last December, has yet to be discussed in a Senate Committee. With 13,000 children in the state's care, it's a major disappointment if these bills aren't approved. Another package that didn't win final action, one that will change the state's practice of automatically sending 17-year-olds offenders to the adult corrections system, has a good chance of moving through the Senate when the Legislature returns, but the clock is ticking. All but nine states including Michigan adjudicate 17 year olds as juveniles. If this legislation doesn't pass through the Senate and move to the Governor's desk by the end of the calendar year, efforts will have to begin again in both chambers in 2017.

Before any of us get too discouraged, though, there is something we can all do about these and other issues. Your state senators will be home for the summer, and there will be many opportunities to let them know to get moving and not let critical legislation die in their chamber. You can also speak to your state representatives about unfinished business in the state budget, as conversations will continue in Lansing on the needs of the child care system and *Early On*.

Additionally, incumbent state and U.S. House members and their political challengers will be campaigning throughout the summer in the ramp up to the August primary and November general election. Talk to them when you see them at public events or reach them at their local offices. Make sure they understand children, youth and families are at the forefront of issues that matter most to you and that you expect your representatives to put them front and center, too!

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