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Mims, Potts support children's legislation

By Erica L. De Pompeo, Capital News Service
01/29/2004

Several Northern Virginia lawmakers are lending their support to an organization called Voices for Virginia's Children, which wants to boost funding for schools, Medicaid and other programs that benefit the state's younger citizens.

The legislators and Voices for Virginia's Children last week announced the Children's Agenda, calling on the General Assembly to increase funding in areas such as child care, mental health services for children and public education.

The event's organizers delivered a serious message.

"Seventy organizations strong, we advocates remind policymakers that if the needs of children are not met, the Commonwealth will have more expensive costs down the road," said Suzanne Clark Johnson, president of Voices for Virginia's Children.

The coalition is composed of several statewide and national organizations, including the Virginia PTA and the Children's Defense Fund to Virginia pediatricians. Many lawmakers also have endorsed the Children's Agenda.

"As legislators, perhaps our greatest responsibility is not to our own generation but those who will follow us," said Sen. Bill Mims, R-Leesburg.

"A key inquiry must be, 'How will our decisions affect our children and generations to come?' The comprehensive, unified Children's Agenda provides the context for this inquiry."

The Children's Agenda calls for policy changes that supporters say would produce a brighter future for Virginia children.

"This endeavor is invaluable to the General Assembly, as it provides a clear policy statement across such broad lines," said Delegate Brian J. Moran, D-Alexandria.

The agenda promotes:

School readiness. For instance, supporters want the state to improve child care.

Success in kindergarten through 12th grade. The agenda calls for more support for public education, including raising teachers' salaries and involving parents in schools.

Health services and health insurance for children. The coalition also wants schools to serve more nutritious cafeteria food and to require physical education. Moreover, the agenda supports an increase in the cigarette tax to discourage youths from smoking.

Juvenile justice. Supporters are seeking better legal representation for children in

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trouble with the law. They also want the state to raise the minimum age from 16 to 18 for getting the death penalty in capital murder cases.

Programs to empower families and protect children. The coalition wants to increase efforts to combat child abuse -- for example, by requiring clergy to report such abuse to police.

"I appreciate the effort that went into developing such a comprehensive agenda on children's issues," said Sen. H. Russell Potts Jr., R-Winchester. "This will be a helpful resource for me and other legislators as we make difficult choices in the weeks ahead. This agenda will remind us to keep the needs of children as a priority."

Mims added, "Certainly not every legislator will agree with every point. But there will be sufficient common ground to build a consensus to benefit the children of Virginia."

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