



2026 Policy Priorities

Public Policy Agenda 2026



Child Care Aware of Virginia is committed to ensuring that every child across the Commonwealth—birth through age twelve—has access to safe, high-quality care. Parents deserve real choices among programs that support healthy development and allow them to work. Our 2026 policy recommendations strengthen both families and Virginia’s economy.

The State of Child Care in Virginia

Across Virginia, families depend on child care to work and thrive. Yet in too many communities, it remains difficult to find, afford, or access quality child care.

- **379,275** children under age six and **519,266** children ages six to twelve had working parents in 2023. (*U.S. Census Bureau, 2023*)

Child care is a vital part of the Commonwealth’s workforce infrastructure. When working parents lack access to affordable child care, the Commonwealth loses about \$3.1 billion annually in lost wages, productivity and tax revenue. (Ready Nation, 2023)

Businesses, families, and providers are all interdependent for a healthy economy.

Strengthen the Child Care Workforce

Invest in compensation, benefits, and professional development to attract and retain qualified early childhood and school-age care professionals.

Expand Access to Affordable Care

Ensure all families can find and afford quality child care by funding subsidies, supporting home-based programs, and incentivizing employer partnerships.

Build Quality Child Care Programs

Strengthen program quality through increased investment in professional development and statewide support systems for providers and families.

Strengthen the Child Care Workforce

Programs across Virginia face challenges recruiting and retaining qualified staff. Low wages and limited benefits make it difficult to compete with other employers, leading to long waitlists and fewer available child care slots.

Recommended Actions:

- Invest in competitive compensation and benefits to retain qualified staff.
- Create refundable tax credits for child care professionals tied to credentials or education, as seen in states like Louisiana, Nebraska and Colorado.
- Expand business training and technical assistance to help providers sustain operations.
- Make the Child Care Subsidy Program available to child care professionals as a recruitment incentive.

These strategies can stabilize programs and expand parent choices across communities.

Expand Access to Affordable Child Care

In 2025, more than 13,000 children were on waitlists for the Child Care Subsidy Program or Virginia Preschool Initiative (VPI). Without adequate funding, families—especially those earning just above eligibility thresholds—struggle to afford care.

Recommended Actions:

- Fully fund subsidy assistance so all eligible families can access care.
- Eliminate the two-tiered income system and support all families up to 85% of the State Median Income (SMI).
- Offer start-up grants (\$2,000–\$5,000) for licensed home-based programs, especially those seeking to serve infants, toddlers, and families needing non-traditional hour care.
- Expand public-private partnerships to increase supply in child care deserts similar to [Iowa](#), [Kentucky](#), [Michigan](#), [New York](#), [North Carolina](#), [North Dakota](#), [Texas](#), [West Virginia](#), [Massachusetts](#), [Montana](#), [Ohio](#), [Tennessee](#), and [Washington](#).

Build Quality Child Care Programs

High-quality care supports both healthy child development and family stability. To improve quality, Virginia should increase the percentage of Child Care and Development Block Grant (CCDBG) funds devoted to quality improvement activities.

Recommended Actions:

- Invest in training, credentialing, and professional development.
- Strengthen the statewide Child Care Resource and Referral system to connect families and providers.
- Support ongoing coaching and technical assistance to ensure sustainable, high-quality care environments.