

## **NATIONAL COALITION FOR CHILD PROTECTION REFORM**

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### **CHILD ADVOCACY GROUP SUPPORTS CHANGE IN FINANCIAL INCENTIVES, OPPOSES PAY RAISE FOR FOSTER PARENTS**

*The report discussed in this press release is available online at  
<http://www.nccpr.org/reports/virginia02132008.pdf>*

RICHMOND – The General Assembly should approve Gov. Timothy M. Kaine’s proposal to change financial incentives for child welfare, but reject his proposal for a \$22.6 million pay raise for foster parents, a national child advocacy organization said Wednesday. That money would be better spent on programs to keep children out of foster care in the first place, the group said.

“When it comes to the governor’s proposals, we’re behind him fifty percent,” said Richard Wexler, executive director of the Alexandria-based National Coalition for Child Protection Reform. He spoke at a news conference at the General Assembly Building where he released a report on the Governor’s initiatives.

Gov. Kaine has wants to change financial incentives in the state’s Comprehensive Services Act. Under his plan, counties would get more state aid for placing children in “community-based settings” and less for institutionalizing them in group homes and residential treatment centers (RTCs).

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“The paradox of child welfare is that the worse an option is for children, the more it costs,” Wexler said. “Safe proven alternatives to foster homes are better for children, and cost less, than foster homes. Foster homes are better for children, and cost less, than group homes. Group homes are better for children, and cost less, than institutions such as residential treatment centers.

“Yet Virginia pours 45 percent of all CSA dollars into so-called ‘congregate care’ while better alternatives get only nine percent.

“Residential treatment centers are a bizarre accident of history – they are essentially rebranded orphanages,” Wexler said. “No one in his right mind would suggest creating them today if we were starting from scratch. But the centers have bred a powerful industry, dependent on an unending supply of children to stay in business. This - foster care-industrial complex - can be counted on to mobilize against any real reform on behalf of children.

“The scholarly literature is overwhelming: Notwithstanding the pretty campuses and the glossy p.r., residential treatment simply doesn’t work,” Wexler said.

“Institutionalization is inherently harmful to children. It is a waste of taxpayer money but, more important, a waste of children’s lives.

“In the face of this overwhelming evidence, the residential treatment industry responds with fear and smear,” Wexler said. “They piously proclaim that they wish these children could be cared for by families, but supposedly it’s just impossible; they claim the children’s problems are too severe. After all, they say, many of the children already have been through multiple foster home placements.

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“But all over the country, safe proven alternatives are succeeding – for exactly the same children now warehoused in RTCs. Indeed, in some cases RTCs have had crises of conscience and radically reformed themselves, shutting down most of their residential beds and bringing intensive help right into children’s homes.

“The innovators in child welfare are the places that move the system instead of moving the child.

“Yes, sometimes such children fail in families. But that is almost always because those families – be they birth families or foster families – didn’t get the help they needed. And that’s because the money that could buy that help is being thrown away on institutionalizing children.

“The group home industry’s reasoning is circular, and it is cruel,” Wexler said. “Deny families the support they need to make a placement work, then justify your institution’s enormously-expensive existence on grounds that the children couldn’t stay in families.”

Wexler said many of the people who run institutions mean well. “Rationalization is powerful. They’ve convinced themselves that all the children in their institutions really need to be there. It’s hard to face up to the fact that one’s institution may be accomplishing little or nothing, or even doing harm, and the children would be better off elsewhere. But it is time to put the interests of children ahead of the self-indulgence of the residential treatment industry.”

### **Pay raise opposed**

Wexler said that while the governor’s good idea to change financial incentives may be difficult to pass, “the idea that may be easy to pass is not good.”

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The governor is proposing to give foster parents a 26 percent pay raise on grounds that current rates lag behind the national average and supposedly deter people from becoming foster parents.

But Wexler said the plan “is built on a foundation of faulty logic and faulty numbers.”

Wexler said that when one factors in Virginia’s highest-in-the-nation clothing allowance for foster children, the state already pays foster parents of older children a rate that is above the national average, and the rate for all but the youngest children comes close. Add in a 26 percent raise, he said, and Virginia’s rates for most children will far exceed the national average.

“The things that allow a state to attract and keep good foster parents are things money can’t buy,” Wexler said. “Surveys of foster parents repeatedly find that other factors are far more important than money – notably communication with caseworkers and whether the foster parents are treated with dignity and respect.

“Foster parents, rightly, get upset when people say they’re in it for the money. They argue that they can’t be in it for the money because there is not enough money. Pass this pay raise, and that argument goes out the window. If anything, it may make foster parenting more attractive to the minority of foster parents who go into it for the wrong reasons.”

Wexler said much of the pressure to increase foster parent pay comes from a New York-based group with a profound hostility to birth parents. That group issued a report last year purporting to compare current rates nationwide to the minimum needed for children.

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“But they have an odd definition of minimum,” Wexler said. “This group demands that foster parents be paid not just for their foster children’s food, clothing, and shelter, but for every after school activity, movie ticket and carnival ride. They even demand that the state reimburse foster parents for toys and games purchased for foster children.

“It is an insult to the thousands of dedicated, compassionate foster parents of Virginia to suggest that they are so greedy that they would demand state reimbursement to buy their foster child a teddy bear.

“The issue isn’t whether Virginia foster parents deserve more. Most foster parents do the best they can for the children in their care – like most parents, period – and many are true heroes. The issue is whether there are better ways to spend \$22.6 million.

“And there are. The best way to ease any alleged shortage of foster parents is not to try a pay raise in order to increase the supply, but rather to use the same money to reduce the demand, by keeping more children safety in their own homes.”

Wexler said that contrary to what he called “the common stereotype,” most parents who lose their children to foster care are neither brutally abusive nor hopelessly addicted. Far more common are cases in which a family’s poverty has been confused with child “neglect.” In Virginia, neglect is, by far, the main reason children are taken from their parents.

“Several studies have found that 30 percent of America’s foster children could be home right now if their parents just had decent housing,” Wexler said. “And single parents, desperate to keep their low-wage jobs when the sitter doesn’t show may have to

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choose between staying home and getting fired, or going to work and risking having their children taken on 'lack of supervision' charges.

"If the Governor has \$22.6 million to spend, it makes far more sense to spend it on, for example, day care for low income families, instead of taking away their children, throwing them into foster care and then reimbursing the middle-class foster parents for *their* day care costs.

Wexler praised Gov. Kaine for a separate initiative increasing funding for childcare. "But even with that increase, it won't come close to meeting the demand, and those funds are not targeted to families at risk of losing their children.

"Other cases fall on a broad continuum between the extremes, the parents neither all victim nor all villain," Wexler said. "What these cases have in common is the fact that there are a wide variety of proven programs that can keep these children in their own homes, and do it with a far better track record for safety than substitute care.

"Some of those in-between cases involve drug abuse. And that raises another question: Why even bother with parents – usually mothers -- in these cases? But the reason to "bother" is not for the sake of the parents, but for their children."

Wexler cited a University of Florida Medical Center study which found that even infants born with cocaine in their systems developed better when left with birth mothers able to care for them than they did when placed in substitute care.

"It is extremely difficult to take a swing at 'bad mothers' without the blow landing on their children," Wexler said. "If we really believe all the rhetoric about putting the needs of children first, then we need to put those needs ahead of everything – including how we may feel about their parents. That doesn't mean we can simply leave

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children with addicts – it does mean that drug treatment for the parent is almost always a better first choice than foster care for the child – and drug treatment is a far better way to invest \$22.6 million than a huge pay raise for foster parents.

“The evidence of the harm of substitute care in all its forms is overwhelming,” Wexler said. He cited a recent Massachusetts Institute of Technology study of 15,000 children. It found that those placed in substitute care, whether in foster homes, group homes or institutions, generally did significantly worse than comparably-maltreated children left in their own homes.

“Some children really must be taken from their parents – and for them the best option is almost always placement with grandparents or other relatives.” Wexler said. “But Virginia has one of the worst records in the nation for kinship care, in part because, even when children are taken by force of law and placed by order of a court, most kinship care parents are ineligible for any help at all. Still another better use for \$22.6 million would be to provide such help.

“Where kin really aren’t available, a foster home is far better than an institution. But the best home for most children most of the time is the home they were born in. And if Governor Kaine has \$22.6 million available in new money, that’s the best place to put it,” Wexler said.

**ABOUT NCCPR:** The National Coalition for Child Protection Reform is a non-profit organization whose members have encountered the child protection system in their professional capacities and work to make it better serve America’s most vulnerable children. A complete list of NCCPR’s Board of Directors is available at [www.nccpr.org](http://www.nccpr.org). **Funding for NCCPR’s national advocacy activities comes from the Annie E. Casey Foundation. We thank the Foundation for its support, but acknowledge that the views expressed here are those of NCCPR alone and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of our funders.**