

How the O'Malley Mandate Can Improve Child Well-Being

Research-Based Investments Provide Opportunity Despite Budget Crunch

Executive Summary

Elected by a large margin to a second and last term, Governor Martin O'Malley has important opportunities to make Maryland a national model for providing cost-effective services to families, despite a severe budget crunch. The Governor can reorganize and restructure rather than merely trim dysfunctional systems.

Recognize the Opportunity To Reform

In a poll commissioned by Advocates for Children and Youth prior to the election, Maryland voters overwhelmingly favored specific, proven strategies that address clear problems. Each strategy was cost-neutral because it used new federal dollars or reinvested existing state funds. The state budget deficit does not preclude the Governor from implementing these reforms; indeed, these strategies may provide the best hope for significant accomplishments in a tight budget.¹

Invest in Families

The number of Maryland children in foster care has dropped by more than 40 percent over the past 8 years. To safely sustain and accelerate this trend, more parents need in-home services, like substance abuse treatment, mental health care and housing assistance.

In past budget squeezes, the State cut services to families and allowed child welfare caseloads to balloon. The result was a near-instant increase in the number of children in foster care, particularly in expensive group homes.

The Governor has an opportunity to reinvest foster care savings and create an expanded network of services that enable more families to safely care for their children.

Provide Preventive Health Care

Maryland has one of the highest rates of low-birthweight births in the nation, resulting in too many infant deaths and sick babies, at a cost of more than \$1 billion for neonatal intensive care.

Many high risk women in Maryland are not receiving preventive health care prior to their first pregnancy or after a complicated pregnancy. The State has already cut back on support for local health departments, which provide pre-pregnancy services to many women. Further cuts will cause increased hospital expenses greatly in excess of any savings.

Indeed, Maryland has recently experienced the painful implications of not providing preventive health care, when 12-year-old Deamonte Driver died because an untreated cavity became a brain infection. There were not enough dentists available to treat children insured through Medicaid. The Governor increased reimbursement rates and reduced administrative burdens for dentists.

To improve the health outcomes of Maryland's babies and children and to have the State serve as a national model for implementation of federal health care reform, the Governor can maintain and expand his investments in preventive health services.

Target Struggling Students Early

As part of the federal Race to the Top initiative, Maryland is seeking to raise academic standards and close achievement gaps. This means providing struggling students with early interventions, including tutoring and summer school, and addressing the problem failing schools have attracting and keeping effective teachers. Financial incentives, professional development and other supports are useful in attracting effective teachers to failing schools, enhancing their skills and encouraging them to stay.

If students do not have equal access to effective teachers and necessary supports, Maryland will face overwhelming pressure to lower academic standards.

¹ *Maryland Statewide Voter Survey*, by OpinionWorks, commissioned by Advocates for Children and Youth; N=600 likely General Election voters statewide; fielded Aug. 13-18, 2010.



The Governor is in a unique situation to implement education reform in a state with strong unions, by expanding professional development and supports to teachers who work in struggling schools and redirecting state funds towards earlier interventions for struggling students.

Reduce Barriers to Economic Supports

For families to be economically self-sufficient, many need access to Medicaid, food stamps, tax credits and other supports. Yet, securing and maintaining eligibility for these supports requires families to submit multiple applications, provide the same information many times and visit numerous offices. Maryland ranks 41st in the nation in the percentage of eligible families receiving food stamps, in large part because the application process is so difficult.

Allowing parents to apply for food stamps and other benefits at one time reduces the burden of the application process and increases information about other benefits.

As the State works on some high-tech strategies to create a one-stop application system, the Governor can use a family's Medicaid eligibility to identify families who are also eligible for food stamps and use the Medicaid information to jump start the food stamp application. This will increase food stamp enrollment and reduce the workload on eligibility workers.

Rehabilitate Instead of Incarcerate

Juvenile recidivism in Maryland is over 50 percent, i.e., the percent of youth re-arrested within a year of release from facilities.

Other states, including Missouri, have achieved a considerably higher success rate by locating youth closer to their families and providing better treatment during confinement and back in the community. These facilities better protect public safety and save money by having to re-incarcerate fewer youth.

Jurisdictions, like Clayton County, Georgia, have improved public safety by providing services to youth who commit non-serious offenses, rather than arresting them. Other states use Multi-Systemic Therapy to provide intensive in-home therapy to even high risk youth, with much greater effectiveness than residential programs and at a fraction of the cost.

In the past, Maryland has cut community-based services, resulting in more youth in juvenile jails, at a

much greater expense and ultimate danger to the public.

Maryland can become a national model in juvenile justice reform by replicating the Clayton County model to reduce youth arrest, expanding Multi-Systemic Therapy to treat youth in their own communities and using the proven Missouri Model to rehabilitate youth who need temporary confinement.

Take Aim At Racial Inequities

Across every aspect of child well-being, African-American families are doing worse than white families in Maryland, even considering socioeconomic differences. Latino children are also suffering, particularly those who are English Language Learners. The problem has persisted despite many reports on the existence of racial and ethnic inequity.

The best way to create equal opportunity for all children is to directly target equity gaps and their causes. The Governor can require every child-serving agency to report racial equity information in its regular reports to StateStat and to then prepare and implement credible racial equity action plans.

Budget By Results

The Governor has taken scrutiny of government agencies to a new level with his StateStat process. Building upon this impressive accomplishment means asking agencies to focus on outcomes, to link expenditures to impact on these outcomes, and to make budgetary decisions based on program effectiveness and efficiency.

Restructure Government

With increased need but fewer resources, the State needs to consider some fundamental reforms to how government is structured. At least three agencies—Health; Human Resources; and Juvenile Services—are working directly with families, often without coordination. It is possible that some merger will result in better services and cost savings.

The State can also consider any perverse incentives it creates by paying for certain services. For example, local jurisdictions, except for Montgomery County, do not pay for the cost of incarcerating juveniles. In general, the State pays for most of the high-cost services required by the neediest children and families, providing no incentive for local jurisdictions to prevent the need for such services.