

## Youth advocates support child care aid, juvenile justice update

By Rich Suwanski Messenger-Inquirer | Posted: Tuesday, October 29, 2013 12:00 am

About 100 people attended the Kentucky Youth Advocates "Step Up for Kids" regional conference Monday at Western Kentucky University-Owensboro, and KYA Executive Director Terry Brooks encouraged them to reach out to legislators for policies that will help the health and safety of the commonwealth's children.

The event, sponsored by the Public Life Foundation, presented information on the Childcare Kinship program, youth justice, and the state earned income tax credit as part of KYA's Blueprint for Kentucky's Children.

"The blueprint tries to ensure that no matter how you look at politics, we as a commonwealth can come together when it comes to policies that make a difference for kids," Brooks said. "For the first time ever, more than one in four kids live in poverty.

"When we talk about those parents not having secure employment, a lot of them have two to three part-time, minimum wage jobs with no benefits."

Brooks said KYA advocates policies that have importance and are feasible. For example, kinship support would be about \$300 a month for grandparents raising grandchildren as opposed to costing the state \$600 a month for a child to go into foster care.

Peggy Grant, Head Start director at Audubon Area Community Services, said that since eligibility for child care assistance changed earlier this year, at least 40 local families no longer qualify. Parents who can no longer afford the full cost of child care have had to quit their jobs to take care of their children.

"The child care assistance program is the very notion that work is better than welfare," Grant said.

Grant said evidence-based data show that the early years are the most important for child development.

"Statistics show that only 48 percent of children from low-income families are ready to learn by the time they start school compared to 75 percent of children in moderate to high-income families," she said.

KYA also advocates for a state earned income tax credit that would average \$326 per year per income tax filer.

"Families are likely to spend their return on things like paying bills, buying food or buying gas — dollars that are pumped back into the local community," said KYA's Andrea Bennett. "If you're working full time, even at minimum wage, you should be able to provide for your family.

"Right now, 25 states and the District of Columbia have established a state earned income tax credit."

District Court Judge Lisa Jones told the group that there's a task force that will present recommendations to the state legislature for updating the juvenile justice code, something that hasn't been done since the 1980s.

"We need to reduce juvenile incarceration, particularly with status offenders," she said.

Status offenses include truancy, possession of tobacco or alcohol, runaways and children who are beyond the control of parents or school officials.

"Juvenile detention isn't play school, preschool or prep school," Jones said. "These are places where kids are strip-searched when they come in, and they're put in with the general population, right along with kids who are in for gang activity, gun possession, assaulting or beating up someone."

Jones said attorneys and judges may have a story about someone who said "thank you" for putting them in jail, that it turned their lives around, but studies show that nothing good comes of incarcerating status offenders.

"There is a time and place for incarceration, so I'm not saying do away with it, but 70 percent of the kids we have incarcerated in Kentucky are not high-risk offenders," Jones said. "Locking up youth is not getting the result we want. What it does is increase the suicide rate, increases those in the mental health system and school dropouts and increases the likelihood of not maintaining steady employment as an adult."

She said the answer is targeting services to a child and family on the front end, rather than throwing them in jail.

State legislators Rep. Tommy Thompson and Joe Bowen agreed that access to early education and child care assistance are important. However, state revenue growth has only been modest, and restoring funds to all programs that have been cut will be a challenge, but that children and families are a priority of theirs.

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