The Blueprint for Kentucky’s Children is a coalition of non-profit, public, and private organizations that stands on three pillars: thriving communities launch strong families, strong families launch successful kids, and successful kids launch a prosperous future for Kentucky.

As the commonwealth works to overcome the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic and address systemic racism, the Blueprint speaks with a common voice to create brighter futures for all Kentucky kids and their families.

These policy priorities can be implemented during the 2021 Kentucky General Assembly without being included in the state budget:

- Allow city and county governments the option to regulate the use, display, sale, and distribution of tobacco products – including e-cigarettes – to curb tobacco use among youth
- Offer state employees access to 12 weeks of paid family leave after the birth or adoption of a child
- Hold parents accountable in ways that minimize the impact of parental incarceration on children
- Establish a minimum age – at least 12 years old – that a child can be charged with an offense, and connect the child to community-based services instead of sending them through the juvenile justice system
- Allow juvenile court judges to use their discretion in the decision to transfer youth ages 14 and older to adult court for situations involving a firearm
- Amend local planning and zoning laws to allow regulated home-based family child care options to safely serve children in their neighborhoods
- Modify the mandated child abuse reporting law to disallow “chain of command” procedures within public and private agencies
- Remove the clergy-penitent privilege exemption in the child maltreatment reporting law
- Strengthen the current statute of limitations timeframes for physical and sexual abuse offenses to allow later abuse disclosure
As the commonwealth works to overcome the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic and address systemic racism, the Blueprint for Kentucky’s Children speaks with a common voice to create brighter futures for all Kentucky kids.

Kentucky kids and families need a strong state budget. Among the many budget priorities, the Blueprint for Kentucky’s Children hopes to see the following included:

- Sustain funding for the Medicaid and KCHIP programs, and invest in closing the remaining gap in child health coverage
- Invest in infrastructure to close the digital divide so that kids can access the educational resources and telehealth services they need
- Sustain funding for Family Resource and Youth Service Centers (FRYSCs), who work with families to remove barriers to student learning
- Ensure dedicated funding to implement the Expanded Care Services policy to support student health
- Prioritize kinship care by sustaining investment in critical services and financial supports
- Increase funding for family preservation and treatment programs that allow families to stay together safely while parents work to achieve sobriety and access mental health and parenting supports
- Expand investment in child abuse forensic services so all children who experience maltreatment can receive the best care
- Invest in the Health Access Nurturing Development Services (HANDS) in-home visitation program to provide critical supports to new parents
- Protect current funding for safety net programs, including KTAP, CCAP, SNAP and WIC, and ensure they are not modified in ways that prevent children from receiving needed services
Kentucky can...

**Ensure children and families continue to access the health care they need**

Kentucky has made strides to improve the number of children who have access to health coverage, including through Kentucky Children’s Health Insurance Program (KCHIP) and Medicaid.

KCHIP and Medicaid ensure children in low-income families receive access to health coverage that allows them to visit health care providers to address their physical, behavioral, oral, and vision health needs. While health coverage rates remain high, progress has stagnated; there are still at least **45,000 children and teens** who need to be enrolled in health insurance.

Parents’ health—and access to health insurance coverage—affects the health and well-being of their children. When parents are insured, they are more likely to be healthy so they can care for and provide for their children, and children rely on their parents to sign them up for health insurance and to take them to receive care. Research has also shown that children with health coverage are more likely to receive regular preventive care, such as well-child exams, and to stay connected to a primary care doctor.

**Advancing Health Equity in the Commonwealth**

All children need access to affordable health care to ensure healthy growth and development. During the pandemic, it is even more vital that everyone has access to health insurance so they can get the care they need. Yet, COVID-19 has highlighted some pre-existing racial disparities in health coverage and care.

As the Commonwealth builds pandemic recovery efforts, **the disproportionate impact on the health of Black and Latinx communities must be considered**. These communities have been impacted especially hard by COVID-19 due to pre-existing disparities that are the result of a variety of historic and present-day factors rooted in systemic racism, ranging from unequal access to health coverage and treatment in health care, to being more likely to live in areas with less access to healthy foods and safe outdoor spaces, along with education and employment barriers that have concentrated Black and Brown people in lower wage jobs.

**Blueprint for Kentucky’s Children Solution:**

Sustain investments in Medicaid and KCHIP, and prioritize investments focused on closing the remaining gap and addressing racial disparities in coverage so that children and families can continue to access the health care they need.
Blueprint for Kentucky’s Children Solution:

Establish a minimum age – at least 12 years old – that a child can be charged with an offense, and connect the child and family to community-based services instead of sending them through the juvenile justice system.

Kentucky can... Address misbehavior by children under 12 through community-based services instead of the court system

Kids are kids, and we do not expect them to act like tiny adults. Young children, such as elementary school students, who get in trouble need responses and interventions that address the root causes of their behavior; the juvenile court system is not the place to do that. The formal court process can be traumatic, negatively impact a child’s development, and trap children in an increasingly difficult maze of problems.

Kentucky can continue to make commonsense shifts in how we respond when young children get in trouble to ensure safer communities and brighter futures for all kids.

The best solutions address the root causes of the child’s behavior because:

- Parents and other caring adults play a critical role in healthy development and positive behaviors
- When children and their families have access to community-based services, such as mental health treatment and mentoring, they can develop healthy coping skills and build stronger family connections

Advancing Equity in the Commonwealth

Perceptions that youth of color are older than their actual age, or are more culpable, contribute to more young Black children than White peers having complaints filed against them – the first step into the juvenile justice system maze. Even when young Black children receive diversion or have the case handled out of formal court, early charges can impact how a future case is handled.

In Jefferson County – home to almost half of Kentucky’s Black youth – Black children are disproportionately represented in complaints filed against children ages 12 and younger.

Currently, the juvenile justice system operates like a complex maze with many points of entry, making it easy to get in but very difficult to get out.

Entering the juvenile court system can:

- Expose kids to trauma
- Disrupt their development and education
- Create roadblocks into adulthood through reduced employment opportunities and increased likelihood of future incarceration

Proportion of population under age 13

68% Complaints filed

29%
Kentucky can...

**Strengthen Kentucky’s efforts to prevent child abuse and neglect**

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought unique stress to families with children – juggling child care, helping students manage online learning, fewer options for obtaining social support, and many facing lost income to cover basic expenses. Kentucky has made strides in recent years to improve the foster care system for children who have experienced abuse or neglect, yet more can be done to prevent maltreatment and strengthen families, especially when considering a strong, equitable recovery that reaches all Kentuckians.

When children have experienced — or are at risk of experiencing — abuse or neglect, investing in programs that target prevention or family preservation can serve as a catalyst to safely keep families together or reunite families.

**Kentucky can continue to invest in the following programs to keep kids safe:**

- **Kentucky Strengthening Ties and Empowering Parents (K-STEP) and the Sobriety Treatment and Recovery Team (START) programs.** Substance abuse is a major factor for over half of children removed from their homes by child protective services due to abuse or neglect, especially infants and toddlers. K-STEP and START are proven to help parents achieve sobriety while safely caring for their children.

- **Home visitation programs.** Parenting is tough, and the lack of knowledge of how to handle typical child behaviors can make it more stressful. When parents enter evidence-informed home visitation programs, like the Health Access Nurturing Development Services (HANDS) program, early in the pregnancy, the effects are dramatic—increases in adequate prenatal care, lower rates of preterm birth and low birth weight, and lowered incidence of child abuse. Continued supports for the HANDS in-home visitation program ensures this critical service is available to new parents across Kentucky.

- **Forensic services for children who experience maltreatment.** When child abuse or neglect occurs, children need access to the best care in order to recover and heal and for their case to be investigated. The forensic pediatric teams based out of Kentucky’s medical schools, as well as the 15 child advocacy centers across the commonwealth, rely on state funding to provide critical services for all children who have experienced maltreatment. An increase in funding to support these programs will allow for our most vulnerable children to get access to the services they need.

- **Safety net programs to meet families’ basic needs.** Ensure that safety net programs, including financial assistance for basic needs, such as food and health care, are not modified in ways that keep children in need of these supports from receiving them.

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Too many Kentucky children are victims of child abuse or neglect each year. Many policy and practice changes are needed to prevent child maltreatment.

Among the many commonsense policy changes that Kentucky can make, the Blueprint for Kentucky’s Children advocates for the following:

- **Modify mandated reporting law to disallow “chain of command” procedures** within public and private agencies. Keeping children safe is an adult responsibility. If maltreatment occurs, it must be reported accurately and in a timely manner directly to the proper authorities.

- **Remove the clergy-penitent privilege exemption** in the child maltreatment reporting law to ensure that if abuse is disclosed or suspected by any adult, that abuse is reported to the proper authorities.

- **Strengthen the current statute of limitations timeframes** for misdemeanor physical and sexual abuse offenses to accommodate for delayed abuse disclosure. If a child experiences abuse, research shows that many wait years, some well into adulthood, to disclose their abuse.

Suspected child abuse and neglect should be reported to the Cabinet for Health and Family Services, local law enforcement, the Kentucky State Police, or the County or Commonwealth Attorney’s Office.

Call 1-877-KY-SAFE-1

Only 38% of children who have experienced sexual abuse disclose that abuse.

**Blueprint for Kentucky’s Children Solution:**

Strengthen Kentucky’s efforts in child abuse and neglect prevention by investing in programs that keep kids safe and families together and making commonsense changes to state law that would protect kids and help kids who have experienced maltreatment heal.
Kentucky can...

**Expand child care access to best serve kids, families, and local economies**

Parents rely on safe, affordable child care to be able to work. Even before the pandemic, Kentucky parents lacked child care options, especially families of color and those in rural parts of the state. Now, with child care center closures, the fragile ecosystem of child care is under further threat.

**Regulated home-based family child care options are a much-needed option for working parents and local economies.**

In the last 10 years, Kentucky has experienced a dramatic decline in the number of family child care home providers. Planning and zoning requirements on in-home businesses have contributed to the decline. Recently, Kentucky has taken steps to encourage the growth of regulated family child care by offering start-up funds to providers.

This regulated child care option is offered in private homes to a small number of children and must meet state health and safety standards. Regulated family child care complements the care offered by centers to fill gaps in access by:

- Being located closer to families in their neighborhoods
- Serving parents with nontraditional work hours, such as healthcare workers and first responders
- Strengthening the local child care infrastructure
- Adding new providers in child care deserts

**Kentucky Child Care Facts**

HALF of Kentucky communities are child care deserts, where families have limited or no access to child care

14% of parents quit a job, did not take a job, or greatly changed their job due to problems with child care for children under 6

Child care expenses for an infant take up 36% of a single parent's income

All data are prior to the pandemic.

**Advancing Equity in the Commonwealth**

Parents may favor family child care because they can choose providers who share their cultural background, speak the family’s language, or have the ability to address the individualized needs of the children, particularly for children with special needs.

**Blueprint for Kentucky’s Children Solution:**

Amend local planning and zoning laws to allow regulated home-based family child care options to safely serve children in their neighborhoods.
Kentucky can...

Expand court discretion when determining the transfer of youth to adult court

An efficient and effective juvenile justice system holds kids accountable, helps them grow up to become contributing members of their community, and increases public safety. Just as a bicycle works best when it uses the right gear for the terrain, our juvenile justice system should use different responses for different situations. Kentucky has made strides in improving its juvenile justice system, yet our state has been stuck in a single gear when it comes to the mandatory transfer of youth to adult court for certain offenses.

Using the right gear for the situation keeps Kentucky moving forward.

When judges have the discretion to decide how to handle these cases, courts can respond more effectively. Keeping children within the juvenile justice system means:

- Speedier trials
- Most cost-effective and developmentally-appropriate responses
- Better access to rehabilitative supports and services

But Kentucky is stuck using a single gear.

The mandatory transfer of children to adult court has unnecessary consequences:

- More time incarcerated awaiting trial
- Court records are not confidential
- Higher likelihood to commit crimes in the future

Advancing Equity in the Commonwealth

Despite recent reforms to Kentucky’s system of juvenile justice, youth of color continue to be overrepresented in the youth justice system at all points, and the disparities have grown in recent years. This is due, in part, to factors like Black youth receiving harsher treatment than White youth for similar offenses, mandatory policies that focus on toughness rather than what works to keep youth from committing an offense in the future, and the compounding impact of those disparities.

Kentucky

| Race       | Transferred to Adult Court | 2017 Population
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Jefferson County

| Race       | Transferred to Adult Court | 2018 Population
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Blueprint for Kentucky’s Children Solution:

Allow juvenile court judges to use their discretion in the decision to transfer youth ages 14 and older to adult court for situations involving a firearm.
Kentucky can...

Expand local control to curb tobacco use among youth and improve health

The Kentucky General Assembly has made strides in recent years to curb tobacco use among youth by establishing a statewide tobacco-free school campus policy, increasing tobacco excise taxes, and setting the legal minimum age for purchasing tobacco products at 21.

Local governments are uniquely positioned to meet the needs of the people who live in their communities.

City and county governments see firsthand how effective tobacco control policy can improve health over time. They can respond more quickly to local needs, tailor ordinances to meet those needs, and develop effective enforcement measures. Yet, a current state law prohibits – or preempts – local jurisdictions from enacting stronger tobacco-control measures to reduce tobacco use.

Allowing local governments the option to quickly and effectively regulate the use, display, sale, and distribution of tobacco products ensures cities and counties can work to reduce health disparities in their community.

Examples of local control tools could include:

- Set standards on tobacco retailer density in neighborhoods
- Set buffer zones between tobacco retailers and schools or playgrounds
- And other options communities choose

While youth cigarette smoking has declined, e-cigarette usage among children and teens doubled from 2016-2018

Every year, smoking directly causes 8,900 deaths and leads to more than $1.9 billion in health care costs

Youth who use e-cigarettes products are up to 7 times more likely to get COVID-19 than non-e-cigarette users

Children are more likely to smoke if they live or go to school in a neighborhood with high tobacco retailer density

Tobacco retailer density is higher in urban neighborhoods, neighborhoods with higher percentage of Black residents, and low-income neighborhoods – meaning that kids who are low-income or Black are disproportionately at-risk of using tobacco

Blueprint for Kentucky’s Children Solution:

Allow city and county governments the option to regulate the use, display, sale, and distribution of tobacco products, including e-cigarettes.
Kentucky can...

**Hold parents accountable in ways that minimize the impact of parental incarceration on children**

Children need their parents to care for them and work to meet their basic needs. Unfortunately, in Kentucky 12 percent of children have had a parent separated from them due to incarceration—the 3rd highest rate in the nation.

Having a parent incarcerated can negatively impact a child’s behavioral, educational, and health outcomes. Even short stays in jail for a parent can create negative consequences for children and for the parent’s ability to financially support the family.

To minimize the impact on children, Kentucky needs a system of justice that holds people accountable while using incarceration for those who pose a flight risk or risk to public safety.

1. **Promote community-based alternatives to incarceration for parents**

   For parents who have committed a nonviolent offense and do not pose a risk to public safety, Kentucky can expand sentencing options to include community-based solutions, like substance use treatment, parenting classes, vocational training, or educational services. Holding parents accountable in these ways allows them to continue caring for their children and helps them be more successful in contributing to society. When their parents are jailed, children are more likely to be placed with a relative, family friend, or in foster care – a system that is already strained.

2. **Support parents in achieving sobriety while safely caring for their children**

   Given Kentucky’s increase in women locked up for low-level drug offenses and housed in county jails with limited access to substance use disorder treatment, expanding substance use treatment in the community would be a better intervention for mothers with drug charges and for their children.

**Blueprint for Kentucky’s Children Solution:**

Minimize the impact of parental incarceration on children by utilizing community-based alternatives to incarceration for parents who commit nonviolent offenses and releasing pregnant women with substance use disorder to treatment.
Kentucky can...

Allow paid family leave to state employees

When families welcome a new child home, whether by birth or adoption, working parents should not have to choose between caring for their loved one and risking their financial stability. Paid family leave allows families to be there for the important first moments in the lives of their children knowing their employment is secure.

Paid family leave has proven short- and long-term health and well-being benefits for families:

- Contributes to fewer low birthweight babies, fewer incidents of pediatric abusive head trauma, fewer infant deaths, and higher rates of breastfeeding
- Promotes parent-child bonding and accessing prenatal care
- Linked to children having better developmental outcomes, including fewer behavioral problems
- Improves maternal mental health
- Generates greater income stability for families

It also has proven returns on investment for employers:

- Boosts employee morale and reduces turnover
- Creates an incentive for potential employees
- Lever for increased labor force participation
- Potential savings in the state budget due to decreased reliance on public assistance programs

As a first step measure, Kentucky can allow state employees to access 12 weeks of paid family leave after the birth or adoption of a child.

Advancing Equity in the Commonwealth

Currently, Black and Hispanic workers are less likely to have access to paid family leave than people who are White. Improving access to this benefit would boost family and economic stability for all eligible families.

Paid family leave would lower health and economic disparities as families would maintain an income and have access to health care as they care for their new child.

Blueprint for Kentucky’s Children Solution:

Allow state employees to access 12 weeks of paid family leave after the birth or adoption of a child.
Kentucky can...

**Invest in services that promote student success, health, safety, and well-being**

During the pandemic, public schools have been critical in connecting families to the resources needed to continue learning, accessing meals, and receiving school-based health services and other supports. Schools will continue to be a critical pillar for students, families, and communities as COVID-19 continues to impact the Commonwealth. The pandemic has also shed light on the deep digital divide, as many parts of Kentucky lack access to quality internet service. The Kentucky General Assembly continues to demonstrate their commitment to student success and health – including clarifying statutory language in the School Safety and Resiliency Act about school-based mental health providers and including budget investments for schools to tap into the Expanded Care Services policy in 2020. Kentucky can continue to build on that progress.

Too many Kentucky kids are struggling to learn and receive the school supports and other services they need. Many policy and practice changes are needed to set kids up for success and on a path towards a brighter, healthier future.

Among the many budget investments that Kentucky can make, the Blueprint for Kentucky’s Children hopes to see the following included:

1. **Invest in infrastructure to close the digital divide so that kids can access the educational resources and telehealth services they need**

   Students need affordable and accessible internet connections to fully engage in learning, and school closings due to the COVID-19 pandemic have made internet even more crucial for succeeding in school. In addition, quality internet access is important for kids’ health as many healthcare providers are now offering telehealth services. Yet Kentucky faces a digital divide with too many families in both rural and urban areas lacking quality internet access. A gap in infrastructure impacts rural communities, and lack of affordability drives gaps in access in cities, which results in fewer families of color having strong internet connections. Kentucky can close these gaps by investing in the infrastructure needed to access more affordable, higher speed internet services.

2. **Ensure dedicated funding to implement the Expanded Care Services Policy**

   With recent federal approval, school districts are now able to bill Medicaid for health services provided to Medicaid eligible students within the school building or virtual school setting, an opportunity known as the Expanded Care Services policy. During this time of heightened social and emotional needs,
schools, healthcare providers, and other entities interacting with children and families must elevate efforts to identify signs of stress, anxiety, and depression. School districts can use this new funding stream to connect students with necessary physical and behavioral health screenings, counseling, immunizations, and preventive dental care. Kentucky can ensure school districts have the information and resources needed to leverage this opportunity to improve student health and well-being.

3. Sustain investment in Family Resource and Youth Service Centers

Family Resource and Youth Service Centers (FRYSCs) enhance student success by making referrals to health and social services, connecting families to afterschool care, supporting kinship caregivers, and more. As demonstrated in school districts across the Commonwealth during the pandemic, they are integral in providing tools for families to remove barriers to student learning. For a school to be eligible for a FRYSC, 20% or more of enrolled students must be eligible for free or reduced-price school meals. While the number of students receiving free lunch has risen, the FRYSC-per-student allocation has not kept up.

From March 16-June 30 of 2020, FRYSCs:
- Coordinated 49,000 home visits
- Supported more than 10,000 parents through support groups
- Made referrals for mental health services, food assistance, and NTI support

In 2018, 16% of 10th graders seriously considered attempting suicide.

Blueprint for Kentucky’s Children Solution:
Invest in infrastructure to close the digital divide, ensure school districts have necessary resources to implement the Expanded Care Services policy, and sustain investment in Family Resource and Youth Service Centers.
Kentucky can...

**Prioritize investments for children who have experienced abuse and neglect by supporting kinship caregivers**

When children cannot remain safely with their parents, relatives and close family friends often step up to help raise them. This situation is commonly known as kinship care—or in the case of a close family friend raising children, “fictive kin.”

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**Kinship care has substantial benefits for kids:**
- Reduce trauma often faced upon removal from their home
- Experience fewer behavioral and mental health problems and educational disruptions
- Maintain connections to culture, family traditions, and siblings

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For every 6 Kentucky kids who enter foster care, an estimated 10 additional kids enter kinship care.

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When relative and fictive kin are asked by the Department of Community-Based Services (DCBS) to take in children, it is often without notice or preparation. Undertaking the full-time responsibility for raising a child who has experienced trauma often includes physical, emotional, social, legal and financial challenges for the caregiver. **These challenges have only been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic:**

- Difficulty with Non-Traditional Instruction due to inadequate access to computers, high-quality internet, and technology support
- Mental and behavioral health challenges, such as insufficient access to services and lack of respite care
- Heightened vulnerability of elderly caregivers to falling ill with COVID-19
- Difficulty navigating complex systems, such as inconsistent guidance on visitation and case delays due to limited court hearings

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**Kentucky has two opportunities to provide commonsense resources to support kinship families:**

1. **Prevention and preservation investments** need to be focused on the front end of the child welfare system to ensure services and supports, such as respite care, are available for relative and fictive kin caregivers.

2. Kentucky provides a one-time financial support, known as the **Relative Placement Support benefit**, to purchase essential items, such as clothing, bedding, formula, and school supplies. Not all eligible caregivers are receiving this support. The commonwealth can maintain investment in this crucial support and ensure DCBS provides it to all eligible kinship caregivers.

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**Blueprint for Kentucky’s Children Solution:**

Prioritize kinship and fictive kin care by sustaining investment in critical services and financial supports.