

# Who'll Stand Up for Virginia's Children?

Is there anything like cars for agitating Virginia voters and their elected representatives? When Jim Gilmore ran for governor in the 1990s on a "no car tax" platform, he won handily. When Gov. Mark Warner confronted a budget crisis by cutting back on the hours of operation at the Department of Motor Vehicles, Virginians protested so loudly that Warner had to backpedal quickly. Then last year came the uproar over the abusive-driver fees, which numerous members of the General Assembly raced to be the first to repeal.

Well, turns out that cigarettes are another touchy subject for Virginians.

Gov. Tim Kaine's proposal to raise the cigarette tax to minimize the coming budget cuts was immediately met with howls of protests, as was his unsuccessful proposal to ban smoking in eating establishments last year.

Cars and cigarettes are such hot-button items because most of us drive and own cars, and, like those of us who smoke, we would immediately feel the impact

of higher taxes or limits on our behavior. We become unhappy. We let our elected officials know. They respond.

But who will stand up against cuts to

programs for our children, cuts whose harm will only be known farther down the road?

If, for example, a young mother loses her home visits from a nurse, or a young child can't go to preschool, or a 10th-grader drops out, who is going to complain? If a child in trouble gets sent to a juvenile prison (at a cost of more than \$100,000 per year) because the community-based programs that used to serve kids such as him lack funding, will anyone call a legislator? The answer, of course, is no.

And yet, all of these services, and others like them, are critical to Virginia's future. They are also much less expensive than what we end up paying (for public benefits and prison construction, among other costs) when we fail to deliver them.

Unfortunately, given the economic downturn, Kaine has already proposed damaging cuts to services for our children, including substantial permanent cuts to our schools and the closure of Virginia's last public mental health treatment centers for children. While these cuts are alarming enough, some legislators are threatening more and may target critical children's programs such as preschool, dropout prevention and chil-

dren's health care. We must not let this happen.

The only way to protect our children and our collective future is for the grown-ups who vote to tell the people we elect that we stand for children and that they should, too. As with a leaky roof, if we do not pay a little more now, even in these hard times, we will pay a lot more later. It is that simple. According to the most recent census data, the number of children living in poverty in Virginia is on the rise. If we want them to become self-reliant members of our society, we must find the money to continue to invest in them now.

The General Assembly session begins this week. I hope that Virginians will take a moment to tell their representatives and the governor to protect the programs serving children — even if it means we have to pay a little more for a pack of smokes or a tank of gas, or wait a while longer at the DMV.

— Andrew K. Block Jr.

*Washington*

*The writer is the legal director of the JustChildren Program of the Legal Aid Justice Center, which has offices in Charlottesville, Richmond and Petersburg.*