

## A Message from Mai Miksic, New Executive Director



Leading Children First is deeply personal for me. My family fled Laos when I was three years old, coming to the United States with hundreds of thousands of other Hmong refugees. The systems we fight for at Children First are the very same that kept my immigrant family strong, like Head Start, SNAP, and Medicaid. When I talk about opportunity and economic mobility, it's real to me. I went from being a Head Start kid

who didn't speak English to now leading one of the most powerful child advocacy groups in PA.

**I fight for every child in Pennsylvania because I see myself in them.**

But the systems that helped me thrive are under threat. The stripping of federal dollars will lead to millions of families and children losing their health insurance. The work requirements for SNAP benefits will deter enrollment and undermine the dignity of the most vulnerable and hungry Pennsylvanians. The very fabric of the support services that led to my success may no longer be available to some of the most marginalized children and families in our community.

We live in a politically fractured country right now, but there's a new majority building in the Commonwealth that doesn't belong to one party.

It is made up of the parents who show up to school board meetings, pediatricians who see what poverty does to a developing brain, employers who can't find a prepared workforce, and the teachers who work endless hours to catch the students falling through the cracks in our education system. It crosses every zip code, every faith, every sector, and every income bracket.

Right now, there are dozens of child-focused organizations that work on the many issues that affect children's lives. Children First works with many of them in our formal coalitions like the Youth Justice Alliance or PA Schools Work, and ad hoc partnerships like The Kids Campaign. But they are typically around singular issues, not an overarching approach under the umbrella of child wellbeing.

My vision for Children First is to be the organization that weaves together the long list of children's issues into a defining movement, developing new ways to unite with fellow advocacy organizations and coalitions to build our political power and rebuff politicians who try to pit us against each other for resources. If we work collectively across issues, we would be unstoppable in making children – not campaign donors or high-paid lobbyists working for corporate profit – THE defining issue for lawmakers.

**Together, we can turn a multitude of voices toward a singular demand: put children first, in every budget, in every policy, and in every vote.**

**Because every child deserves no less.**

## Advocacy in Action

### Big Progress on Paid Family Leave



Thanks to our hard work, paid family and medical leave legislation passed the PA House of Representatives. It was a Pennsylvania first and is excellent news to the four million Pennsylvania workers who would have to risk their family's financial stability to care for themselves, a new child or an elderly parent.

It was also a national first – the first time ever that paid leave legislation advanced with bipartisan support.

Only 14 states and Washington, D.C. have paid leave programs, including neighboring states Delaware, Maryland, New Jersey, New York, and Virginia. All passed on strict party lines.

Paid leave is a major component of a larger economic security agenda. A new report by Children First and the Maternity Care Coalition, [Investing in Families to Build a Stronger Economy: A Blueprint for Pennsylvania](#), details other policy areas for state lawmakers to focus on: healthcare reform, tax breaks for families, \$15 minimum wage, direct financial support, and affordable child care.

[Read the full report at www.childrenfirstpa.org/blueprintforfamilies.](http://www.childrenfirstpa.org/blueprintforfamilies)

# Advocacy in Action

## Pa'lante Fellowship Launched

Hispanic Americans are the fastest growing demographic group and a MAJOR cultural and economic force, contributing to the diversity that actually makes America great.

In Philadelphia, with nearly 70,000 children of Hispanic heritage, Hispanic families in the city are, overall, moving out of poverty and sending their children to early learning programs in high numbers, according to the Children First report, Pa'lante – It's Time to Move Forward: Improving the Lives of Philadelphia's Hispanic Children.

Children First found that, while Hispanic parents work hard to care for their children, the child-serving health care and education institutions in Philadelphia are falling short. The Pa'lante report shows that a troubling 70% of Hispanic public school students are not on grade level in Math or English; 10% of Hispanic children are uninsured; and half of all Hispanic kids likely haven't seen a dentist in the last year.

"These numbers aren't surprising or new—but what is new is the determination to move from decades of inadequate systems and resources to decades of progress," said Neli-da Sepulveda, co-author of the report. "

Moved to action by the research findings, Hispanic leaders across Philadelphia came together with Children First to build a long-term, coordinated strategy to improve outcomes for Hispanic children and teens, including Children First Board President Javier Suarez.

"Children First is proud to lead this effort in deep partnership with Hispanic leaders across the city, because no single organization can solve the complex challenges facing young Hispanic people," said Javier. "Pa'lante is about bringing our strengths together—community leadership,



data, and advocacy—to build the conditions our children need to thrive."

Their first step was to cultivate a Fellowship, a dedicated network of Hispanic stakeholders to do the reach out to community members, prioritize the Pa'lante report recommendations, and assess community strengths and resource gaps. Already the Pa'lante Fellowship is up and running with 19 members.

The next step is for Fellows to elicit feedback on the report recommendations from all sectors of the Philadelphia Hispanic community – advocates, direct service providers, educators, political leaders, and families themselves – and how to implement them. Further actions include designing an action agenda and mobilizing the community to put change into action.

**Hispanic leaders and community members across southeastern Pennsylvania are invited to join the Pa'lante effort and help shape an Action Agenda. To get involved, email [palante@childrenfirstpa.org](mailto:palante@childrenfirstpa.org) or visit [www.childrenfirstpa.org/palante](http://www.childrenfirstpa.org/palante)**

# Advocacy in Action

## Changing the City Charter to Protect Kids

For years, too many kids in Philadelphia juvenile institutions were exposed to physical, sexual, or emotional abuse by the staff responsible for their care. Without an independent, dedicated office to investigate reports of institutional abuse, parents and children did not have a trusted place to turn.

Children First worked to create the Philadelphia Office of the Youth Ombudsperson (OYO), an independent monitor of child welfare, juvenile justice, and behavioral health residential placement facilities. In 2022, then-Mayor Kenney established the OYO by Executive Order.

But by their nature, executive orders are temporary. Children's safety should not be. Philadelphia City Council unanimously agreed; Philadelphia voters will decide on the May 19, 2026, ballot if children in institutional settings will have a permanent and formally established agency dedicated to keeping them safe.

Philadelphia children in institutions need voter support on May 19th but all Pennsylvania children in juvenile institutions need more advocates to fight for a second chance in life.

**Contact Stefanie Arbutina, [stefaniea@childrenfirstpa.org](mailto:stefaniea@childrenfirstpa.org), to learn how you can get involved in the Youth Justice Alliance.**



# Policy Priorities

## Making Second Chances Possible

For the first time in a REALLY LONG TIME, juvenile justice reform is progressing in Pennsylvania. Thanks to the diligent efforts of the PA Youth Justice Alliance (Children First is a co-founder), state lawmakers are putting aside partisan differences to advance important changes for kids caught up in the juvenile system. This is an encouraging sign that advocacy efforts are working!

**Diversion, Not Detention:** Diversion programs create opportunities for children to learn from their mistakes and make amends, and get counseling, substance abuse treatment, mentoring, or other forms of support that get to the root causes of behavior.

Because each county runs its own diversion program, there are broad inconsistencies across the Commonwealth. The PA House of Representatives passed legislation (153 to 45) to standardize juvenile diversion to apply to every child with a low-level offense and expand access statewide. More than half of the Republicans voted yes.

**No Unnecessary Detention:** When a judge orders a kid to a juvenile detention program, there are too many times when a slot is not available. Instead of sending the child home to their families until something opens up, the kid sits behind bars, not getting services, not starting their rehabilitation, not meeting their obligations. It's unnecessary detention.

Legislation passed the House by a vote of 111 to 87 that will reduce unnecessary time young people spend in detention by encouraging faster placement in court-ordered programs and alternatives to incarceration. **Now onto the Senate...**



## Advocacy in Action

### Building the Next Generation of Advocates



Few know better how to improve education than the students themselves and Voices for Education, a collaboration of Children First and the Montgomery County Intermediate Unit (MCIU), is building the next generation of education advocates.

"If we didn't have Voices for Education, we would never have come together and talked about the issues that were in our school. We've all been able to speak out, but it's more than that. It's adults teaching us strategies to be able to speak to people who sometimes don't want to hear you. Having this space and learning from the adults who know what they're doing was really helpful," said program alumna Samantha Stankus, now a senior at Souderton Area School District.

This year, more than 50 students from 11 Montgomery County schools are taking part in Voices for Education, a transformational program that builds their knowledge, self-confidence and effective advocacy strategies to influence state educational policies – including adequate funding.

Throughout the full school year, students meet advocacy experts, state lawmakers, and county officials, learn the legislative process, craft persuasive policy positions, and work together on projects addressing key educational issues supported by data and research. Their efforts culminate in a full day in Harrisburg, meeting with lawmakers, holding a press conference, and sharing their powerful student voices in the fight for equitable public school funding. **To learn more about Voices for Education, contact Shirlee Howe, our Suburban Field Manager, at [shirleeh@childrenfirstpa.org](mailto:shirleeh@childrenfirstpa.org).**

## In Case You Missed It...

On Friday, May 1st, more than 450 people celebrated our outgoing executive director, Donna Cooper, as the 2026 Children First Champion for Children. The event was a rousing financial success, raising a historic \$730,000, as well as a sensational party with lots of fun and dancing. Check out the photos at [www.childrenfirstpa.org/2026celebrationpics](http://www.childrenfirstpa.org/2026celebrationpics), especially the ones featuring special guests Governors Ed Rendell, Senator Vincent Hughes, a Mummer's Band...and Elvis! There was also an amazing tribute video to Donna, and you can view that at [www.childrenfirstpa.org/donnattribution](http://www.childrenfirstpa.org/donnattribution).

Our success is directly tied to the individual and corporate supporters whose generous sponsorships will go a long way toward helping Pennsylvania children to thrive. Please review the event program book at [www.childrenfirstpa.org/2026programbook](http://www.childrenfirstpa.org/2026programbook) and if you know any of the sponsors, please tell them, "Thank you for supporting Children First."

# Donor Salute



We are very proud to have the support of Jean Smith, a retired teacher from Media who spent decades teaching English: 32 years at Upper Darby High School and 11 years at Delaware Valley Friends.

With such a passion for education, she made her first donation to Children First in 2021 when she learned of our involvement in the successful fair funding lawsuit that has now delivered nearly \$2 billion in additional funding to public schools.

A proud supporter of Children First, she increased her giving this year on the advice of her tax preparer.

Jean said, "I was happy to do so. Because my Required Minimum Distributions added to my taxable income, I was told that I could reduce my tax burden by supporting my favorite causes directly.

**I certainly would rather support the good work of this organization than send more money to Washington, DC."**

If you have a pre-tax retirement account and want to pay less in taxes while helping your favorite nonprofit, speak to your account manager or tax professional about a gift to Children First. We will appreciate it and put your money to very good use! Contact Caroline King at [carolinek@childrenfirstpa.org](mailto:carolinek@childrenfirstpa.org) with any questions.

**Be like Jean and support our work. Contact Caroline King at [carolinek@childrenfirstpa.org](mailto:carolinek@childrenfirstpa.org) or 215-680-0077.**

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# Volunteering

Like being outdoors? Like volunteering for a good cause? We may have several opportunities to help Children First at community events (tabling) in the five county region. Typical ask is two to three hours on a Saturday (or Sunday) and you'll be paired with a Children First staff member.

**If you're interested in being a volunteer at Children First, please email [Steven Fynes at info@childrenfirstpa.org](mailto:info@childrenfirstpa.org) for more information.**

