



NORTH CAROLINA CHILD FATALITY TASK FORCE Overview of 2024 Action Agenda

The [North Carolina Child Fatality Task Force \(Task Force\)](#) was created by state statute in 1991. The Task Force studies our state's data surrounding child deaths and a variety of prevention strategies, and makes annual recommendations to the governor and legislature for changes in law and policy to prevent child deaths and promote child well-being. What follows is an overview of the 2024 "Action Agenda" containing recommendations from the Task Force. Complete recommendations with a more thorough explanation are contained in the [2024 Child Fatality Task Force Annual Report](#), expected to be released later this spring.

Legislative Recommendations

Support **recurring funds to increase the number of school nurses, social workers, counselors and psychologists** to support the physical and mental health of students, and to move North Carolina toward achieving nationally recommended ratios for these professional positions in schools.

The youth mental health crisis continues to be a major area of focus for the Task Force. One in 5 North Carolina high school students has seriously considered suicide, one in ten has made a suicide attempt, while 43% of high school students report feeling sad or hopeless. The importance of school-based strategies, including having sufficient numbers of school nurses, social workers, counselors, and psychologists, has repeatedly been emphasized by state and national experts such as the U.S. Surgeon General. Yet North Carolina remains far below nationally recommended ratios for these professionals. For example, North Carolina would need four times as many school social workers as it has now to meet national recommendations. In fact, the poor status of youth mental health and poor ratios for these school professionals led to an assigned grade of "F" in mental health and "F" in school health on the North Carolina 2023 Child Health Report Card, a joint project of the NC Institute of Medicine and NC Child.

Endorse legislation that addresses **addictive algorithms in social media** that harm children.

The American Psychological Association and the U.S. Surgeon General have issued advisories on social media and youth mental health, and many other experts and organizations have formally raised concerns about the role social media is playing in the worsening status of youth mental health. Nearly all adolescents report



spending more time on social media than they intended, with one-quarter perceiving that they are "moderately" or "severely" addicted to social media. A recent survey showed that teens spend an average of 3.5 hours a day on social media, yet frequent social media use may be associated with changes in the developing brain, and kids who spend more than three hours a day on social media face double the risk of poor mental health. The Task Force is endorsing the efforts of others who are working on legislation that addresses the addictive algorithms in social media by restricting a company's use of a minor's data, thereby making social media less targeted, a measure intended to make it less addictive and less likely to show the minor harmful content.

Support **recurring funding for the NC S.A.F.E. Campaign** that educates about firearm safe storage.

Rates of firearm deaths to North Carolina kids reached horrific heights in 2020, 2021, and 2022 (the latest year that finalized death data is available). In North Carolina, firearms are the lethal means used in most youth suicides and homicides, and guns are now the leading cause of injury death for kids 17 and under. Evidence is clear that

guns are frequently not stored safely and that many kids can access a firearm, including 30% of North Carolina high school students who report that it would take them less than an hour to get and be ready to fire a loaded gun without a parent or other adult's permission. Evidence is also clear that safe storage of firearms saves lives. While progress was made in 2023 on the Task Force's longtime recommendation to launch a statewide firearm safe storage education and awareness initiative, sustained funding is needed to keep this work going. The NC S.A.F.E. (Secure All Firearms Effectively) media campaign that began in the spring of 2023 has two years of temporary funding, yet the need to educate gun owners is ongoing. There were more than 680 firearm-related deaths to North Carolina kids age 17 and under from 2013 through 2022, and recent increased rates of firearm-related injuries and deaths to kids coincided with a significant increase in gun purchases. It's critical that all gun owners understand the importance of safe storage in protecting kids of all ages.



Support legislation changing the current law addressing safe storage of firearms to protect minors to remove language from N.C.G.S. § 14-315.1(a) that says “resides in the same premises as a minor.”

As noted above, rates of firearm deaths and injuries to kids have increased significantly, and safe storage of guns saves lives. North Carolina enacted its law addressing safe storage of firearms to protect minors in 1993 and that law has remained unchanged. The current law applies only to a gun owner or one who possesses a gun who “resides in the same premises as a minor.”* The recommended change from the Task Force would no longer limit application of the law to those who reside with a minor. A person who owns or possesses a gun who does not reside in the same premises as a minor may nevertheless be in situations where, for example, a child or teen is visiting their home or riding in their car, and if their gun is not safely stored, the risks of what can happen when a child or teen accesses that gun are no different than they are for someone who resides with a child.

[*Note: the law only applies under specific circumstances as stated in [N.C.G.S. § 14-315.1](#)]

Support recurring funding for the NC Office of Violence Prevention.

Momentum has been growing in North Carolina around efforts to prevent firearm violence and other forms of violence as more and more experts and organizations have become interested in working on this issue. With this momentum comes the need to ensure coordination

and support for the variety of efforts taking place across the state. The NC Office of Violence Prevention (OVP) was established in 2023 and has a mission to “serve as North Carolina’s central hub for coordinating and supporting evidence-based public health strategies that enhance public safety, prevent violence, and foster community healing.” OVP was created via an Executive Order that expires in March of 2025. This new office plays an important role in coordinating and supporting violence prevention efforts in North Carolina and is at risk of being discontinued unless measures are taken to sustain its operation.

Support funding to enable Medicaid reimbursement of doula services throughout pregnancy and the postpartum period and to provide support services and technical assistance for the doula population.

Doulas are nonclinical trained professionals who can provide emotional, physical, and informational support during pregnancy, delivery, and after childbirth. Doula services are increasingly recognized as an effective means of improving maternal and infant health outcomes and experiences, and improving disparity gaps. North Carolina’s infant mortality rate is among the highest 10 in the nation, and disparities persist with the infant mortality rate for Black babies around 2.5 times the rate for white babies. The Task Force is making this recommendation to expand the use of doulas in North Carolina as a means of reducing our infant mortality rate and closing disparity gaps.

Support Fetal and Infant Mortality Review (FIMR) legislation

Fetal and Infant Mortality Review (FIMR) teams examine de-identified cases of fetal and infant deaths to better understand the circumstances surrounding a death so that efforts can be implemented to prevent future deaths. There are approximately 146 FIMR programs in the U.S. with just one FIMR program in North Carolina that began only recently in Guilford County. Although there are laws in North Carolina for certain other types of death review teams that address things like a team's access to and protection of information, there is no NC law that specifically addresses FIMRs. Without such a law, a FIMR team's ability to carry out its work effectively is limited. FIMR legislation in North Carolina would make it more likely that a community would consider establishing a FIMR team and would enable them to more fully exercise best practices in conducting their work effectively.



Support growth and expansion of investments in the early child care system, including increases for child care subsidies.

The child care business model cannot sustain itself and is at great risk of falling into further crisis without significant state investments. While temporary federal funds have been helping to sustain an already struggling system in North Carolina, those funds will expire in June 2024. The Task Force is supporting growth and expansion of investments in the early child care system because ensuring that families have access to affordable, quality early care is a recognized strategy in preventing child abuse, neglect, and even death, and is important for supporting overall child and family well-being. Child care teachers earn so little that many can't meet basic needs and lack health insurance, so they take other jobs and centers are challenged to find teachers and stay open; yet parents cannot afford to pay more for care. While there are child care subsidies to help eligible families afford child care, only a fraction of eligible North Carolina families are actually getting child care subsidies, as there is not enough subsidy funding to meet the need. The child care crisis is also an economic problem when too many parents are unable to fully participate in the workforce or advance their careers due to child care challenges. Quality early care positively impacts the brain development of young children, setting them up for better outcomes later in life, and investments in early care and learning have a high rate of economic return.

Administrative Efforts

This year's Action Agenda also includes three items that are designated as "administrative" efforts, which indicate the Task Force's intention to further study or collaborate on an issue that does not at the present involve a legislative recommendation. Three topics that involve administrative efforts for further study and/or collaboration this year include:

- **Congenital syphilis:** Further study and collaboration on this topic will take place due to an increase in cases of congenital syphilis, including an increase in stillbirths and infant deaths related to congenital syphilis.
- **Paid family leave insurance:** Access to paid family & medical leave is a recognized strategy for supporting child and family well-being and preventing child abuse and neglect, and the Task Force intends to study paid family leave insurance programs further, including the perspective of North Carolina employers.
- **Fentanyl-related deaths to children and adolescents:** Further study and collaboration on this issue will take place due to an increase in fentanyl-related deaths to children and adolescents.

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For more information on the Child Fatality Task Force visit:
www.ncleg.gov/DocumentSites/Committees/NCCFTF/Homepage/index.html