



## Executive Summary

### Building a Strong Foundation for Children Report

*Among the most accomplished and fabled tribes of Africa, no tribe was considered to have warriors more fearsome or more intelligent than the mighty Masai. It is perhaps surprising, then, to learn the traditional greeting that passed between Masai warriors. “Kasserian ingera,” one would say to another. It means, “And how are the children?” . . . Even warriors with no children of their own would always give the traditional answer, “All the children are well,” meaning that peace and safety prevail, that the priorities of protecting the young and powerless are in place, that the society has not forgotten its reason for being, its proper functions and responsibilities.*

*Attributed to a speech by Reverend Patrick O’Neill Printed in Father Times, Minneapolis, MN*

#### Why This Report, Why Now

The well-being of our youngest citizens is critically important to the long-term well-being of the community. Much like the old story of “the canary in the coal mine,” indicators about children—the status of their families and neighborhoods, their health, economic security and educational success—tell a story of how well a community is succeeding. When communities struggle, families struggle; when families struggle, children struggle. When children thrive, the community is thriving.

Our community is at a crossroads. The populations of the cities of Hampton and Newport News are becoming poorer and less educated than they used to be, as well as poorer and less educated than the rest of the Peninsula region. Currently over 18,000 children on the Peninsula live in poverty. That’s eighteen thousand people, from birth to age seventeen, living below the official poverty threshold. If Darling Stadium in Hampton and Todd Stadium in Newport News were filled with a child in every seat, that would represent the number of local children in families lacking the resources to meet their basic needs.

The Peninsula Community Foundation believes that our communities prosper and our quality of life improves in lockstep with the skills and talents of our citizens. But the skills and talents of our citizens are

a direct result of the investment made in their early development. Research consistently demonstrates that a child's experiences in the first five years of life can influence and predict his or her success in school and later in life.

Working closely with Smart Beginnings, a local nonprofit dedicated to early child development on the Peninsula, the Foundation is committed to answering the question of how to build a strong foundation for local children. To do this, everyone must play an important role because early childhood development is a community issue. The policies implemented, the networks operating, the institutions that act on a child's behalf, and the citizens willing to be part of the solution, all are part of creating effective systems of support.

How are the children of Hampton and Newport News? This report, *Building a Strong Foundation for Children*, offers a first step to answering that complex question. The Annie E Casey Foundation, in an attempt to define the well-being of children, has identified four different, but intricately connected, issues that influence the likelihood that every child enters school ready for success and grows into a well-educated, economically secure, productive and healthy adult. Our data is collected into these four areas—Families and Communities, Health, Economic Well-being, and Education—thus creating a snapshot of how our children are doing.

The report contains some good news. An abundance of agencies and organizations are working hard to support children and families, and multiple government programs are in place to support those in need. In particular, the Virginia Preschool Initiative is achieving significant results in preparing children who are at risk for educational failure to be ready for Kindergarten. Also, many of the individual indicators, such as reduction in teen pregnancy and increases in early pre-natal care have shown improvement over the years.

But the bad news is: the efforts are not adding up. The combined effect of positive gains is not greater than the parts—it's not "moving the needle" in the right direction. Numerous indicators are worsening. Those 18,000 children below the federally-established poverty level are joined by an equal number of children who live below 200 percent of the poverty threshold and are considered economically disadvantaged because their family's income, according to many studies, is not enough to meet basic food, housing, utilities, medical, child care and transportation costs. There is a sizeable performance gap between the poor and not-poor students. Child care options are limited. Almost half of the children are growing up without the benefit of two parents in the home. Many of these trends are escalating, particularly in specific neighborhoods, and they threaten the long-term growth and success of the community.

The report provides a statistical portrait to inform community conversations, guide planning efforts, and serve as a benchmark by which to assess future efforts. Public and private sector individuals, nonprofit and faith-based organizations, community organizations, government and education officials and business and philanthropic leaders can use the data to better understand the complex social problems facing families. It is the hope of the Peninsula Community Foundation that the information will be used to determine local priorities for action.

Citizens of the Virginia Peninsula have difficult decisions ahead. How do we foster neighborhoods and communities that support families? How do we assist the people with few choices so they can raise healthy children who live as productive members of the community? How do we ensure an ongoing and intentional investment in our children? How do we build on our current successes and experience while championing bold new experiments?

When our warriors ask, "And how are the children," what will we answer?

## “How Are the Children?”

*Learning from our Data*

Children are the future of our community—children, that is, who are ready for school and ready for life. Scientific research tells us that healthy early child development is a foundation for a prosperous and sustainable society. Our local data tells us that creating a strong foundation for our children is paramount to our success as a community.

The concerns that led Peninsula Community Foundation to undertake this data collection project—concerns about the increasing poverty in Newport News and Hampton and the accompanying risks to our children and families—were confirmed in our research. In spite of extensive efforts by local governmental and non-governmental organizations, positive gains occurring in specific indicators are not adding up to improved conditions for many children and families on the Peninsula.

From the question “How are the children of the Peninsula?” five critical issues arose from the indicators of childhood well-being. While all the indicators in this report point to important issues, we believe these five bear emphasizing. These critical issues, so intricately connected, work together to ensure that every child starts school prepared to succeed. They include things our community is doing well that we need to do more of, as well as key indicators that must be addressed if we hope to “move the needle” toward healthy and thriving children.

### Critical Issue #1: Poverty

There is a strong link between poverty status at birth and future outcomes. An overwhelming body of evidence demonstrates that student performance is negatively affected by poverty. Children in poor families (with incomes below the federal poverty level) and those in low-income households (with incomes between 100 and 200 percent of the poverty level) are less likely to receive support for early learning at home and up to ten times less likely to attend quality early education programs.

- Almost one in three Hampton and Newport News children aged birth to four live in poverty.
- Economically disadvantaged students comprise over 60 percent of the public school student population in Hampton and Newport News. Today the majority of our school kids come from financially stressed homes.
- Students in all Hampton Roads school districts from disadvantaged homes score below those from affluent families.
- Hampton and Newport News have nine neighborhoods with over 30 percent poverty. These neighborhoods have a multitude of other social issues and have large numbers of school-age youth.

### Critical Issue #2: Health

Giving every child a healthy start and creating a level playing field can produce substantial benefits for the child, family and community. Lack of access to health care is a specific component of Issue # 1: Poverty, and has an identified relationship to school success.

- Together, Hampton and Newport News have 31 census tracts that are officially designated as “Medically Underserved.” Medically underserved areas are prone to having high numbers of:
  - infant mortality
  - developmental delays
  - low birth weights
  - low prenatal care
  - low childhood immunizations
  - low levels of health insurance
- Forty-seven percent of all births in Hampton and Newport News are to single mothers. Growing up in families with one parent significantly increases the chances of poverty and stress, which can lead to dropping out of school.

### Critical Issue #3: Services for Families

Government programs like TANF, VIEW, WIC and SNAP are designed to support families in poverty to become self-sufficient. The families who participate in these programs are at greatest risk for not meeting their family’s basic needs, and their children are the most vulnerable.

- In Hampton and Newport News, 51 percent of children live in homes that receive SNAP benefits (“food stamps”) and 60 percent of school-age children rely on free and reduced lunch. Today the majority of our school kids come from financially stressed homes.
- In spite of increasing poverty levels, numbers of families participating in WIC services is decreasing, and the program is dramatically underutilized.
- For working parents, maintaining eligibility for federal programs can be difficult; with a slight change in income, a family can lose eligibility.
- Non-governmental programs throughout the community are fragmented and under-resourced.
- The combined efforts of all of these programs often move families in the right direction but seldom result in the goal of self-sufficiency.

### Critical Issue #4: Early Childhood Education

School readiness provides a powerful framework for improving educational outcomes, especially for marginalized children. According to the January 2015 *Economics of Early Childhood Investments* report released by the office of the President, “expanding early learning initiatives would provide benefits to society of roughly \$8.60 for every \$1.00 spent, about half of which comes from increased earnings for children when they grow up.”

- Seventy percent of Hampton and Newport News four-year-olds attend a preschool program, including Virginia Preschool Initiative, Head Start and private programs.
- Four-year-old public preschool students in Hampton and Newport News outperform their peers who did not attend preschool, as measured up through the fourth grade, and their incidence of special education placement is significantly diminished.
- Over time, as the number of four-year-olds attending public preschool has increased, performance on PALS, a literacy screening test, has improved.
- The number of private preschool programs has diminished as public programs within the schools have expanded.
- There remains an achievement gap between economically disadvantaged and non-economically disadvantaged students.

## Critical Issue #5: Child Care

The care of children is essential for working families. Not only is the safety and nurturing essential for children, there is mounting evidence that the quality of these early experiences affect learning and school success.

- Seventy percent of Hampton and Newport News families with children aged five and under need childcare because all adults in the family work.
- Access to childcare subsidies is decreasing at the same time the need for assistance is increasing.
- Repeated studies show that 25 percent of families use center-based services to meet their childcare needs. The remaining children are cared for at home or in individual homes throughout the community, and receive varying degrees of quality care and early education.
- The number of local childcare providers has shrunk by 18 percent in the last six years.
- Early Head Start serves 32 children who are 36 months old or less. If the program went to scale, it would serve 3,600 children.
- Infant care fees average \$10,000 annually. Childcare fees average \$7,800.

## A Call to Action

*How do we heed the message that all the children are not well?*

The data in this report collected by the Peninsula Community Foundation, and the critical issues it raises, calls for a new sense of urgency by the cities of Hampton and Newport News. We must act as

a community to set a greater priority on all our children. We must act now to ensure them a better beginning and a brighter future.

There is no single or simple answer for how to build a strong foundation for children. Multiple strategies and supports are required to reduce the risks children face as well as to strengthen the factors that protect them from those risks. The responsibility cannot lie solely with parents, with schools, with government, or with any single agency or professional group.

In other words, a community must come together—to talk, to problem-solve, to imagine how to build the foundation together. The first step is to have the conversation.

- What does our data tell us about the current impact of those critical issues on local children and families?
- How can we build on our local wisdom to identify our successes, our current assets and resources?
- What can we learn from the extensive national research, and how can we adapt the proven models for early childhood to our local needs?
- Which outcomes should be prioritized that will increase the number of children who have a healthy start in life, have equal access to quality early childhood experiences, and arrive at kindergarten ready and able to succeed?
- Which investments must be made that build on our existing programs, supports, networks and policies, and expand what is working to a scale that can actually effect change.
- How do we act intentionally and collaboratively to create a system that supports all children and families?

This is difficult work. The Peninsula Community Foundation invites you to be part of the conversation. The well-being of the Peninsula's children depend on it. The future of our community is at stake.