

Testimony on the Oregon Healthy Kids Program (HB 2201)

Cathy Kaufmann, M.S.W., Policy & Communication Director, Children First for Oregon
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the Senate Committee on Health Policy and Public Affairs
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Representative Greenlick, Senator Monnes-Anderson, members of the House and Senate Health Care Committees, thank you for the opportunity to discuss the need for and importance of the Oregon Healthy Kids Program.

Children First for Oregon is a widely respected nonprofit, nonpartisan child advocacy organization dedicated to making Oregon a place where all children thrive. At minimum, we believe every child in this state has a right to be healthy, safe and secure. We educate and engage Oregonians to promote programs and policies that get results for kids.

We support House Bill 2201 because it will address a very pressing issue facing Oregon: the increasing number of children in our state without access to affordable, comprehensive health care.

Currently, in Oregon, about 1 in 8 children – just over 12% – do not have health insurance. Uninsured children are ten times more likely than insured children to miss out on needed medical care. Children without health insurance are more likely to suffer from earaches, sore throats and asthma – common childhood illnesses that force students to miss school and hamper educational success. Health needs that go unmet significantly impact a child's well-being and reduce his or her ability to learn and grow into a successful adult.

Children who don't receive preventive or early health care are more likely to end up in emergency rooms or require more expensive treatments in the long run. This results in increased costs to everyone because hospitals and insurers pass on these costs to the insured through higher premiums. One study shows that the average increase in family insurance premiums to pay for the cost of the uninsured is currently estimated to be \$1,128 in Oregon, a rate 22 percent higher than the average increase for the nation. In addition, a child without health insurance can put a significant financial strain on a family when a child becomes ill or injured. Enormous medical debt is a rapidly growing problem in Oregon, one that can be helped by making sure more families have access to health insurance for their children.

Yesterday, Children First released its 2006 County Data Book. This year's book examines a further troubling concern about the health of Oregon's children: the stark health disparities that exist among them. Not only are too many children in the state without access to care, but Children who live in low-income families, belong to a racial or ethnic minority, have immigrant parents or live in rural areas face an even greater risk for poor health.

The health disparities that exist are just one more reason why Oregon needs to set politics aside, and put the health of children first this legislative session. We must make smart investments now or pay later in even higher health care costs and unhealthy communities

We must remember that the current health of our children determines the future health of our state. We cannot afford to wait any longer. We must realize that the cost of passing the Oregon Healthy Kids Program pales in comparison to the social, moral and fiscal cost of not passing it.

Thank you all for your commitment to the health of Oregon's children and future of our state. We hope the entire committee will support House Bill 2201.

Thank you.