

# Group: Oregon shortchanges troubled teens

PORTLAND (AP) — A children's advocacy group has flunked the state for its care of troubled teen-agers and given it only an average grade for its investment in families and child safety.

Children First for Oregon has tracked the treatment of children and families for eight years in an attempt to improve services for all children.

Each year, the watchdog group studies data and grades the state on areas such as childhood poverty, prenatal care and child abuse and neglect.

This year, the group gave the state B's in education and early childhood, C's for investment in families and child safety, and an F in dealing with teens.

Pam Patton, director of government relations at Morrison Center Child and Families Services, a child and family organization, said adults turn away from teens in trouble out of fear and ignorance.

"We see teen-agers as aggressive and violent," she said. "We don't help them, and they get worse and worse until all we want to do is

lock them up."

Teens who don't come under the jurisdiction of the state's child welfare agency, don't have serious mental illness and have not committed a crime are blocked from the help they need, Patton said.

Paul Bellatty, an analyst with Portland State University's Child Welfare Partnership, said older youths are the lowest priority for the State Office for Services to Children and Families, yet teens from 13 to 17 make up 8 percent of the agency's caseload.

But the state's financing is more effective aimed at the youngest children, said Senate Majority Leader Gene Derfler, R-Salem.

"I still think we're spending too much money on late teen-agers," he said. "If you don't address the problem early on, the dollars you spend are not effective. If a teen-ager is stealing cars and beating people up, I'm not sure you'll be able to turn him around for the rest of his life. It's very difficult to turn that kid around at that age."

Others say the state ought to adequately finance programs for children of all ages.

By keeping youths away from services, "we're doing a real disservice not only to kids but to our communities," said Charlotte Cook, who serves on a citizen board that reviews cases that go through the Oregon Youth Authority.

Most agencies serve only dangerous or immediately endangered youths.

Organizations that serve all youths are swamped and serve about 20 percent of those who need help.

Steve Olsen, supervisor of Harry's Mother, a southeast Portland shelter, spent Wednesday scrambling to help a mother whose daughter was halfway through private treatment for drug and emotional problems when the family's insurance ran out.

The mother called all kinds of programs to see whether they would help her daughter. Olsen scheduled an interview at a 10-bed shelter, but there are no guarantees.

"Parents come in with a kid who began tearing up the house at age 10, and now the kid's 15, and they say, 'God, I've been trying to get services for five years,'" Olsen said.