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Fighting child poverty

Helping low-income families will help kids

Children below the age of 6 make up the most poverty-stricken age group in Oregon; more than 20 percent are poor. Of course, it's not the children themselves who are poor, it's their families — usually single mothers. And for single mothers, poverty is partially the result of the burden of caring for babies, toddlers and preschoolers. Understanding the self-reinforcing nature of poverty among children and mothers is the first step toward ending it.

President Clinton said in his State of the Union speech last week that the nation should resolve to ensure that "no child will be raised in poverty." For that goal to be realized, every parent will need a job that pays enough to keep his or her family above the poverty line — currently \$13,880 a year for a family of three — and assistance in meeting the costs of child care, health care and other expenses that drag working people into poverty.

Escaping poverty is fairly easy for people without family responsibilities. Oregon's minimum wage of \$6.50 an hour is more than enough to lift a single person out of poverty. That helps explain why the poverty rate among single people and married people without children is low. Even married people with children are unlikely to be poor, because at least one partner is able to pursue full-time employment.

Poverty is mainly a problem for single people with kids. Thirty percent of Oregon households consisting of single women with children are poor. The rate for single men with children is just under 20 percent. Single parents struggle with the cost and availability of child care, health care, transportation, housing and other essentials, particularly when their children are young. And it is when children are young that they are most in need of educational stimulus, good nutrition and emotional security — things that families living in poverty may be unable to provide.

Children First for Oregon, a child-welfare advocacy group, last week released its annual county-by-county report on children's well-being. In Lane County between 1996 and '98, nearly 30 percent of children were born to unmarried mothers, meaning they were born in the type of household that is statistically most likely to be poor. The parents of more than 1,400 Lane County children divorced in 1998, and divorce is often a ticket to

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Fighting poverty in Lane County, in Oregon and across the nation is largely a matter of helping single parents and their children. In recent years the nation has changed its approach to this challenge by scrapping traditional welfare programs in favor of a system that requires parents to find work.

Oregon has done more than most other states to provide child care assistance, health insurance and food stamps as parents, primarily mothers, make the transition from welfare to work. Even so, though most people in Oregon's welfare-to-work program say their lives have improved as a result of having entered the work force, most remain below the poverty line, 42 percent seek assistance from food banks and 25 percent say they are sometimes forced to skip meals. These findings come from a survey by the University of Oregon's Center for the Study of Women in Society. The children in these families endure the same stresses.

In his speech last week President Clinton offered a number of proposals to help such families, including an expansion of the earned income tax credit and a refundable child care tax credit for lower income people. These are modest measures that would provide bigger tax refunds but would do little to assist with the week-to-week problem of supporting a family on a small paycheck. Clinton's proposed \$1 per hour increase in the minimum wage would immediately benefit workers at the bottom of the pay scale, but Oregon's minimum wage is already \$1.35 an hour higher than the federal rate.

Poverty has always seemed an intractable problem, but focusing on children's well-being is a good way to begin addressing it. Clinton's goal of ensuring that no American child lives in poverty is ambitious, but the alternative is to accept child poverty as a permanent feature of the social landscape. Americans should not accept that.