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Oregon must focus more on programs for needy children

By Anne Stone
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Today, one of four children in Oregon is at risk.

What does that mean for our future and why should Oregonians care? Simply put, even if you don't agree that normally we have an obligation to reach out to those less fortunate, our economic future will be determined by how quickly we move children from risk to success. It has been estimated that for every dollar spent on quality preschool, more than \$7 are saved in averted special education, crime, welfare and other costs.

Each January, Children First for Oregon, a leading children's advocacy organization, produces a County Data Book on the status of children in Oregon.

The 1999 County Data Book is about early childhood well-being. It tells a story of the challenge to Oregon's communities to meet the needs of Oregon's young children, particularly the 25 percent of children who face significant risk in their lives every day.

But how does Oregon meet the goal of creating community capacity for early childhood well-being? How do we get families what they need when they need it? We meet this quest by understanding the components of early childhood well-being and the challenges within them.

First, we recognize that parents offer the package of success for meeting the fundamentals of family well-being. Family life is how children learn about their world. A secure family offers the best chance for cognitive growth, physical development, and emotional well-

being for children. The best asset for a child is a supportive, stable and loving parent.

The fundamentals of family well-being in Oregon are challenged, however. A total of 16 percent of children are estimated to live in poverty in Oregon. Across the state poverty among children ranges from 11 to 26 percent. Nearly a third of babies are born to unmarried mothers and a fifth of babies are born to mothers with less than 12 years of education.

Infant mortality rate up in Yamhill County

The infant mortality rate in Yamhill County jumped to 9.2 deaths per 1,000 births, up from 5.5 deaths, according to a report released by Children First for Oregon.

The number of deaths in children ages 1 to 14 also increased as did the number of youngsters who were abused or neglected, the report said.

Teen arrests and the number of teens who committed suicide dropped.

Second, we know that the key to child care and early education is access. All interaction with parents and providers has a lasting impact on a child's capacity to learn and grow.

But access to quality care is a critical challenge in Oregon. Thirty-six percent of our children under 13 spend at least a portion of their week in paid child care. And, because of limited capacity, only 47 percent of children eligible for Oregon Head Start pre-kin-

dergarten are in the program.

Third, we acknowledge that every child needs the access and opportunity for good health care. Prenatal care, regular checkups and immunizations are critical investments in the good health care of children.

The facts demonstrate, however, that not every child in Oregon has the access and opportunity for good health care. Just 81 percent of two year olds were up to date on their immunizations in 1998. And 16 percent of babies born between 1996 and 1998 in Oregon were born to mothers who smoked during pregnancy. Five percent of pregnant women between 1996 and 1998 received late or no prenatal care in Oregon.

We know that Oregon's ability to meet its capacity for early childhood well-being is based on its willingness to make community investments. Communities can and do invest in children in innovative ways. Local parks offer art and play classes for pre-schoolers. Hospitals provide support groups for new mothers. Health care outreach clinics help immunize children. Private businesses support employee child care. Libraries offer story times for children of every age.

Unfortunately, Oregon's community investments have not met the challenge. Healthy Start, a model program of screening and home visitations for new parents exists in only 15 of Oregon's 36 counties while 14 percent of our citizens, nearly 500,000 Oregonians, have access to only substandard libraries.

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