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State receives C grade for child well-being

Group says Oregon shows no improvement in lessening poverty

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Of the News-Register

This was supposed to be a grand year — the year Oregon met its self-imposed goals for child well-being.

But judging by the 1999 results, it isn't going to make it.

Children First for Oregon, a non-profit group that advocates for children, released its annual report this month. It gave the state a "C" grade for overall child well-being in 1999, and grades ranging from "D," to "B," in individual categories.

The group acknowledged that the state benchmark for child well-being, first set in 1993, has since been revised and the timelines expanded. But the group pointed out that the state has actually gotten worse in some areas.

Executive Director Marie Hoeven said research shows the state has shown no improvement in lessening

the statistics for childhood poverty — hunger, teen-age dropouts and juvenile arrests — in 10 years.

"We need to invest smarter for Oregon's children to make this the last report card in which Oregon receives merely an average grade for child well-being," she said.

Childhood poverty has grown from 14 percent in 1990 to 16 percent in 1999. Ten percent of children lack health insurance.

The rate of uninsured children is on the rise for the first time since before 1990, according to Children First. And early prenatal care has shown little progress in the last decade, according to the group, leaving it far short of the 2000 goal.

The state has done particularly poorly by its teen-agers according to the group, which awarded it a D-, up from the F it gave the state in 1998.

The high school dropout rate has risen steadily for the last five years, it said, and self-reported substance abuse among eighth-graders, though it has dropped in the last two years, is higher than it was in 1990.

Infant mortality, by contrast, has dropped significantly in the last 10 years. The state actually exceeded its goal of holding infant deaths to no more than 6 per 1,000 babies in 1999.

But child abuse and neglect are high, according to the group. Nearly one of every 80 children in the state is a known victim of abuse or neglect.

Although suicides continue to be the second leading cause of death among children aged 10 to 17, the attempted suicide rate is at its lowest since 1990, according to Children First. And teen pregnancy declined for the third consecutive year.

For a complete report card listing, see the group's website at www.childrenfirstfororegon.org.