

'CHILDREN FIRST' REPORT

As Oregon faces a recession, families struggle to get by

Low income families across Oregon have difficulty providing basic food and shelter for their children, according to Oregon's leading statewide child advocacy group, Children First for Oregon (CFFO). The 2001 County Data Book: Growing Up in Oregon, released last month, reports data on the economic stability and quality of family life in every county in Oregon.

"We found that even after ten years of general economic prosperity too many children across Oregon are growing up poor, hungry or homeless," said CFFO executive director Marie Hoeven.

In Hood River County, children make up 5,709 of 20,411 residents; of those, 20 percent are found to be living in poverty. (\$17,650. income for a family of four.)

Here are sample statistics for Hood River County, from the Children First report (2000 figures):

- Abuse or neglect: 18 of 1,000 children under 17 were confirmed victims of abuse or neglect, compared to 13 of 1,000 statewide;

- Mothers who smoke: the mother smoked during pregnancy in 11 of 1,000 families with children born in 2000, compared to the state average of 14 per 1,000.

- Babies born to unwed mothers: Hood River County, 31 percent of families with babies born in 2000; statewide, 30 percent.

The prosperity of the 1990s resulted in some improvements in child well being, but it did not provide many families with lasting financial stability. As the economy continues to decline more stress will be put on our system of supports. "Our state needs to be ready to help families who are losing their jobs," said Hoeven.

In each of Oregon's counties, the Children First Data Book re-

veals that many families are having difficulty maintaining financial stability:

- 42 percent of children in Oregon live in families with incomes below or near the poverty level (the Federal Poverty Level for a family of four is an income of less than \$17,630. CFFO considers a family of four near poverty if they make between 100 percent and 200 percent of the Federal Poverty Level);

- 28 percent of Oregon's families spend more than 30% of their income on housing;

- 34 percent of the state's public school children need help paying for school lunch or breakfast;

- 45 percent of adults in families with children have only a high school education or less;

- Nearly 3,000 kids were homeless on a given night in 2000. Low income working families do have some options for improving their financial stability, including taking advantage of state and federal tax credits.

"The refundable federal Earned Income Tax Credit has helped pull thousands of families out of poverty in Oregon," said Liz Smith CFFO policy director. Businesses can help their employees by letting them know about the federal EITC, child care tax credits, the Children's Health Insurance Program and other services that can help lower income families.

There are also many ways families of any income can improve the quality of their family life. "We know that family relationships can make a big difference to a child's well being, and the data show that most parents in Oregon do have positive relationships with their children," said CFFO executive director Marie Hoeven. "But we also found that there are some children who are at elevated risk for drug and alcohol abuse, delinquency, teen pregnancy, violent behavior and

high school drop out because of their negative relationships with their family and community."

A second area of focus in Growing up in Oregon reports quality of family life data based on a survey of eighth graders across Oregon:

- 31 percent are at excessive risk because of close contact with a family member or an adult who engages in substance abuse or criminal activities;

- 7 percent are at excessive risk because their families set unclear rules and do not adequately monitor their behavior;

- 12 percent have excessive risk because their families frequently yell and argue;

- 7 percent are at excessive risk because their parents have permissive attitudes about drugs, alcohol, and cigarettes. "Most adults know that setting clear rules and providing positive examples play an important role in helping children to make good decisions," said Hoeven. "It is troubling then that some children report that their parents or community do not provide the appropriate guidance they need. Adults need to remember their importance in a child's life."

Children First's findings were released as the state is about to begin a special budget cutting session. "Most of the data we have on family well being comes from the year 2000 — during the height of the economic boom — yet even then we had hungry and homeless kids in Oregon," said CFFO policy director Liz Smith. As Oregon faces an economic recession, the legislature is planning to make deep cuts in services to vulnerable families. "The state didn't prepare for a rainy day, and now it's raining. Our state needs to invest in better strategies for helping families to achieve financial stability and build stronger relationships with their children," said Smith.

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