

Group: Financial instability hurts Oregon's children

PORTLAND (AP) — A child advocacy group has given Oregon its highest ranking ever for child welfare despite serious concerns about low-income families that might have trouble securing food, quality childcare and affordable housing for their children.

According to the nonprofit Children First, in the last decade the state and local communities have made significant progress in addressing teen pregnancy, infant health, drug use and youth crime. The group gave Oregon an overall B-plus for these improvements.

But the group's latest report indicates families are at higher risk of experiencing hunger and taking care of basics like childcare and housing.

"If you look at any average family of any income they have to worry about their kids' health, their education development, childcare, the family's capacity to provide a home, food, the basics, and sometimes more," said Marie Hoeven, executive director of Children First. "And they are all interrelated. So when one area is in trouble it taxes all the other areas."

The picture might worsen due to Oregon's unemployment rate — which this year wavered between 7 and 8 percent — and state budget cuts. The Legislature in the last special session cut funding for preschool expansion, mental health and drug services for youth and funding for the Oregon Youth Conservation Corps.

"A decline in the economic category is a recipe for worsening health outcomes," Hoeven said. "We will lose kids, they will fall off the path."

Hoeven said managers of programs which serve families are nervous about future funding.

Jean Phelps, executive director of a relief nursery in Eugene that takes care of young children removed from abusive environments, said future state budget cuts are bound to damage families and children in them.

"We have seen some cuts locally, but so far, from the state level, we have funding through December. Then all the seven nurseries in the state face a very precarious future," she said.

Since Children First issued its first report in 1990, it has seen significant improvement in certain areas, such as the teen pregnancy rate and infant birth weight.

The teen pregnancy rate has dropped by 20 out of every 1,000 over the last 12 years. Oregon also has the one of the lowest low-birth weight rates in the nation.

Children First gave ratings this year of B-plus to the categories of health, youth development and education and safety. It assigned a C to early child care and education.

But it only takes one category, Hoeven said, to start bringing down the rest, and financial stability received a D on the report card.

Based on information from various state and federal agencies and the 2000 Census, the group determined that 14 percent of the state's children under 18 live in poverty. Poverty was defined as a family of four which made less than \$17,050.

They also discovered 76 percent of low-income households in Oregon don't have affordable housing.