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'Dismal picture of families' finances'

Children First annual report card shows Oregon's families are struggling to afford food, housing, health and childcare

Oregon has earned a failing "D" grade in family financial stability in an advocacy group's report card on the status of the state's children.

In the report issued by Children First for Oregon, a nonprofit policy voice for children, Oregon's high unemployment rate, lack of affordable housing, number of children living in poverty, and other indicators paint a dismal picture of family financial health.

"We could fill the Rose Garden Arena six times over with the number of Oregon children living in poverty," said Marie Hoeven, the executive director of Children First.

"The parents of 120,000 children in Oregon are struggling to cover even the basic costs of food and shelter for their families.

"Oregon has a responsibility to help these children and support their families as they work to provide a nurturing, stable environment."

POINT OF VIEW Children First for Oregon

The effects of poverty can be subtle, yet enormously destructive, Hoeven reported.

Poverty often robs children of opportunities to have some of the most enriching childhood experiences and adds enormous stress to family life.

"For many children, common childhood activities, like getting new back-to-school clothes, talking music lessons, or playing a sport are unreachable dreams," Hoeven said.

"Their lives and the lives of their families are burdened with uncertainty and worrying."

Much more can be done to help families achieve financial security, according to Children First's policy director, Liz Smith.

"Oregon can use federal dollars to provide summer and after school meals to children in communities with the highest need," she said.

"We can provide tax relief to working poor

families. We can increase the number of children enrolled in health insurance. We can ensure parents can find affordable, quality child care, and we can make better investments in education."

Despite poor grades for its performance in the Early Care and Education and Family Economic Stability categories, Oregon maintained a "B-" grade because of strong results in other categories assessed by the organization.

Hoeven said that the data show that the state can make improvements.

She credits research-based investments in prevention and health care programs for part of the strong results in the Health, Youth Development and Education and Safety categories.

"In the last 10 years, smart public and private investments in effective programs have helped more families find affordable health insurance for their children," she said.

"Fewer teens are pregnant and more mothers receive prenatal care. Thoughtfully planned programs have dramatically decreased the number of teenagers who smoke."

The challenge is now to find similar strategies to help strengthen family financial stability.

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