

Oregon earns 'D' grade in family financial stability

Annual report card shows families are struggling to afford food, housing, more

Oregon earned a failing "D" grade in family financial stability in the annual Report Card on the Status of Children. In the report issued by Children First for Oregon, a non-profit 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. The parents of 120,000 children in Oregon are struggling to cover even the basic costs of food and shelter for their families," said Marie Hoeven, executive director of Children First.

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

The effects of poverty can be subtle, yet enormously destructive. 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, taking music lessons or playing a sport are unreachable dreams.

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

Much more can be done to help families achieve financial security, says 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.

"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,

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— Marie Hoeven,
executive director
of Children First

quality child care and we can make better investments in education" said Smith.

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. Marie Hoeven says that the data show that the state can make improvements. Hoeven 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. 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.

Improving Trends in Child Well Being:

- Far fewer girls ages 15-17 are pregnant than a decade ago.
- Confirmed cases of abuse and neglect have declined for the last several years.
- Incidents of violent crime have dropped during the last seven years.
- Juvenile arrests declined

by nearly 20 percent during the last decade.

- 3rd grade reading and math proficiency scores improved over the last several years.
- The high school dropout rate declined for the third straight year.
- Cigarette and drug use dropped.

Worsening Trends in Child Well-Being:

- Affordable housing for low-income families and individuals is harder to find.
- More families are at risk of hunger.
- Oregon's unemployment rate is at its highest level in eight years.
- Affordable childcare for low-income families is at its lowest point in a decade.
- Youth alcohol use remains high with nearly 25 percent of 8th graders reporting drinking.
- More teens attempted suicide than any time in the last five years.

Executive director Hoeven said that progress has been made, but there is still much more to be done to help all children succeed in Oregon. "By setting goals for itself, the state has said—this is what we are working toward, this is where we should be. But we have a long way to go before we are able to make those promises come true.

Summary of grades:

- Family Financial Stability: D
- Health: B+
- Early Care and Education: C
- Youth Development and Education: B+
- Safety: B+
- Overall: B-

For the third consecutive year, Portland General Electric is the presenting sponsor of the 2002 Report Card. Portland General Electric's community investments focus on education, environment, livable neighborhoods and cultural diversity in communities where its employees live and work. PGE employees and retirees enhanced PGE's financial contributions in 2001 with more than 105,000 hours of volunteer service.