

5038 Youth safety net chipped

Children First gives Oregon a C- grade overall.

BY PETER WONG
Statesman Journal

A sagging economy and a tattered social safety net have caused a children's advocacy group to downgrade Oregon dramatically in a report, giving it an F for family financial stability. The fourth annual report card, which Children First

for Oregon released today, gave the state an overall grade of C-, a whole grade down from the B- it gave last year and in 2001.

Even more dramatic were the downgrades in family financial stability, which dropped from D to F, and health, which fell from B+ to D.

"A financially stable household is a foundation for a safe, secure childhood," said Marie Hoeven, executive director.

In addition to Oregon's unemployment rate — which is 2 percentage points higher than the national average — more than 140,000 children live in poverty and find it hard to get food, housing and medical care. That's about one in six children, Oregon's highest rate since 1994.

"The economic downturn has highlighted the fact that a lot of families always were on the border-

line," said Tina Kotek, policy director for the Portland-based group. "It also exposed the lack of a social safety net that would have kept those families somewhat stable, instead of falling through the cracks."

In the more severe downturn of the early 1980s, Kotek said, families could turn to welfare and other programs to supplement unemployment benefits.

Now, because of federal limits on welfare and state program cuts, she said "there is no place for them to go, except that they have to lose a lot more of their resources before they are eligible for safety-net programs."

About one in 10 Oregon children (80,000) has no health insurance coverage, the first upturn in nearly a decade. The

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percentage of uninsured children had been declining since state Medicaid coverage was converted into the Oregon Health Plan in 1994, and the federal Children's Health Insurance Program began in 1996.

Kotek said one of the bright spots of the 2003 Legislature was its expansion of health coverage for children in families earning as much as 200 percent of the federal poverty level. It is subject to federal approval. "It will take a year or two to

see some of those effects," she said. "We have not been making a lot of progress on health indicators."

Oregon got mixed grades in the other three report-card categories:

■ For early care and education, C+, up from a C in 2002 but still below the B in 2001.

■ For youth development and education, C, down from a B+ in 2002 and B- in 2001.

■ For safety, B+, the same as in 2002 and up from a B- in 2001.

Jean Thorne, director of the state Department of Human Services, said in a recent interview that the state's poor econo-

my has increased demand for agency services, yet the Legislature has to weigh those costs against balancing the budget.

She said it's hard in a budget-cutting era to maintain a social safety net and still move people toward long-term goals of self-sufficiency. But the 2003 Legislature did restore programs it cut during special sessions last year.

"At this point, we need to move forward and get services back on line as quickly as we can," she said.

Among the positive trends seen by Children First for Oregon are declining rates of

teenage pregnancy during the past decade, declining high school dropout rates for four years, declining violent crimes and confirmed cases of abuse and neglect. Reading and math proficiency scores for third graders also are improving.

On the other hand, the group said, alcohol use by youths remains high with a quarter of eighth-graders reporting drinking.

Portland General Electric is the sponsor of the report card.

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