

'Oregon must break cycle of child poverty'

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State child advocacy group recommends 'programs and policies designed to increase financial stability'

According to Children First for Oregon's County Data Book 2003, which was released last week, the worsening trend of Oregon's children living in financially unstable environments can be reversed through implementing proven policies and programs that help low-income working families break the cycle of poverty.

"With more than one in three Oregon children living in or near poverty, we know there's work to be done," said Marie Hoeven, Children First's executive director.

"A financially stable household is a foundation for a safe secure childhood. Smart public and private investments that promote family financial stability will be good for Oregon's children and the state's economy."

Recommendations for improving child well being and family financial stability from the 2003 Data Book include:

□ Make quality child care more affordable by fully utilizing existing parent and employer child care tax credits, strengthening the state's Employment Related Day

□ Strengthen earned income tax credits by making the state Earned Income Credit refundable and increasing it, expanding public education efforts about the credits and access to tax filing assistance, and connecting families who receive federal Earned Income Tax Credit refunds to financial services and asset-building opportunities.

Affordable, quality childcare is an economic necessity for many families and a bottom-line issue for businesses.

Children's health insurance and safety-net clinics, including school-based health centers, help families avoid the financial hardships that often come with illness or injury. Earned income tax credits reduce poverty and support work.

The report includes a call for government, child and family advocates, family services providers, the business community and philanthropic leaders to take advantage of improving economic conditions to make investments in proven policies and programs.

Please turn to **CHILD** on Page 14

POINT OF VIEW

Children First for Oregon

Care Program, and encouraging private sector investment in the state's child care system.

□ Expand access to quality health care by investing in health insurance for all children, reducing barriers to participation in the Oregon Health Plan and the Family Health Insurance Assistance Program, and strengthening the system of "safety net" clinics across the state, especially school-based health centers.

Continued from Page 4

"With the economic picture slowly beginning to brighten, the time is right for children's advocates, philanthropists, family service providers, and the business community to work together to help all of Oregon's families succeed," said Tina Kotek, Children First's policy director.

Data highlights include:

Family financial stability

□ 37 percent of children, more than 321,000 children, live in poverty or in financially vulnerable households.

□ 65 percent of Oregon families with incomes below the state median income cannot find affordable child care and thus, spend more than 10 percent of their income on child care.

□ Prior to the economic downturn, while almost all children had working parents, only 66 percent of children had one parent working full-time, all year.

Health and nutrition

□ More than 80,000 children have no health insurance, despite public health insurance programs that are supposed to cover children in low-income families.

□ Hunger occurs year round in Oregon, but the number of children eating lunch through federally funded meal programs falls dramatically during the summer months and varies greatly by county.

In 2003, only 18 percent of children who ate free or reduced-price lunches during the school year ate free meals during the summer months.

□ Approximately one in five children in Oregon receives food stamps and/or is covered

by the Oregon Health Plan.

Child care affordability

□ Between 1994 and 2002, the cost of child care in Oregon increased for all ages and all types of care, with family care and center care costs increasing 34 percent and 37 percent respectively.

□ The state's Employment Related Day Care Program, which provides child care assistance to working poor families, serves approximately 20 percent of eligible children.

□ For the 2000 tax year, only 16 Oregon businesses took advantage of the state's tax break for employers who provide some form of child care assistance to their employees.

Earned Income Tax Credits

□ An estimated \$30 million in federal Earned Income Tax

Credit (EITC) dollars went unclaimed by Oregon low-income families last year.

□ Less than 2 percent of EITC returns were prepared at free tax preparation sites for the 2001 tax year.

The 2003 County Data Book, part of the KIDS COUNT project, is made possible by a grant from the Annie E. Casey Foundation, and NIKE Inc. supported its publication.

Children First for Oregon reports it has served as the state's leading voice for children since 1991. A nonprofit, non-partisan group, Children First uses research, outreach and public education initiatives to speak to the legislature, media and local communities on behalf of Oregon's children and families.

For more information, call Hoeven at 503-236-9754, send an email to marie@cffo.org, or visit the web site www.children-firstfororegon.org.

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