

Third of Oregon kids 'financially vulnerable'

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There was a silver lining for Deschutes County in a set of grim statistics released Monday by a group called Children First for Oregon, but the bottom line was still the same - more than a third of children in the county live in what the organization calls "financially vulnerable families."

The 34 percent figure is a bit better than the statewide rate of 37 percent for that benchmark, defined as homes with income less than twice the federal poverty level. That's a sliding figure that would be, for example, \$36,800 a year for a family of four, as the poverty level for such a family is \$18,400.

"Deschutes County does better than the state average in many measures of child well-being, including high school dropout (rates), teen pregnancy and childhood poverty," the report said. In addition, "More third- and eighth-grade students meet or surpass state reading and math standards in Deschutes County than the state average."

Teen pregnancy continues to decline in the county and is 13 percent better than the state rate, the group said. Things are even better on the dropout picture, which is almost 40 percent below the statewide figure.

Despite the county's slightly better picture in financially vulnerable families, 34 percent is still "a huge number" of children in that situation, said Sharon Miller, executive director of the Central Oregon Community Action Agency Network (COCAAN).

"I look at the families at Healy (Heights), I saw all the research," Miller said. "Most of the people don't make more than \$19,000 a year. They have two or three children. How many families below that (figure) can't afford health care. That's why we have a hunger issue in our community."

"There are so many issues that families live with that we see, especially in the family services office, the Head Start program," she said. "They make it one month and not the next, because they're not working as many hours, or they had two jobs and now just have one."

The economic downturn has made the needs grow as the resources shrink, Miller said. Bend Aid turns away more than 200 requests a month for help with rent, utilities and other emergency aid.

"Our food supplies are up 70 percent, but the numbers (of people seeking food) are up 40 percent," Miller said. "Instead of two times a year, they are coming in every month."