

County kids struggle with poverty/abuse

By Tege Phillips-Hotchkiss
Lake County Examiner

A recent report on Oregon children shows the county's children fare better than their state counterparts on several well-being measurements. Nevertheless, Lake County's children are not as "safe" as other youth and almost half live in poverty, report statistics show.

In December, the Children's First, a non-profit, non partisan group released their 2003 Status of Oregon's Children County Data book. A voice for Oregon children since 1991, Children First, uses research, public education and policy initiatives to speak on behalf of Oregon's children and families.

During the last two decades, financial stability has become elusive not just for Lake County but many Oregon families. Across the state the percentage of working poor families doubled from the late 1970s to the late 1990s, the report stated.

"As the economics of a community deteriorate and jobs disappear, families experience greater stress. Children's well-being and economics are definitely interrelated," Lake County Commission on Children & Families (CCF) /Juvenile Dir. Eric Shpilman said.

In Lake County, out of 1,823 children, 905 or 49 percent, live at or near the Federal Poverty Level. This compares with 37 percent of children at or near poverty level, state-wide. For 2003, the FPL for a family of four was \$18,400.

Locally, ninety-three percent of Lake County children live in households with at least one parent working however only 62 percent of children live with a parent who works full-time, all year. In 2002, 9.2 percent of Lake County workers were unemployed a 6 percent increase since 1999. Statewide 7.5 percent of the working population went without a job sometime in 2002.

Children lose out in several ways, when families experience financial instability, Children's First officials

stated.

Research shows poverty puts children at increased risk for negative outcomes in health, social and emotional development, educational achievement and future economic success. Environmental factors, such as educational opportunities and adequate nutrition, have a greater impact on the variations in children's IQ than genes, the report stated. Additionally, family financial stress also puts children at increased risk of abuse or neglect.

Indeed, Lake County children fared worse on safety issues. Last year, 10.4 percent, or 19 Lake County youth experienced abuse and neglect. While this is better than the previous five year abuse rate of 14.7 percent, this number is still 95 percent worse than the rest of the state. Also, 13 or 7.1 percent of Lake County children experienced the threat of harm, 64 percent worse than other youth in Oregon.

Charley Tracy supervisor of the local Child Welfare Program with Department of Human Services said her office has experienced an increase in referrals and founded cases this year, although as a trend rates are much lower than three to four years ago.

"At 208, our referrals are up from the previous year," she said. Additional referrals combined with a tough economic situation could be the reason behind the increase from 2002 Children's First statistics which reflect 17 child abuse and neglect victims and 11 threat of harm victims county-wide.

"We are one of the highest counties, but a lot depends on the poverty level and drugs in the community," Tracy said.

Over time, the county abuse rates have lowered, she said.

According to DHS statistics in 2000, Lake County's abuse rate was 25.5 percent and 30.2 in 1999.

Empowered with looking at the health of Lake County's families, CCF has funded several programs to better meet poverty and abuse issues, Shpil-

man said.

Four projects receiving recent CCF financial support are: the Inner Court Family Center student lunch and snack program in Paisley; the Court Appointed Special Advocate program which aids neglected and abused children through the court system; a North Lake parenting program focusing on discipline and nutrition; and a Lifespan respite program for families with special needs; as ways the commission is helping to provide support for parents and children.

Despite discouraging economics and abuse numbers, Lake County children fare better than other state children in several categories. In the category of youth development, juvenile arrests were 70 percent lower than the state, and there were 6 percent fewer suicide attempts.

"I'm very pleased to see the juvenile arrest rate down," Shpilman said.

He attributed the decrease to community programs and partners.

"Youth Investment, is just a phenomenal program to have in the community, plus it's the partnerships we've built with mental health, the Alcohol & Drug outpatient program, school resource officer and local law enforcement," Shpilman said. "All those things benefit the kids and keep them from getting involved with the juvenile justice system."

A bright spot for schools, in third grade reading and math proficiency testing, youth performed 8 and 13 percent better than their state counterparts and in eight grade reading and math proficiency at 20 and 30 percent better than the state.

In their report, Children's First asked the state to: further its public-private partnerships in childcare so the cost of child care is manageable for working families, to push for health insurance for all children and to expand the state's tax credit system to help low income working families achieve financial stability.

Visit the Children's First website at www.childrenfirstfororegon.org to view the report.