

Children First: County can do better

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Advocacy group report: Half of area's children live in financially vulnerable families, compared to 37 percent for state.

By Mary Schamehorn

Coos County's children do not fare well, when compared to state averages, in many measures of child well-being.

At least that's the finding of the group, Children First for Oregon, which released its data several months ago, county by county, in the 2003 County Data Book.

According to Children First, 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," Marie Hoeven, Children First's executive director, said. "A financially stable household is a foundation for a safe, secure childhood."

Coos County stats

The report shows that in Coos County, a third of the children live with a single parent.

More than half of babies are born to mothers with a high school education or less, and only 12 percent of new mothers have completed a college education. More than one in 10 students in the county has changed school districts in the last school year, leading to a higher-than-average mobility rate for students in Coos County.

Income and assets

The report found that 50 percent of children live in financially vulnerable families, which are described as homes with income less than twice the federal poverty level (\$36,800 for a family of

four). This is much higher than the statewide rate of 37 percent.

In 1999, while almost all children had working parents, only 57 percent of children had one parent working full-time, all year, in the latest report.

Unemployment was higher than the statewide rate in 2002, with 8.6 percent of workers out of work. Joblessness, the report found, has decreased slightly since 1999.

Family supports

It also found that more than one in four children in the county receives support in the form of food stamps and/or Oregon Health Plan insurance.

Half of school children are eligible to receive free or reduced-price lunches during the school year, compared to 40 percent statewide.

Bandon School Superintendent Kenny Kent said recently that more than 50 percent of the children in the Bandon district fall into that category.

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