

Group decries state of families

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■ **Comparisons:**
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standout statistically.

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For the World

More Coos County children live below the poverty line than in other parts of the state. And that is just one measure of child well-being where the county's youngest citizens are falling behind.

That's the finding of the group, Children First for Oregon, which released its annual report several months ago on the status of children.

"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."

While it might sound like an impossibility, the group went on to say the worsening trend of Oregon's children living in financially unstable environments can be reversed. Communities can implement proven policies and programs to help low-income working families break the cycle of poverty.

Statistically, Coos County is a standout statewide.

More than half of the county's babies are born to mothers with a high school education or less, and only 12 percent of new mothers have completed a college education. A third of the children live with a single parent. More than one in 10 students has changed school districts in the last year.

The report found that 50 percent of children live in financially vulnerable families. That means they live in 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. And unemployment was higher here than the statewide rate in 2002, with 8.6 percent of workers out of work. One in five local children live in extreme poverty, compared to

only 14 percent statewide.

The list goes on: 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 schoolchildren are eligible to receive free or reduced-price lunches during the school year, compared to 40 percent statewide.

Only 21 percent of children who receive subsidized lunches during the school year receive free lunches during the summer months despite the ongoing need, said the report.

Hoeven's organization made recommendations for improving the conditions, including making quality child care more affordable by using existing parent and employer child-care tax credits, strengthening the state's Employment Related Day Care Program, and encouraging private-sector investment in the state's child-care system. The report points out that 65 percent of Oregon families with incomes below the state median cannot find affordable child care. They spend more than 10 percent of their income on child care.

The report suggested expanding access to quality health care by investing in health insurance for all children. Children First reported that the state could strengthen tax credits by educating families about the state earned income credit and making it refundable. An estimated \$30 million in federal earned income tax credit dollars went unclaimed by Oregon's low-income families last year.