

# The future looks brighter 5038 for Crook County's children

*Work still needs to be done,  
but progress is being made in  
the welfare of our children*

Anyone that knows me very well knows that I like kids. I have two of them, ages 4 and 1, and one more on the way. I also have three nieces and two nephews that I keep a close eye on.

I've been working with kids in some way since high school when I spent a semester as a teacher's aide in a special education classroom. My first job out of college was for a non-profit agency that worked with college youth. Later, while at the Prineville Chamber, I had a hand in launching one of Oregon's model business-education partnerships.

My interest in positive youth activities has led to my involvement with several local boards dedicated to helping kids. I've served on boards governing or advising the Boys and Girls Club, a juvenile drug and alcohol treatment center, a school for troubled youth, a childcare center, an in-school childcare program and a boy choir. On the wall of my office hang two plaques in which I take great pride, one for service to Crook County High School and one from the University of Oregon for furthering the cause of education statewide.

It matters a lot to me that our community is a good place for kids — my

kids and the kids of others.

That's why each year I await somewhat nervously an annual report published by Oregon's leading children's advocacy organization, Children First for Oregon. This annual report "grades" performance of individual counties in advancing the well-being of children. I always hope for the best when it comes out, even as a little part of me fears the worst. This year was no exception.

The 2004 report was recently released. The bad news is, Crook County still isn't perfect. The good news is, things are trending in the right direction, and we've surpassed other areas of the state in some measures.

Some achievements worth noting:

- **Crook County's teen pregnancy rate** is considerably better than the state average. That's a far cry from a decade ago when Crook County had the worst teen pregnancy rate in the state. Today, a teen in Crook County is 26 percent less likely to be pregnant than her peer elsewhere in Oregon. That's progress!

- **The percentage of children in our county living in poverty** was actually lower than the rate for the rest of the state. Some 13.9 percent of children in Crook County live in a household classified as impoverished. Statewide, that number is a full point higher at 14.9 percent.

- **The percentage of local children who are victims of abuse or neglect** is improved in this year's survey over 2003

numbers. In fact, the rate has nearly been cut in half. In 2004, 5.9 of every 1,000 children living in Crook County suffered abuse or neglect. In 2003, the rate was 9.4. Although the rate is still barely higher than the state average of 5.6, progress in this area is clearly being made.

- **The number of mothers receiving prenatal care** is another bright spot in the report. Eighty seven percent of Crook County mothers received care, compared to 85 percent elsewhere in Oregon.

All these numbers suggest that the extraordinary efforts at improving life for one of its most vulnerable and most important populations are starting to pay off. The community that is making that difference deserves a pat on the back.

Before we pop the champagne corks, let me quickly point out that the report is not entirely glowing. The high school dropout rate is moving in the wrong direction. There is a woefully inadequate supply of childcare. Too many pregnant mothers are smoking cigarettes. The rate of children not covered by health insurance is too high. We need to keep working on these areas, and efforts are underway to address them, but the fact that there is still work to do should not detract from the progress we have made.

All things considered, it seems to me that Crook County is a better place for kids today than it was a decade ago. Many people and agencies can claim credit for that achievement, starting with parents. Schools, churches, law

## IN MY JUDGMENT



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