

Michael Goforth: Florida continues to rank poorly in how it treats children

Staff Reports

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The annual Annie E. Casey Foundation's KIDS COUNT report on the well-being of children has been released and Florida ranks a dismal 38th among all states. Last year, the state ranked nearly as badly at 36th.

Thanks to a lack of state legislative support for children and their families, Florida continues to be a poor place for the young people who are supposed to represent our future.

Susan Weitzel, Florida KIDS COUNT director, said in a news release, "To continue to improve the lives of the children in Florida, we must provide our communities with the assistance they need to feed, house and educate our families. "When children are going to school hungry and do not know if they have a place to sleep at night, how can they be successful in the classroom?"

Some of the alarming statistics:

Economic well-being: Florida ranks 44th. About 924,000 children live in poverty, nearly 1.4 million children have parents who lack secure employment, and nearly 2 million children live in households with a high housing cost burden.

Education: 35th. About 217,000 children (51 percent) do not attend preschool, 65 percent of fourth-graders are not proficient in reading, 72 percent of eighth-graders are not proficient in math, and 31 percent of high school students are not graduating on time.

Health: 38th. Some 507,000 children (13 percent) are without health insurance, 94,000 teens abuse alcohol or drugs, and 8.7 percent of children born are low birth weight.

Family and community: 35th. Nearly 1.5 million children (39 percent) are in single-parent families, 555,000 children are in a family where the head of household lacks a high school diploma, and 341,000 children are living in high poverty areas.

The poor economy has contributed to the statistics, but the state ranked poorly on the KIDS COUNT reports before the downturn. Lawmakers have acted to make the state more business friendly to attract jobs, but limited education spending, unemployment benefits and, most recently, did not expand Medicaid coverage.

At the state level, organizations such as the Children's Movement of Florida are challenging lawmakers to make the state's children a top priority. But, lawmakers have not taken meaningful steps to resolve a potential problem for the economic well-being of the state's future.

Among Florida's counties, few have suffered as much as St. Lucie. In a recent report, the Roundtable of St. Lucie County noted that while the county's population grew by more than 44 percent between 2000 and 2010, the county's poverty rate skyrocketed by 99 percent. During that period, the number of children living in poverty increased by 85 percent, to nearly 17,000 children.

St. Lucie County organizations have stepped up efforts to make a difference. The Roundtable, for example, recently initiated a program called Bridges Out of Poverty to turn the tide in conjunction with the business community. Also focusing on improving lives is the Children's Services Council of St. Lucie County and the Parent Academy created by the St. Lucie County School District.

Those organizations will succeed only if they have the support of a community that believes in their goals and recognizes that resources to accomplish what needs to be done may not be forthcoming from the Legislature.

Florida's leaders ought to be ashamed at how poorly the state does on the annual KIDS COUNT report compared to other states with similar financial and institutional resources. But, if they do, they don't take action. That's particularly unfortunate since they apparently are unwilling to see that a state that treats its children and families well is more likely to attract new businesses and the jobs they can create.

Child health and safety are key factors in economic development. St. Lucie County knows that even if state leaders don't.

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