



Children's Defense Fund
LEAVE NO CHILD BEHIND®

The Child Defender

JUNE 2004

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The mission of the Children's Defense Fund is to **Leave No Child Behind®** and to ensure every child a Healthy Start, a Head Start, a Fair Start, a Safe Start, and a Moral Start in life and successful passage to adulthood with the help of caring families and communities.

CDF provides a strong, effective voice for **all** the children of America who cannot vote, lobby, or speak for themselves. We pay particular attention to the needs of poor and minority children and those with disabilities. CDF educates the nation about the needs of children and encourages preventive investment before they get sick or into trouble, drop out of school, or suffer family breakdown.

CDF began in 1973 and is a private, nonprofit organization supported by foundations, corporation grants and individual donations and does not accept government funds. In 1985, CDF established the St. Paul office to direct its efforts in Minnesota.

2004 Legislative Session Wrap-Up

Budget Stalemate

After one of the most contentious and unproductive legislative sessions in recent history, the 2004 Legislature adjourned early Sunday, May 16, 2004. It closed without settling a final budget-balancing bill for the 2004-2005 biennium \$160 million deficit and a Capital Bonding Project bill, which is generally the highlight of an even-year legislative session.

While CDF hoped that state lawmakers would have enacted legislation to remedy some of the extreme budget cuts to children and families from the 2003 legislative session, child advocates were generally relieved that at least no further cuts were made. Additional budget cutting proposals had been promoted by the Minnesota House that would have, in their Omnibus Health and Human Services Bill, cut an additional \$150 a month from cash assistance checks of welfare families who live in government subsidized housing. These families on public assistance are already penalized \$50 a month from their cash



assistance checks. This would have increased their penalty for having access to subsidized housing to \$200 a month. Additionally, the House budget

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Lawmakers' Decisions Erode an Already Weak Child Welfare System

Putting our Youngest Citizens at Even Greater Risk

Prior to the 2003 state legislative budget cuts, Minnesota's approach to child welfare was already weak. The system, which is state-supervised and county-administered, is responsible for ensuring Minnesota children and youth are protected from abuse and neglect; have permanent, safe homes; and receive the mental health services they need to function more successfully at home, in school and in their communities. But, in a recent federal

review, Minnesota's, like all states reviewed so far, does not conform to any of the seven national child safety, permanency, and well-being outcomes. In addition, there are large racial disparities for Minnesota children.

But, there is also a lot of potential in Minnesota's approach. Though the state's overall child welfare system is weak, Minnesota has been a national leader in child welfare programs that

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Scholarships Awarded to Four Young Women Who "Beat The Odds"®

The community joined Children's Defense Fund Minnesota to encourage honorees along their path of success

Drug abuse, gang violence, chilling memories of civil war, and language barriers were just some of the adversities this year's Beat the Odds® scholarship award honorees faced in their young lives.

Beat the Odds is a scholarship awards dinner that Children's Defense Fund Minnesota presents every year to celebrate young people's accomplishments. As part of the dinner celebration, held April 22 at the Minneapolis Hilton, four local high school students were honored with college scholarships for their hard work, academic excellence, community service and personal determination to "beat the odds."

Joining CDF Minnesota to present the 12th annual Beat the Odds awards were local business and community leaders and WCCO radio personality, Pat Miles, who emceed the event.

The Honorees



Adair Soderholm

Pa Kong Lee

Pa Kong Lee is a senior at Patrick Henry High School. Pa learned she had epilepsy as a little girl. While her culture believes those who have epilepsy are special, Pa feared that her condition would prevent her from doing the things she loved and achieving her dreams.

In reality, it did cause some setbacks, but Pa learned she could reach her goals despite the epilepsy.

As a Hmong girl growing up in the United States, Pa also faced significant cultural differences and language barriers that still challenge her today. As the oldest child, Pa cares for younger siblings and helps with household chores. She often feels caught between two cultures, especially when her studies conflict with responsibilities at home. She continually draws on her determination and inner strength to overcome the adversities she faces.

Pa's outstanding grades have earned her membership in the National Honor Society. She credits much of her success to her mother, who urges Pa to always do her best. Pa looks forward to integrating her expe-

riences in becoming an art and bi-lingual teacher. She will attend Hamline University this fall. "She is young woman who has overcome so much, and yet has the bar raised high to achieve so much more," said her college coach. Indeed, Pa's future is bright.



Adair Soderholm

Fartun Mohamed

Fartun Mohamed is a senior at Edison High School. At four years old, the civil war in Somalia brought unspeakable horror—she watched her brother murdered and her mother raped. Fartun's mother never recovered and her mental state deteriorated. During their eleven years in a refugee

camp, Fartun's father abandoned the family. At 15 years old, Fartun relocated to Minnesota—illiterate, even in her native language, and unable to speak or understand English.

Fartun lived with her aunt in the wake of her mother's continued mental illness, but Fartun's goals of educating herself and her aunt's traditional beliefs created constant conflict at home, so much so that Fartun found herself without a place to live. A school counselor helped her locate public housing, where she now lives by herself.

In spite of these traumatic events, Fartun has remained remarkably passionate about achieving her goals. "When I moved to the United States, I found a world of opportunities," she said. According to one of her teachers, Fartun has used her experiences to empower her and to recognize the importance of education. "When I realized what education was and where it can bring me, I knew I couldn't give up...I started from scratch, and I am so proud of myself." Fartun plans to attend the University of Minnesota Duluth this fall, where she plans to pursue a career as a dermatologist.



Yer Lee

Yer Lee is a senior at Harding High School. She explains that she has become accustomed to an unstable home life—limited financial resources and drug-addicted relatives who often display volatile

behavior. During her middle school years, she began to abuse drugs and alcohol as way to escape. Yer joined a gang, and frequently skipped school, often days at a time. As her life grew increasingly out of control, Yer realized her future was being jeopardized. Instead of following in the footsteps of her troubled relatives, she became determined to improve her life. Her difficult past continues to challenge her to work hard to make a better life for herself.

Despite family difficulties, Yer has flourished in school, where she is a member of the National Honor Society and numerous committees. She is also involved with the Boys & Girls Club, where she has participated in several community projects. Her school counselor speaks highly of Yer. “Despite the very hard life Yer is enduring, she is not letting any challenges get in her way of finding success,” she said. After she graduates this spring, Yer will attend St. Olaf College, where she plans to major in social work.



Blanca Martinez

Blanca Martinez is a senior at South High School. She was only 11 years old when she sorrowfully left Mexico with her family to move to Minnesota for better opportunities. Blanca recalls an

agonizing first few years in her new country as classmates teased her and teachers ignored or isolated her. In addition to the challenge of learning English and adapting to a new culture she faced severe harassment from other students. Encouraged by her mother, Blanca pushed herself to learn the new language and dedicated herself to her studies. While many of her friends dropped out of school, joined gangs, became

pregnant or were incarcerated, Blanca desired more for her life. By the time she entered high school, her studies had vastly improved and she earned her way into South’s most competitive academic program at her school.

Today Blanca is grateful for her move to the United States. “When I crossed the border at 11 and made the sacrifice to leave my country, it was all to pursue a life of opportunities,” she said. “Education will take me there.” Blanca is involved in numerous academic, social, and cultural opportunities in and out of school. Her college planning instructor is impressed with Blanca’s dedication and commitment to the community. “Blanca understands that by sharing her experiences with others, it will help her to be true to her roots,” she said. Blanca will attend St. Olaf College in the fall, where she plans to major in biology.

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Tom Hoffman
Joint Religious Legislative Coalition
Mairs and Henry Family
New Visions School
University of Minnesota Pediatric Residency Program (two tables)
Margaret Weber

To view a complete list of silent auction donors, and the photo gallery of the evening, visit www.cdf-mn.org/beat.htm.

Freedom School Summer Sessions

in Minneapolis and St. Paul June 28–August 6

LaCreche Early Childhood Center and the St. Paul Council of Churches are gearing up for their ninth annual Freedom School sessions June 28–August 6. The Minneapolis program will be held at Kwanzaa Community Center and the St. Paul will be held at the William McGee Institute of Technology Charter School. The six-week Afro-centric summer program is a national effort that serves students ages five to 18 by promoting social, cultural, and historical awareness.



Support Freedom Schools

1. Make a tax-deductible donation!

\$20 Will Buy Three Board Games—Students play board games to learn about math, travel and improve vocabulary.

\$50 Will Buy 10 Books for One Student—Student could purchase suggested books for reading, and start his/her own personal library.

\$200 Trains One Servant Leader—Each servant leader attends one week training at the Haley Farm in Tennessee, and one week of local training. Servant leaders are responsible for the front-line care and nurturing of the children they serve.

\$500 Will Pay for One Field Trip for 50 Students

\$700 Will pay for one student to attend a Freedom School Summer

\$2,000 Will sponsor one servant leader—Each servant leader is given a summer stipend for his/her service to help with living costs.

2. Donate supplies such as healthy pre-packaged snacks, paper, pens, glue, musical instruments, etc.

3. Spread the word! If you know a student who might benefit from Freedom Schools, tell him/her about it, and consider donating money to cover his/her cost.

4. Attend a Freedom School grand finale or daily harambee gathering.

5. Know someone who would make a great guest speaker? Call LaCreche Early Childhood Center 612-377-1786 (Minneapolis) or Reverend Darcel Hill (St. Paul) at 651-646-8805 extension 23.

What is Freedom School?

Integrating reading, conflict resolution, and social action in an activity-based curriculum, Freedom Schools are primarily staffed by college-age young adults, called servant leaders, who are committed to making life better for children.

Freedom Schools' parental involvement is a key component of the program, as is leadership development (identifying, training, linking, and nurturing the next generations of servant-leaders). It is a partnership between CDF's Black Community Crusade for Children® (BCCC) and local community organizations.

Freedom Schools strive to realize a vision that emphasizes the following core values:

- All children can learn when they are nurtured and taught by knowledgeable and caring adults who believe in them and who are committed to sharing with them the joys of learning.
- Children must be listened to, treated with respect, and offered opportunities to learn about their rich culture and heritage.
- Reading is one of several keys that unlocks the door to a child's potential.
- Parents are vital partners in their children's education.

To learn more, call:

Minneapolis—LaCreche Early Childhood Center, 612-377-1786

St. Paul—Reverend Darcel Hill at 651-646-8805 ext. 23

A Typical Day at Freedom Schools

8:00–8:30 a.m.

Breakfast with Children and Staff

If children are to have a Healthy Start in life, they must eat nutritious meals and snacks and develop healthy eating habits.

8:30–9:00 a.m.

Harambee!

Each morning students, staff, and volunteers gather to share in music, ideas, and stories, exposing them to the richness of their culture and a positive sense of self and community.

9:00–10:30 a.m.

Integrated Reading Curriculum: Reading, Conflict Resolution, and Social Action

Guided by the belief that reading is one of several keys that unlocks the door to a child's potential, servant-leaders engage the children in reading many children's books throughout the summer featuring heroes, heroines, and settings that reflect the children's own cultural images and history.

10:30–10:45 a.m.

Morning Break

10:45–11:45 a.m.

Integrated Reading Curriculum Continued

11:45 a.m.–12:00 p.m.

Drop Everything and Read (D.E.A.R. Time)

D.E.A.R. Time emphasizes the importance and joy of reading. Children and adults alike "Drop Everything and Read" silently for 15 minutes, choosing from a rich selection of reading material.

12:00–1:00 p.m.

Lunch with Children and Staff

At lunchtime, the feeling of family and community spirit continues as the children join with adults to eat a nutritious meal.

1:00–3:00 p.m.

Afternoon Activities: Arts and Crafts, Dance, Music, Sports, Computer Lab, Rehearsal for Finale, Field Trips, Social Action Projects

Children participate in well-planned music, dance, athletics or culturally enriched activities. Field trips and civic action projects that expand children's horizons also fill the afternoons.

State Tax Benefits for K-12 Supplies

All Minnesota families with children in kindergarten through grade 12 are eligible for state tax benefits for a portion of their school-related purchases. Eligible expenses include any required school supplies, tutoring, transportation fees, music lessons and the purchase or rental fees for musical instruments, after-school enrichment programs, and up to \$200 of computer hardware or educational software. (For a complete list of qualifying expenses, contact the MN Dept of Revenue at 651-296-3781 or www.taxes.state.mn.us).

Outreach Opportunity

Late this summer, the Minnesota Department of Revenue is printing envelopes that will have information about the K-12 tax benefits and which school purchases qualify. These envelopes can be given to families in your community during outreach events. To request the envelopes in time for the back-to-school season, please contact Ione Duff at ione.duff@state.mn.us or 651-556-6455 now. Be sure to indicate how many envelopes you need.

Tax Tip

It is very important that families **KEEP THEIR RECEIPTS** for these purchases. Encourage families to place all school-related receipts in one envelope and then store it away until tax time.



Minnesota Ranks #1 in Child Well-Being

National KIDS COUNT Data Book Released

Minnesota ranks first among all states in a new state-by-state study that reports on the well-being of American children. The 2004 KIDS COUNT Data Book released June 3 reveals that Minnesota improved in nine out of the 10 measures that reflect child well-being between 1996-2001, experiencing setback in only one measure (low birth weight babies).

The other nine indicators where progress was shown are:

- Infant mortality rate
- Child death rate
- Rate of teen deaths
- Teen birth rate
- Percent of teens who are high school dropouts
- Percent of teens not attending school and not working
- Percent of children living in families where no parent has full-time, year-round employment
- Percent of children living in poverty
- Percent of families with children headed by a single parent.

To view the data book online, visit www.kidscount.org or to receive a paper copy of the data book email Diane Benjamin at cdf-mn@cdf-mn.org.



USDA Rejects Minnesota's Request to Ban Junk Food in Food Stamp Benefits

Minnesota cannot change its rules to prevent food stamp participants from buying certain food like "junk food" with their benefits, ruled the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) this spring. Governor Tim Pawlenty made the request to the USDA as part of the state's cuts in welfare reform policy changes last year.

The USDA, in its denial letter to Minnesota issued a strongly worded response. The letter said the proposal to ban some "junk food" was based on "questionable merits," would create "confusion and embarrassment" at food store check-out, and that "implementa-

tion of this waiver would perpetuate the myth that (program) participants do not make wise food purchasing decisions." In reality, participants make similar purchases as higher-income shoppers. The letter also noted inconsistencies. For example, Hershey bars would be excluded, but Kit-Kat bars included.

CDF Minnesota agrees with the USDA's decision and thanks advocates from across the state for their help. The USDA received a number of letters and communications from advocates across the country opposing this ban and the correspondence made a difference.

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proposal also promoted \$200 million of cuts to health care programs for the next budget biennium along with an additional \$67 million of cuts in child care assistance. CDF Minnesota believes that it was positive that these potentially harmful cuts were not enacted into law.

Pawlenty Cuts \$110 Million from Health Care Funds

With no final budget agreement, Governor Pawlenty balanced the \$160 million state budget deficit by executive order through cuts in state agencies, delaying funds for certain bonding projects, and cutting \$110 million from Minnesota's Health Care Access Fund. CDF Minnesota opposed the Governor's use of the Health Care Access Fund to balance the budget for two main reasons. First, the dollars in the Health Care Access Fund are dedicated to MinnesotaCare, Minnesota's health care program for low- to moderate-income families and children. Raiding the monies from the funds while thousands of Minnesota children and families have lost or will be losing their public health insurance because of state budget cuts is shameful. Second, raiding the Health Care Access Fund violates a promise the state made to health care providers whose taxes provide the

bulk of the monies in the Health Care Access Fund. In 1992, when MinnesotaCare was created, the state promised health care providers that revenues collected for the fund from taxes would never be used for any other purpose than for health care services.

Children's Health Security Act Update

CDF Minnesota's Children's Health Security Act (SF 2401 and HF 2543) that would provide universal health care coverage for all children was received very positively and was approved by the Senate Health Policy Committee, but no hearing was given to the bill in the Minnesota House. Both State Senator Yvonne Prettner Solon of Duluth and State Representative Paul Thissen of Minneapolis plan to reintroduce this legislation again next year and work with CDF Minnesota and other child advocates to promote this legislation during the upcoming fall elections. CDF Minnesota encourages child advocates to talk to their state legislative candidates to urge them to endorse this legislation as way to help Minnesota promote healthy children and families and deal with our state's health care crisis.

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intervene early with families to help prevent maltreatment and more aggressive and expensive intrusions into families' lives later.

The state relies on counties and community organizations to deliver those proactive, innovative services, but the effectiveness of the system was seriously eroded by the budget cuts of 2003.

The 2003 Legislature made cuts to Minnesota's child welfare system in two ways. First, state lawmakers merged 17 grants, many of which went directly to local community organizations, into one block grant to be distributed to all 87 counties. They then reduced the total amount of the grant by \$37.5 million for the 2004-05 biennium (of that, \$12.5 million represented an accounting shift). Second, state lawmakers significantly reduced the amount of state aid to local governments. Some of this aid enables local governments to help fund the local community organizations that provide essential family support programs.

Children's Defense Fund Minnesota's preliminary analysis of the impact of the state budget cuts on Minnesota's child welfare services reveals that:

- Early intervention and prevention programs, such as Crisis Nurseries which are designed to prevent families from entering emergency situations, are being significantly reduced and in some cases eliminated; and
- Services for homeless youth, including



transitional housing and emergency shelter that provide youth a safe way to get off the streets, have been cut dramatically.

However, the analysis also suggests that:

- For the most part, even deeper cuts to programs and cuts to core services for the most vulnerable children and families in crisis were temporarily spared due to the use of one-time money by Minnesota counties and local communities. Program directors believe that those cuts may need to be made for next year, assuming these funds are no longer available.

It is disturbing that Minnesota's most vulnerable children, youth, and families are more at risk for abuse and neglect because of the state's need to find some short-term budget savings. It is also distressing that the cuts will cost Minnesota much more in the long-run, as more families enter crises that were preventable and counties have no other recourse than to take children from their families and place them in foster care or group homes.

What is Block Granting?

Block granting occurs when the legislature combines separate programs with distinct purposes and funding streams into a new, single program. Block grants have fewer requirements and allow for a broad use of the funds. In the instance of child welfare programs, 17 grants were block granted.

What Are Some of the Potential Consequences of Block Granting?

It is politically more palatable to cut funding to broad-based block grants to counties than to individual programmatic grants. By block-granting the funds, the state has potentially made future cuts to child welfare services easier. Second, block granting means that state policy makers will have less ability to impact services they think are valuable and counties will have more ability, including whether to increase the local contributions to compensate for state cuts. As a result, which services are available for families and children depends on where they live. By reducing more of its contributions to the overall child welfare system and further transferring responsibility for protecting vulnerable children and families directly to counties, the state may increase the inequality across counties and the disparities in the system.

CDF Public Policy Director Awarded Bush Fellowship



Minh Ta Heads to Harvard

CDF Minnesota Public Policy Director Minh Ta was awarded a prestigious Bush Leaders Fellowship earlier this

spring. He plans to obtain a master's degree in public administration from Harvard University's John F. Kennedy School of Government.

Ta was among 20 individuals who received the leadership fellowship, which supports full-time study in academic or self-designed educational programs. The program's goal is to help individuals at mid-career prepare for greater leadership responsibilities and enhanced contributions to their communities.

Ta's goal is to become a more effective advocate on children's and family issues. "I have always sought to improve the lives of individuals and groups that are the most marginalized in our society and have the least voice in the policy-making process," said Ta. He is a Chinese American born in Vietnam. He has been with CDF Minnesota since 2000, and will take a one year leave of absence while earning his degree.

A Simple Way to Stand Up for Kids

Stay in touch with CDF Minnesota through its e-advocacy network. You will receive timely legislative email updates and action alerts on how to stand up for Minnesota children.

Join the network by simply visiting our website www.cdf-mn.org and clicking on the Sign up now! button. You will need to provide your first and last name, plus your email address.

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KIDS COUNT Coffees Hosted Throughout the State

CDF Minnesota completed its third annual KIDS COUNT Coffees throughout the state. The Coffees are designed to provide a statistical overview of child well-being using 12 indicators, including family economics, health, education and safety. The data comes from the annual KIDS COUNT data book.

This spring, Coffees were held in 18 communities, and participants included county commissioners, mayors, local media, law enforcement, public health, school officials and educa-

tors, early childhood educators, and community activists.

In each community, the discussion focused on how children were faring in the local area, how legislative decisions are affecting children and families, and how people can become more involved in CDF Minnesota's outreach activities.

CDF Minnesota extends a special thanks to all of the hosts who made this year's KIDS COUNT Coffees a success. These hardworking hosts make the Coffees possible.

KIDS COUNT Coffee Locations, 2002 - 2004

