

# Daily Globe

## **Organizations collaborate on behalf of Minnesota children**

*Kari Lucin*

*Worthington Daily Globe - 12/12/2007*

WORTHINGTON — Three Minnesota organizations united to advocate for universal children’s health care, accessible and affordable child care and a minimum wage increase Tuesday during a citizens’ meeting at the Southwestern Minnesota Opportunity Council.

“A lot of parents are taking whatever (child) care they can get. I don’t think that’s the environment we want,” said Carole Spektor, the Advocacy and Legislative Affairs Director for the Children’s Defense Fund.

The CDF, a private nonprofit advocacy organization, attempts to ensure all children receive a good start in life.

The other two organizations collaborating in the meeting were Child Care WORKS, a coalition of Minnesotan parents, early childhood professionals and advocates working for good early child care for children, and the JOBS NOW Coalition, a group advocating for all workers to have the opportunity to earn a family-supporting wage.

Spektor explained the reason all three organizations are working on child care and wage issues is that they are integral to a family’s economic security and contribute to learning and healthy development for children.

In Minnesota, 6.5 percent of families live in poverty, and 75 percent of those 6.5 percent have one or more workers in the family. Child poverty has increased in Minnesota since 2000, and the number of those in extreme poverty has doubled. Poverty rates in Minnesota have increased more quickly than the national poverty rate.

The CDF believes child care is a public policy issue because 75 percent of Minnesota families with children younger than 13 rely on child care. Additionally, Spektor said, parents signing up for welfare cite child care as the reason they did it more often than any other reason.

Spektor also cited research from the Federal Reserve Bank of Minnesota indicating that a \$1 investment in early childhood education yields an eventual return of \$12.

Minnesota is the least affordable state for infant care in the nation, Spektor said, and the second least affordable state for preschool-age care. On average, it costs \$30,000 for four years of child care — more than four years of tuition at the University of Minnesota.

The CDF listed several barriers to child care accessibility.

- Copayments some parents can’t afford.
- Long waiting list for government child care assistance programs.
- Not all low-income parents are eligible for those assistance programs.
- Providers don’t get fully reimbursed for children in the government’s child care assistance program, and as a result, some don’t accept children from those programs.

A proposed bill designed to assist with some of those issues “is very expensive, but we’re working toward this, so more families can get the benefits,” Spektor said.

### **Living wages and JOBS NOW**

Kevin Ristau, the Education Director of the JOBS NOW Coalition, gave a presentation about poverty and its impact on Minnesota families, offering statewide data and data from the nine-county region of southwest Minnesota.

Ristau’s numbers came from “The Cost of Living in Minnesota,” a report by the JOBS NOW Coalition on the cost of basic needs for

Minnesota families in 2006.

“Basic needs” do not include debt payments, skills training, entertainment, meals at a restaurant, vacation, emergencies, retirement or children’s education, Ristau pointed out.

In southwest Minnesota, 16 percent of all jobs pay \$7.75 an hour or less, Ristau said.

“The average annual cost of meeting basic needs for a family of four with two workers is about \$39,000,” he explained. “To cover these costs, each worker must earn at least \$9.49 an hour. Thirty percent of the jobs in (southwest Minnesota) pay less.”

The statistic Ristau cited that drew the most gasps from the audience was that a couple working full-time at minimum wage would need to work more than three full-time jobs in order to meet basic needs if they had two children.

Ristau advocated increasing the state minimum wage from the current \$6.15 an hour to solve the problem.

### **Children’s health care**

Spektor recapped the progress of last year’s attempts to extend state health care to all children.

“The bottom line is, children are falling through the cracks,” Spektor said, citing the sharp increase in health care costs across the board.

The Children’s Defense Fund believes insuring all children would make them less likely to miss school because of illness, offer kids preventative care that could eliminate costs later and decrease the likelihood that kids need to use the emergency room. In addition, insuring all children would decrease the amount of money medical centers would need to write off each year.

“Three-fourths of uninsured kids are eligible for public programs, but they’re not accessing them,” Spektor said.

Last year, the Children’s Health Security Act, which would have expanded children’s eligibility for state insurance programs, made it through eight legislative committees at the state level and had 65 co-authors.

The entire bill did not pass, but several parts did, making it easier for children to transition between government insurance programs, reducing premiums and eliminating some of the bureaucratic red tape.