



The Child Defender

MARCH 2009

Children's Defense Fund
MINNESOTA

With State Facing Large Budget Deficit, Children Need Your Voice

Lawmakers returned to the State Capitol in early January to begin setting the state's two-year budget with the daunting task of addressing a more than \$5 billion deficit.

Governor's Proposed Budget Impacts Children

In late January, Governor Pawlenty proposed more than \$2.5 billion in spending cuts. More than half of these cuts come from the Health and Human Services area, reducing services for low-income Minnesotans at a time when they are most needed. Specific to children, the governor's proposal would cut both child care and children's health coverage, both central to children growing up healthy and acquiring the tools they need to succeed in school and in life.

The recently enacted federal stimulus bill will require some changes to health care cuts in order to qualify for the increased federal Medicaid funds. Based on this, and the updated budget forecast released this month, the governor will adjust his budget proposal. While his new budget will look different, it is likely that significant cuts to Human Services will remain.

The governor's original budget shows the magnitude of the deficit and the level of cuts that will be required to balance the budget, especially without new revenue.

It is unclear how child care funds in the stimulus package will impact future budget proposals from the governor.

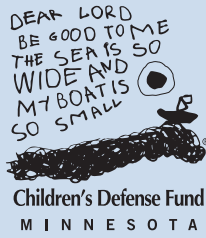
Federal Stimulus Mitigates Proposed Cuts

The governor's proposed budget cuts health care coverage for more than 100,000 Minnesotans including 26,000 children, 22,000 parents and 65,000 childless adults.

The provisions that impact children would eliminate recent changes designed to make MinnesotaCare more affordable and reduce administrative barriers that make it difficult for people to enroll in public programs. The governor's proposed cuts would reverse the progress made in the past two years to reduce the number of Minnesota's nearly 80,000 uninsured children.

Fortunately, the stimulus package provides additional Medical Assistance dollars to Minnesota and prevents lawmakers from cutting current eligibility. This protects parents who were cut under the governor's plan. Minnesota's childless adults, however, are not protected. It is unclear if the stimulus bill requires state lawmakers to continue the simplification provisions that impact children.

Access to health care coverage is a key indicator of child well-being and a wise investment for the state. Children with coverage get crucial immunizations and checkups, do better in school, have fewer long-term health problems, and are better prepared for the future work force.



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REGIONAL REPORT

CDF-Minnesota Expands Its Reach and Spurs Action in Neighboring States

North Dakota Child Forums Successful

As part of its work on behalf of children throughout the region, Children's Defense Fund-Minnesota spearheaded a series of community forums across North Dakota in January to raise awareness of the growing needs of that state's children. The events were held just as North Dakota's State Legislature began meeting to urge lawmakers to invest part of the state's budget surplus in the needs of children.

More than 100 people attended forums in Bismarck, Minot and Fargo, where they heard that one in eight North Dakota children lives in poverty, and that more than 14,000 children have no health insurance.

Helen Danielson, Outreach Coordinator of North Dakota KIDS COUNT, presented the 2009 North Dakota *KIDS COUNT Data Book*, which details how well children are doing across the state on a variety of important indicators.

Attendees in Bismarck heard about a local community action program that sends food-filled backpacks home with 150 to 200 low-income school children every Friday to ensure they don't go hungry over the weekend. In Minot, attendees heard about the significant increase in the number of homeless families, and in Fargo, participants discussed the growing need for quality, affordable child care for the area's working parents.

CDF Regional Director, Jim Koppel, updated forum attendees on how current state and federal policies are responding to the needs of children. He stressed the need for the state to increase its investment in children's health coverage.

Koppel said CDF is planning future health care forums in the state, and will continue to press for health coverage for all children.



New North Dakota State Coordinator for Children's Defense Fund, Paul Ronningen, urges North Dakota lawmakers to use current budget surpluses to expand health care coverage for the state's 14,000 uninsured children at recent press conference at the North Dakota State Capitol.

Montana Bridge to Benefits Lifts Hundreds of Families

The Bridge to Benefits initiative launched last summer in Montana has already linked thousands of children and their families with important benefits.

According to new data from 2008, nearly 2,000 children and adults in 563 families have been screened to see if they are eligible for Medical Assistance, the Children's Health Insurance Program, Childcare Scholarships, School Meals, Food Stamps, Energy Assistance or the Earned Income Tax Credit.

The initiative was launched in partnership with Great Falls-based Rural Dynamics, Inc.

"Bridge to Benefits has improved the economic situation for thousands of Montana children and their families," said CDF-Montana Director Kristina Davis. "In this time of economic difficulty, it has added economic stability for families and strengthened the state's economy and work force."

Bridge to Benefits has also been launched in both North Dakota and South Dakota.

Help Children; Support CDF-Minnesota

Step forward and improve the lives of children! Every dollar donated helps Children's Defense Fund-Minnesota continue to fight to improve the lives of Minnesota's 1.2 million children and their families.

Your donation to CDF-Minnesota allows us to continue to do critical research, enact public policy and promote successful initiatives that lift children out of poverty, protect them from abuse and neglect, ensure access to health care and quality education, and provide a moral and spiritual foundation to help them succeed. Now, more than ever, we need your help.

Contributions to CDF-Minnesota are fully tax-deductible. For more information, please contact Judy Ham, development director, (651) 855-1179 or ham@cdf-mn.org.

Bridge to Benefits Update

In 2008, Children's Defense Fund (CDF) Minnesota's free web-based "Bridge to Benefits" helped provide economic stability for almost 17,000 Minnesota children and adults.

From July 1 through December 31, 5,713 Minnesota families, totaling 16,796 family members, were linked to important benefits that can help them. These families have an average income of only \$20,744 annually.

Benefits include energy assistance, health care, child care assistance, food support, school meals and tax credits. "These benefits make all the difference for a family who now must choose between buying food and taking a child to the doctor," said CDF Outreach Director Elaine Cunningham. "The high percent of families eligible and interested in these programs indicate that we are reaching the right audience with this project. In large part, this is a credit to our partner organizations."

Bridge to Benefits is a free web-based screening tool (www.bridgetobenefits.org) that quickly and anonymously helps a family determine if it is eligible for assistance and then helps with the application process.



New Face at CDF-Minnesota: Meet Nicole Hernandez

Nicole Hernandez joined Children's Defense Fund-Minnesota in February and serves in the newly created position of program associate, where she will work primarily as an organizer for the CDF Freedom School® program and Young Advocate Leadership Training (YALT) programs.

Nicole comes to CDF-Minnesota from Anoka County Head Start, where she worked as a family advocate and home visitor, establishing a positive link between families and their schools.

Prior to that she worked as program director and youth enrichment coordinator for the Brooklyn Center School District. Nicole is earning her master's degree in education, and she has a B.A. degree in family life and child development and early childhood education from Minnesota State University, Mankato.

"We are very excited that Nicole has joined us in this new and very important position," said CDF-Minnesota Associate Director Sybil Axner. "Her work will be critical to our efforts to improve the lives of the 1.2 million Minnesota children and their families."

Ten Future Leaders from Region to Attend YALTsm Training



In March, Kenny Scales (right), a staff member at the Peace Foundation in Minneapolis, will be one of 10 representatives from the upper midwest at the annual Young Advocate Leadership Training (YALTsm) Conference in Tennessee.

In March, 10 young adults from Minnesota, Montana and North Dakota will travel to Haley Farm in Clinton, Tennessee, to participate in the Children's Defense Fund's annual *Young Advocate Leadership Training (YALTsm) Conference*.

The group, chosen based on understanding of advocacy and leadership, will represent the upper midwest region. The weekend-long event seeks to develop the next generation of leaders who are committed to social justice and improving the lives of all children in America.

"This training is an excellent opportunity for these young people to connect with other young leaders, community organizers, and child advocates," said Nicole Hernandez, CDF-Minnesota's program associate for youth programs. "They'll also learn the skills necessary to be leaders in their communities and on their college campuses."

SCHIP Expansion Enacted

With almost nine million uninsured children in Minnesota and across the country, CDF-Minnesota said the recent expansion of the federal State Children's Health Insurance Program (SCHIP) is an important step toward covering all children.

The measure, signed into law by President Obama in February, is expected to cover an additional 4.1 million children in the coming years and boost the total number of children covered by SCHIP to 11 million. Former President Bush twice vetoed a similar expansion in 2007 despite wide, bi-partisan support in Congress.

"With nearly nine million children living without health coverage, it is good to see that President Obama moved so quickly to enact this expansion," said CDF-Minnesota Legislative and Advocacy Director Carole Spektor. "But even this good news is tempered by the knowledge that there are still millions of children, including tens of thousands in Minnesota, who don't have coverage. I'm glad that the President has called this a down payment on his commitment to ensure every American has health coverage."

Voting to expand health coverage for children were Minnesota Senator Amy Klobuchar and Reps. Tim Walz, Keith Ellison, Betty McCollum, Jim Oberstar, Erik Paulsen and Collin Peterson. Reps. Michele Bachmann and John Kline voted against it.

The expansion will be funded primarily by boosting the federal tax on cigarettes by 61 cents, to \$1 a pack. Most of the children covered by SCHIP nationwide come from families with incomes less than twice the federal poverty line, which was \$21,800 for a family of four in 2008.

Raise Your Voice for Children March 19 at the Capitol

On Thursday, March 19, Children's Defense Fund-Minnesota will join hundreds of parents, teachers, early education professionals, partner organizations, and children by participating in "Voices for Children" advocacy day at the State Capitol.

The day starts at 9:15 a.m. with children's activities, followed by a 10 a.m. rally in the Capitol Rotunda.

Participants also will be able to visit their elected representatives.

Attendees are urged to take part in the "Flower Project," by making paper flowers with messages on them and bringing them to the Capitol or by mailing flowers to your legislators and the governor before March 19. Find out more at www.voicesforchildrenmn.org.

Key House Committee Passes Minnesota Health Security Act

The State House of Representatives' Health Policy Committee recently approved the Minnesota Health Security Act (MHSA). The action gives momentum to the bill, which would provide affordable quality, health coverage to all Minnesotans, starting with children. Minnesota has more than 375,000 uninsured residents, including almost 80,000 children.

"With hundreds of thousands of Minnesotans either uninsured or under-insured, it's clear that our current, costly health care system is unsustainable. And the economic downturn has only made things worse," said Carole Specktor, legislative and advocacy director for CDF-Minnesota. "The committee's action today moves us closer toward our vision of having quality, affordable health coverage for all Minnesotans."

The MHSA, introduced by Rep. Paul Thissen and Sen. Tony Lourey, would provide health coverage to all children by the middle of 2010 without co-payments or premiums. The second phase would ensure access to coverage for adults by 2012 and hold costs to no more than 5 percent of family income. It would generate savings for the state and families by streamlining current health care programs, reducing "uncompensated care," and commissioning an independent study of how to achieve better value from the health care system.



CDF-Minnesota Legislative and Advocacy Director Carole Specktor (right) listens as State Rep. Paul Thissen discusses the Minnesota Health Security Act before the House Health Policy Committee.

The measure awaits action by the Senate and other House committees. CDF-Minnesota is a member of the Make Health Happen Campaign, which developed the legislation. For more information on the Minnesota Health Security Act and the "Make Health Happen Campaign," please visit www.MakeHealthHappen.org.

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Child Care Cuts Would Hurt Families

During these difficult economic times, access to affordable, quality child care is critically important. Often, child care assistance is what allows low-income, working families to stay in the workforce.

Yet, the governor's budget proposal cuts child care by increasing parent co-payments and reducing provider reimbursement rates. This combination hits families particularly hard. The reimbursement rate paid by the state for the child care assistance program is already significantly below the market rate due to previous budget cuts. Many providers are forced to pass the difference between their rate and the state's reimbursement rate on to the family. In effect, the governor's proposal would result in a double co-payment increase for many families.

Your Help Needed

In these economically challenging times along with an historic budget deficit, CDF-Minnesota will work with you and its partners to send the message that the state's budget is about more than numbers—it is about what kind of state we want to be.

Governor Pawlenty and the legislature will create a budget for the next two years that will impact the well-being of our state for many years to come. CDF-Minnesota will advocate based on these key principles: The budget must ensure that children's needs are met; all options must be on the table for balancing the budget, including new revenue; and the budget should not devastate the health care system so that it is not possible to achieve the progress that is necessary to ensure all Minnesotans, including children, have access to affordable, quality health care coverage in future years.

We must ensure that Minnesota returns to its tradition of investment and work to preserve health care, child care and safety net services that are so important to the most vulnerable Minnesotans.

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Our Mission

The Children's Defense Fund
Leave No Child Behind® mission
is 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.

The Minnesota office opened in
1986.

Beat the Odds® Awards Dinner Right Around the Corner

CDF Minnesota's 17th Annual Beat the Odds® Awards Dinner is right around the corner. The event, set for Thursday, March 12, at the Depot in Minneapolis, will once again honor four exceptional Twin Cities high school seniors who have overcome tremendous adversity to succeed in both school and life.

The stories of the four young people chosen in 2009 are heart-wrenching, and their courage and strength are an inspiration to all who attend the event. Each student receives a scholarship funded by generous event sponsors.

This year's event will be emceed by Minnesota Public Radio personality Kerri Miller. Twin Cities Mayors R.T. Rybak and Chris Coleman will introduce the four honorees. All proceeds from the awards dinner go directly to support the important mission of CDF-Minnesota to improve the lives of the state's 1.2 million children and their families.

For information about attending the event, call 651-855-1185 or email bto@cdf-mn.org.



FOUR WHO BEAT THE ODDS: In March, CDF-Minnesota honors four outstanding young people who have overcome tremendous odds to succeed in school and life. This year's honorees are (left to right) Max Wirt, Michael Roberts, Kia Lor and Edwin Rosas. You can hear their stories by attending the March 12 Beat the Odds® Awards Dinner.