

Fall 2008

VOICES

BUILDING BETTER LIVES



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Join the Voices online advocacy network at www.voices4kids.org

TOGETHER, WE ARE VOICES FOR ILLINOIS CHILDREN

By Jerry Stermer, President



For the past several months, during a long presidential campaign, we've been bombarded with multiple and sometimes conflicting messages about how to recover and strengthen our ailing economy. There is no doubt that people have been

unhappy and anxious about what has been happening in Washington and Springfield, not to mention Wall Street.

Despite the turmoil, some things haven't changed. Children and families still need adequate incomes, access to health care, decent and affordable housing, quality educational opportunities from preschool through college, communities that are safe, engaged and prosperous, and governments that are fiscally responsible and responsive to all citizens' needs.

Children will only rise to the top of the political agenda when we raise our collective voices, creating a groundswell of support for policies that improve their opportunities to grow up happy, healthy, safe, nurtured and well educated. That groundswell starts with individuals like Joyce Smith (see p. 6),

who is mobilizing people in East St. Louis to address the serious problems of low-income families. It starts with neighbors who offer help to a foster care family. It starts with parents who sign petitions demanding excellent and equitable education for all children. It starts with you. And me.

Together we have made some progress. This fall, Illinois' commitment to invest in early childhood programs helped rate Illinois fourth in a national ranking of "best chance" states for parents seeking a high-quality, state-funded preschool program for their children. While we should celebrate each and every victory, such as the achievement recognized by this prestigious ranking, we also recognize that more work must be done to have a positive, lasting impact on children's lives.

Every day, in ways too numerous to count, adults in Illinois give of themselves to make life better for children. We all share in the belief that children do well when they grow up in strong, supportive families, and that families do well in supportive communities.

Each of us has a voice; together, speaking for children, we are Voices for Illinois Children. ■

OUR MISSION—Voices for Illinois Children champions the full development of every child in Illinois to assure the future well-being of everyone in the state. We work with families, communities and policymakers on all issues to help children grow up happy, healthy, nurtured, safe and well educated.



LEGISLATIVE WRAP-UP

2008 POLICY UPDATE: BOTH PROGRESS AND PROBLEMS FOR KIDS

By Sean Noble

Several policy victories for young children emerged from a frustrating 2008 legislative session that otherwise sidestepped many critical issues – or even threatened to worsen the challenges facing kids and families.

The spring session ended with the summer announcement of budget cuts totaling hundreds of millions of dollars in important state spending priorities for FY 2009, falling most heavily upon health and human services. In many cases, the cuts erased funding increases that had been planned for important programs. In other situations, existing resources were cut – stripping a series of crucial supports from children and families.

The hardest hit programs included efforts to curb or treat alcoholism and substance abuse among teens, parents and their affected family members, representing about \$55 million in funding. Among the victims were dozens of single moms and their kids who were evicted from residential treatment facilities that had supported child care and job training for parents in rehabilitation.

Programs for abused and neglected children suffered more than \$70 million in cuts to the Department of Children and Family Services. Scheduled Department of Human Services layoffs threatened to curtail efforts to

connect families in need with food stamps and medical care..

These and many other grievous steps resulted from the inability of the governor and legislators to agree upon revenues – let alone some spending priorities – for the fiscal year that began in July, leaving a budget hole that was reportedly \$2.1 billion deep.

At press time, policymakers were making progress toward restoration of many of these cuts through a so-called “funds sweep,” allowing the state to tap surplus money in a series of restricted state funds. However, all these problems dramatically underscored Illinois’ crying need for more adequate, sustainable and fairly raised revenues.

Among more positive news, state officials approved a two-year extension of Illinois’ landmark Preschool for All efforts. They also increased its funding by \$32.4 million to expand program access and quality, with the goal of someday ensuring that all 3- and 4-year-old children can benefit from high-quality early learning opportunities if their parents want.

State-supported child care – a vital piece of the early learning puzzle for many working families – gained from a \$45.2 million boost. During budget negotiations, advocates were able to ward-off the “wait-list” threat of barring new families

from signing up for child care services they need. Yet budget cuts threatened to erase \$1.9 million from Great START, a wage-incentive program for qualified early childhood professionals.

Other results of the spring session similarly came in good news/bad news form:

- Overall, elementary and secondary education funding grew by \$360 million this year. However, the governor and legislators once more took a pass on school-funding and quality reforms, despite a renewed push among advocates.
- Families of young, at-risk children may benefit from a \$1.4 million increase in parent-coaching, home-visiting programs such as Healthy Families Illinois and Parents Too Soon. But budget cuts eliminated planned expansion of the prevention, early intervention and treatment priorities of the Illinois Children’s Mental Health Partnership – and even threatened to cut into their existing funding.
- Legislators largely agreed with proposals to expand important developmental programs for infants and toddlers and to further bolster families’ child care quality and access, including an update in the “co-pay” fees assessed for child care participation. But both bills fell victim to technical and political squabbles, and did not receive final legislative approval. ■

ILLINOIS STUDENTS: READY FOR TOMORROW?

By Melissa Baker

Are we properly preparing all Illinois students for tomorrow's workforce?

That is the question the 2009 Illinois Kids Count data book will examine. The book, to be released on Jan. 29, will include up-to-date, comprehensive data on the educational well-being of children.

The report will feature traditional education statistics from preschool to higher education, such as student demographics, enrollment, test scores, graduation rates and school finance. To address the question of whether all Illinois students are prepared to be workers and citizens in the 21st century, it also will report on influ-

ences from outside of the formal classroom, including access to technology, the health status of young people, afterschool programming, and social and emotional learning. In thoughtful essays and commentaries, experts from around that state will explore educational strategies to build and secure better futures for all children.

On Feb. 27, Voices will host the 2009 Illinois Kids Count Symposium in Chicago. The symposium will bring together advocates, policymakers, researchers, elected officials and citizens to engage in informative dialogues about education in Illinois. ■



ALL KIDS SUCCESS

According to Census data, the uninsured rate for Illinois children dropped from 10.1 percent in 2005 to 9.5 percent in 2006 to 6.6 percent in 2007—a dramatic result of All Kids expansion. The change in the U.S. uninsured rate during this period was insignificant, hovering around 11%. ■

EDUCATION FUNDING & PROPERTY TAX RELIEF

By Larry Joseph

For several decades, debates over school finance reform in Illinois have focused on inadequate state funding, heavy reliance on local property taxes, and huge fiscal disparities among school districts. Voices' Budget & Tax Policy Initiative is reassessing a key assumption in these debates: the link between state education funding and local property tax relief. Although the effort to link these issues is understandable, many school finance experts warn against the pitfalls of such an approach. Despite widespread discontent with the property tax, it is both a stable source of revenue and the only local revenue source controlled by school districts. In states

that have severely limited local property taxes for education, the consequences have included shifts in policymaking from the local level to the state level, lower levels of resources for public schools, and greater vulnerability to economic downturns.

In Illinois, "tax swap" proposals have typically involved raising state income taxes while rolling back property taxes. Replacing school district property taxes entirely with higher income taxes would be extremely difficult. The amount of property tax revenue raised by school districts statewide is more than total state revenue from individual and corporate income taxes. A less drastic approach would reduce

school district property taxes by, say, 20 percent, with state reimbursement for the lost revenue. But this type of across-the-board property tax relief would create a windfall for the wealthiest taxpayers and the wealthiest school districts.

We need to reconsider the conventional wisdom about school finance reform in Illinois. State government should assume a much larger share of responsibility, with new funding targeted at school districts with the lowest levels of property wealth and school districts with the highest concentrations of low-income students. Property tax reform might be better handled as a separate issue. ■

REDUCING STIGMA THROUGH PUBLIC EDUCATION CAMPAIGNS

Voices for Illinois Children is a vital partner in two public education campaigns that are changing people's perceptions and helping them talk about issues of critical importance—the social, emotional and mental well-being of children and the positive impact of foster care.

Research tells us that children who possess strong social and emotional skills achieve better academic outcomes and develop more positive connections with peers and adults. Research also shows that families who are concerned about the mental well-being of their child are often afraid to ask for help.

That's where the **Say it out loud** campaign comes in. Lorrie Rickman Jones, Ph.D., director of mental health for the Illinois Department of Human Services,

says, "This campaign is about helping people find an easier way to talk about this critical component of our whole health." Caregivers, schools and communities all play a role in assuring that children are mentally healthy.

From its bright yellow **Say it out loud** T-shirts to its, clear, resource-packed website, www.mentalhealthillinois.org, the campaign presents a positive, strength-based message, shares the stories of real people, and spreads valuable and credible information about mental health. Launched in May, the two-year campaign is sponsored by the Illinois Department of Human Services, Division of Mental Health, and the Illinois Children's Mental Health Partnership (ICMHP). The campaign was developed by Chicago's Metropolitan

Group and has already touched the lives of many across our state. Voices is one of the lead partners of ICMHP.

Jasmine, who is living with bipolar disorder, and her mother Letechia, "say it out loud."



Chiketa, Richard and Ozzie share their stories for the "I'm doing good" phase of the Foster Kids Are Our Kids campaign.

Chiketa, Ozzie and Richard are the stars of the third phase of the **Foster Kids Are Our Kids** campaign, which launches this month on WGN-TV. Contrary to perceptions that foster kids are "lost causes," these foster care alumni can say with confidence, "**I'm doing good.**" They are sharing their experiences in television commercials, print ads, posters, and other forms of media created by Better World Advertising, headquartered in San Francisco.

Along with the earlier messages, "Don't write me off," and "We're making foster care better," the "**I'm doing good**" message is challenging negative perceptions and

encouraging the public to support children in foster care. Voices leads this campaign together with more than 60 child welfare agencies around the state. ■



MOBILIZING IN EAST ST. LOUIS

Voices board member Joyce Smith helped to found the first Voices Leadership Committee (VLC) in East St. Louis. “I saw the VLC as an opportunity to use the relationships I’d developed over the years in a productive way,” Smith says. “Getting Voices going all over the state would help us do more for children.”



Program director at the Lessie Bates Davis Neighborhood House and longtime community volunteer and activist, Smith has recruited key people to the VLC, including business leaders, legislators, local elected officials, national leaders, agency directors and parents. Her leadership has brought visibility to an impoverished and struggling community through Kids Count press conferences and many other VLC activities.

“I want to rally people locally around Voices’ statewide agenda, but we are also looking at the things that are happening close to home. We have serious problems with crime, drugs, unemployment, and families who have used up their TANF benefits,” Smith says. Recently, she hosted a VLC meeting that

empowered residents, including East St. Louis Mayor Alvin Parks, Jr., to talk about these issues openly. Then community leaders met with Congressman Jerry Costello to share their concerns and to ask to work with him on solving problems in the community. In the spring they plan to have a forum involving elected officials, business and civic leaders, as well as people working with low-income residents.

“Because of Voices, people from as far away as East St. Louis are heard by the powers-that-be in Springfield,” Smith concludes. “Most economically depressed areas have similar problems. When we mobilize, we are stronger and more effective.” ■



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NEW STAFF INCREASES VOICES' STRENGTHS IN COMMUNICATIONS, ADVOCACY AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Melissa Meighen, director of communications, brings to Voices a career-long dedication to social justice and a personal passion to create positive change for kids and families. Before joining Voices, Meighen applied her experience and enthusiasm on behalf of her agency clients at Kathy Schaeffer and Associates in Chicago. Earlier, she was with The Kamber Group in New York City. "Technology affords us an even greater capacity to reach – and galvanize – more citizens than ever before," said Meighen. "But we need to remember that it's often the personal touch, the human connection, that actually moves us beyond interest and into action."

Sheena Panoor is Voices' community engagement associate. She works with community leaders to build broad support for issues and programs that help all Illinois children thrive and succeed. Prior to joining Voices, Panoor provided individual, family and group psychotherapy to children and youth as a clinical social worker in both inpatient and outpatient mental health settings. She also has a background in community organizing and afterschool and youth development programming. Sheena is a licensed clinical social worker and holds a master's degree in social work from

Smith College and a bachelor's degree in economics from Mount Holyoke College.

Kelley Talbot, policy associate, works to improve families' everyday quality of life through strengthening their economic security. This includes efforts to expand the state Earned Income Tax Credit and foster progressive tax reform. Prior to joining Voices, Talbot was the assistant director of external relations at the Illinois Board of Higher Education, handling legislative and media affairs. She gained four years of legislative experience while on the Illinois House staff and helped run successful state representative campaigns in the north suburbs. Talbot has a bachelor's degree in public policy from Occidental College in Los Angeles. ■

GIVE AN E-MAIL, GET A TOTE

Sign up to receive our e-news alerts, and we'll snail mail you a reusable shopping bag. Send your name, home address, and e-mail address to info@voices4kids.org. It's our practical way to connect our passion for children to our concern for the environment. ■

VOICES WELCOMES NEW BOARD MEMBER LINDA COLEMAN-CLEVELAND

Linda Coleman-Cleveland brings to Voices for Illinois Children a passion



for health care and education issues and the firm belief that that all children deserve the chance to grow into healthy and responsible adults.

A graduate of DePaul University and the Lake Forest Graduate School of Management, Coleman-Cleveland enjoyed a successful career in human resources with A.C. Neilsen, Federated Department Stores and UBS.

Coleman-Cleveland is currently a full-time mom who is active in her community and her church. She and her husband, Michael Cleveland, have three children and live in Frankfort, Ill. ■

CORRECTION: *In our 2007 annual report, Mrs. Miriam Kelm should have been listed as member of the Founders Council (\$1,000 and above). We apologize for the oversight.*



CASA OF COOK COUNTY RECEIVES NATIONAL CITY CHILDREN'S CHAMPION AWARD

Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA) of Cook County is the 2008 winner of the 5th Annual National City Children's Champion award, given in partnership with Voices for Illinois Children. This award honors an organization that contributes in an exemplary way to children being safe, healthy, loved and well educated. CASA was chosen from among more than 350 nominations submitted to local National City branches in Illinois.

The award comes with a \$10,000 grant, generously sponsored by the bank. "National City is honored to support organizations that work so fervently to improve the lives of Illinois children," said Joseph A. Gregoire, president of Illinois Banking, National City.

Working with the Juvenile Court and foster care system, CASA of Cook County advocates for thousands of abused and neglected children in Illinois. Highly trained volunteer advocates provide a voice for foster children on a case-by-case basis, fighting to help guarantee that each child can grow up in a safe, loving and permanent home. CASA volunteers also closely monitor children's specific situations and identify community resources to ensure that they receive appropriate services and treatment. In Illinois, more than 600 children a year benefit from CASA's activities.

Fifteen other local honorees from across Illinois also received a grant of \$1,000 each. For a complete list of these outstanding organizations, visit www.voices4kids.org/getinvolved/nominateachampion. ■

SUPPORT VOICES WITH A DONATION AT WORK

Many of you have the opportunity to support the work of Voices for Illinois Children by making a payroll contribution through your employer's charitable giving program. Voices is represented by Community Shares of Illinois, an umbrella group for Illinois' leading non-profits. Most workplace giving campaigns are conducted from September through November, so now is the time to look for pledge cards in your office.

Look for Community Shares of Illinois in campaign literature and on pledge cards at all state agencies, all state colleges and universities, federal agencies in most parts of Illinois, dozens of school districts, cities, counties and many private employers.

If your employer doesn't offer you the chance to support Voices, visit Community Shares of Illinois at www.cs-il.org, call **312-379-0190** or **217-352-6533**. You may also contact Shawn Gavin at sgavin@voices4kids.org, **312-516-5552**. ■

Do you want to learn more about the issues or how to support our policy agenda for kids? Visit www.voices4kids.org to

- Make a donation
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- Contact your legislator.

RAISE YOUR VOICE FOR CHILDREN!

Voices for Illinois Children

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