

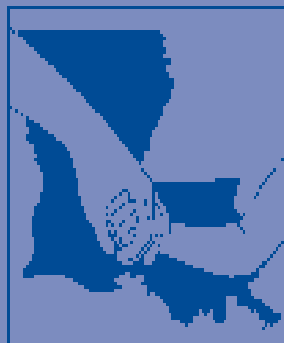


December  
2008

## *The Issues*

- Healthcare
- Childcare  
& Early  
Education
- Juvenile  
Justice
- Family  
Economic  
Security

# Annual Report



**AGENDA  
FOR  
CHILDREN**

A VOICE FOR LOUISIANA'S CHILDREN

# Mission Statement

The mission of Agenda for Children is to make Louisiana a state in which all children can thrive. For us, this means that the basic needs of children and families must be met. It means that children must be nurtured and well taught, beginning in the early years and continuing through adolescence. It means that children must be protected from harm, and it means that we must act intentionally to combat racism and other forms of oppression.

## History

The galvanizing issue that led to the creation of Agenda for Children was child care licensing. Louisiana lost its mandatory licensing law in the wave of deregulation that characterized the Reagan era. From 1981 to 1985, a loose knit group of child care stakeholders and advocates across the state worked to get mandatory licensing back on the books, and succeeded in 1985. At that point we realized that there was more to do and we had the beginnings of a movement

In about the same time frame, Governor Edwards created a Commission on Children and Youth – chaired by Margaret Pereboom, a Baton Rouge child psychologist and public interest lobbyist. Margaret had been one of the most avid and active partners in the licensing movement. As Margaret told it, the commission issued a 71 page report with long lists of recommendations. The only one that came to fruition was the recommendation to create an independent child advocacy organization outside of state government. Thus was Agenda for Children launched.

## Childcare & Early Education

Agenda for Children's commitment to the well being of children includes statewide and national policy advocacy as well as "on the ground" regional support for children, families and child care providers. Agenda for Children operates the Child Care Resource and Referral service (CCR&R) for eighteen parishes in southeast Louisiana, including Greater New Orleans, the Houma/Thibodaux area, and the North Shore. Over the last 12 months CCR&R helped 947 parents who called looking for help finding child care. Our parent counselors also received over seventeen hundred calls from child care centers and providers for assistance with a variety of questions. Parents want to know the ins and outs of the child care assistance policies. They want to know how to help parents who can't come up with the funds for the tuition or the co-payments. They call for help finding jobs, GED programs, mental health services, and just plain problem-solving with a telephone counselor.

The CCR&R Technical Assistance program offers on-site guidance to child care centers and family child care homes to assist them in their efforts to provide quality care. This year our TA visitors made 655 visits to child care providers. CCR&R also conducts training sessions and offers professional development for child care personnel. Over the past twelve months, our "Positive Steps" training program provided 394 sessions, generally three hours in length, for almost 8,000 participants over the three regions of southeast Louisiana.

In the wake of Hurricane Katrina, many child care centers lost their facilities and as families came back to work and re-populate the region, finding child care became a significant challenge. In January 2006, Agenda for Children convened a group of child care stakeholders and created the Rebuild Child Care Collaborative. The working partners of the Rebuild Collaborative currently include United Way of the Greater New Orleans Area, LSU, the Institute of Mental Hygiene, the state's Department of Social Services, the United Way's Women's Leadership Council, and Agenda for Children. To date, the Rebuild Collaborative has completed five newly opened or restored child care centers in Greater New Orleans, including St. Bernard Parish. Two more centers are poised to open soon and two more will open in January. The Rebuild Collaborative has created 295 new "slots" for families in need of child care, with an additional 100 plus in the pipeline. To date, we have spent 1.8 million dollars on rebuilding and an additional one hundred thousand on equipment and supplies.

Funding for the Rebuild Collaborative has been provided by the Packard Foundation, the Kresge Foundation, United Way of America, the Louisiana Disaster Recovery Foundation, AmeriCares, the Edwards Foundation, the Claiborne Foundation, and the Emeril Lagasse Foundation .

Louisiana's new Quality Start (QS) rating system is up and working. QS offers tax incentives to centers, parents, and child care personnel to support the delivery of high quality child care. In this region, 99 centers have enrolled in QS at the one-star level and some have reached to the four-star level!

## Healthcare

There is also a business tax credit for businesses that donate to CCR&R. Any Louisiana business that donates up to \$5,000 to the CCR&R in their region will receive a fully refundable, dollar for dollar credit on their tax return!

This year the Louisiana Legislature enacted an expansion of the state's LA 4 preschool program that will phase in universal pre-k to reach all eligible children by the year 2013. This legislation will expand income limits each year until all children are able to attend LA4 free. The legislation also provides for a "diverse delivery" system offering pre-k classes in child care centers and Head Start programs.

Healthcare is also not a new issue for Agenda for children. In the 1980's, when Congress passed the first Medicaid expansion, LA was one of two states that were slow to pick up the option. Finally, in 1997, when Congressman Buddy Roemer was running for Governor, we found an opportunity to ask him to about the SOBRA. If you are elected, we asked, will you sign our state on with the SOBRA? We haven't done that, he asked? No, we said. He did get elected and that was one of the first actions on his agenda

Agenda for Children's commitment to children's health care solidified in 1998 with the passage of the State Children's Health Insurance Program (SCHIP). Funded first by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and now by the Louisiana Department of Health and Hospitals, we are part of a statewide coalition called Covering Kids and Families (CKF) that has successfully reached thousands of children and families across the state to assist them in enrolling in Medicaid. Over the past decade, advocates, in close partnership with DHH, have succeeded in increasing the number of Louisiana children who have access to the health care they need. Louisiana has cut the rate of uninsured children from twenty-one percent to twelve percent.

At the federal level, advocates and legislators worked to enact SCHIP reauthorization, only to be thwarted by a presidential veto. The new administration, however, is poised to make SCHIP a top priority!

Louisiana rolled out the LaCHIP Affordable Plan this year, extending Medicaid coverage to children whose families earn up to 250% of poverty level. This expansion helps fill the gap for families that earn too much to qualify for Medicaid but not enough to afford private health insurance.

DHH also unveiled a new plan, called Health First, to move most children currently served by LaCHIP and Medicaid into a Provider Service Network similar to private health insurance. The plan will require legislative approval as well as approval from CMS before taking effect. The process will be monitored by health care advocates, including Agenda for Children, as it ensues.

Louisiana continues to incarcerate youth at a higher rate than the national average. Two thirds of youth in custody in Louisiana are non-violent offenders, children whose needs could be more effectively addressed through community-based services including mental health services and special education classrooms. Our youth of color are incarcerated at a rate that is four times that of the rate for youth that are white.

Pursuant to the closure of the notorious Tallulah juvenile facility in 2003, the Legislature approved a comprehensive juvenile justice reform bill. The state was able to dramatically reduce the number of incarcerated youth from 1,200 in 2003 to less than 600 in 2008. There is still work to be done! Following best national practices, the original Act calls for creating regional facilities that can provide youth with therapeutic services in small facilities closer to home. This component has yet to be realized. However, plans are on the table!

Poverty tends to underlie most, if not all, the indicators that challenge children and families. Everything is just a lot harder if you don't have enough money to get you through the week. Louisiana has ranked 49th among the states in overall child well-being for more than a decade. We know that our state's high child poverty rate contributes to the negative outcomes on virtually every measure of child well-being, from the number of premature babies to the number of students that drop out of school. In 2006, an estimated 283,000 Louisiana children lived in poverty.

The 2008 Legislature created the Child Poverty Prevention Council, with a goal of reducing child poverty by 50% over the next decade. Agenda for Children is an active member of the Council. Prior to this legislation, in June of 2007, we created a coalition called "Poor No More" to develop a policy agenda for reducing poverty.

## Juvenile Justice

## Family Economic Security

## Education

## 2009 Policy Agenda

The Poor No More agenda includes the following recommendations for helping poor and low-income Louisiana families:

- raising the threshold for state tax liability so that families living at poverty level do not have to pay state taxes
- increasing the state earned income tax credit
- supporting families in the low-income workforce by allowing them to keep their benefits such as food stamps and child care assistance until they reach a living wage
- expanding Medicaid to serve more parents

Louisiana's schools are failing too many students. We rank 49th in the percentage of fourth graders who are proficient or better in reading. Our dropout rate is among the worst in the nation. Researchers estimate only 64% of youth who entered 9th grade in 2001 graduated with their peers four years later. This is significantly lower than the national average 75 percent. Statewide, only 78 percent of students in eighth grade met the LEAP promotional standard, meaning that the remaining 22 percent did not score high enough to be promoted to the next grade.

**Budget:** With a \$1.3 billion deficit looming over the next fiscal year, it is likely that cuts will be proposed in vital services for children and families. Health and education make up a disproportionate share of spending from the state general fund, leaving scant resources for vulnerable children and low-income working families. To ensure Louisiana's future prosperity, advocates will need to watch carefully that our children are not left farther behind when budget decisions are discussed.

**Health care:** SCHIP reauthorization in Congress is imperative and, at the state level, Medicaid expansion for parents. We need to have healthy parents fully equipped to take care of their children!

**Child care and early education:** Child Care licensing standards should be reviewed and strengthened and consistent oversight made a priority.

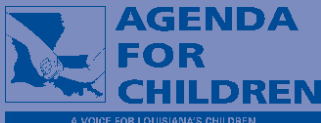
Parent co-payments should be reduced, especially for families with more than one child in care.

**Juvenile Justice:** The key elements of the 2003 juvenile justice reform should be fully implemented, including the establishment of regional treatment centers and a commitment to best practices for the well-being of youth and their families.

- Implement Positive Behavior Support in every school
- Open regional therapeutic treatment centers
- Ensure a smooth closure of the Jetson Correctional Facility and take measures to prevent similar abusive practices in the two remaining detention facilities

**Child Welfare:** Support for transition plans for children aging out of foster care must be available. Priorities for keeping siblings together, assuring school stability, and assuring family connections as appropriate should be strong components of plans for each child and family. Continue reform efforts and take advantage of federal funding for options that support vulnerable families and children

- funds for kinship care and guardianship programs
- family connections
- transition plans for children aging out of foster care
- keeping siblings together
- school stability



Agenda for Children invites you to partner with us to make Louisiana a state in which all children can thrive. To learn more about our initiatives and programs please see our website at [www.agendaforchildren.org](http://www.agendaforchildren.org) or call us at 586-8509.