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Young people speak up for the poor

Frankfort rally draws hundreds

By Deborah Yetter

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FRANKFORT, Ky. -- Working with children at Louisville's Wayside Christian Mission, Chris Head, a senior at St. Xavier High School, said he's happy when they are able to leave the homeless shelter as their parents find jobs and housing.

But too often, said Chris, who volunteers at the shelter, they return when the parents can't make enough at low-wage jobs to support their families.

"It breaks my heart to see children when they come back," he said.

Chris joined seven other high school students yesterday who spoke at a rally in Frankfort sponsored by Kentucky Youth Advocates on behalf of legislation and policy changes they said could lead to dramatic gains for some of Kentucky's poorest citizens.

Speakers urged the state to provide better health care for children, better early-childhood education and economic help for poor families, including more restrictions on so-called "payday" lending and a state earned income tax [credit](#) for low-income workers.

"We serve as a voice, a voice for those who can't be here today and a voice for those who suffer from the ongoing effects of poverty," said Shaye Moessner, a senior at Eastern High School.

After the rally, several of the youths who spoke acknowledged that the current state budget situation -- with deep cuts proposed in areas including human services -- isn't encouraging.

Shaye said she thinks that makes yesterday's rally even more important. About 70 youths who attended planned to spend the rest of the day contacting lawmakers and urging them to support measures they said would help children and families.

"I think human services should be the main focus of government," Shaye said. "That's who they're here to serve."

About 600 adults and advocates attended the event in the Capitol rotunda.

Students also spoke yesterday in favor of adding more children to Kentucky Children's Health Insurance Program; expanding child-care assistance for poor working families; and expanding access to public preschools for poor children.

Josh Ball, a sophomore from the Harlan Independent School District, spoke on behalf of better dental care for children, saying that many counties lack enough dentists and that surveys show a high rate of untreated dental decay in young children.

Josh urges support for a bill that would require dental screenings for all children entering kindergarten.

He said in an interview that he sees the effects of dental problems among youngsters in his own community.

"There's a lot of kids that miss school because of it," he said.

Some of the youths said after the rally that some of the budget cuts proposed by Gov. Steve Beshear are hitting too close to home, including a 15 percent cut in the Kentucky Educational Excellence Scholarships that help students with good grades earn money for college.

"Why are you taking away money that's going to help higher education?" asked Ashley Offutt, an Eastern High School senior who plans to attend Eastern Kentucky University this fall.

With college costs rising, "any type of money I get will help," she said.

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