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UNTIL 3:00 a.m. EDT July 25, 2007

Contacts: Tara Grieshop-Goodwin
502-895-8167 x118
Terry Brooks
502-895-8167 x113

State posts modest improvement in child well-being report ranking

(*Louisville, KY*) The 2007 National KIDS COUNT Data Book, released today by the Annie E. Casey Foundation, brings some positive news for Kentucky. The Commonwealth moved up 2 spots to rank 40th in the annual state-by-state ranking of child well-being. However, a closer look reveals a frustrating picture for children: Kentucky only posted improvements on four of the ten indicators tracked over time, infant deaths, teen births, high school dropouts, and teens not attending school and not working. “Moving in the right direction in the overall ranking is an improvement over the past couple of years, but we still rank 3 spots below our 2004 ranking,” said Tara Grieshop-Goodwin, KIDS COUNT Coordinator at Kentucky Youth Advocates. “We ranked among the worst ten states on four points, and until we make progress in those areas, it will be difficult to make substantial overall progress.”

Among the areas of improvement, the state outpaced the national improvement on infant mortality, improving by 6 percent to rank 27th. Kentucky showed a 10 percent improvement in high school dropouts, meaning teens who are not in school, have not graduated, and do not have a high school degree or General Educational Development (GED) diploma. Still, Kentucky’s rate of 9 percent remains higher than the national rate of 7 percent, which means close to 1 out of 10 Kentucky teens is a high school dropout. A report last year from the Kentucky Auditor of Public Accounts suggests that even this

number underestimates the problem in high schools, because those students who drop out but later receive a GED diploma are not counted as dropouts.

Nationally, Kentucky ranked 45th for its percentage of teens not in school and not working, 44th for both teen death rate and securely-employed parents, and 41st for children living in poverty. The Kentucky General Assembly's passage of graduated driver's licensing in 2006 should positively impact the teen death rate in future years. According to Terry Brooks, Executive Director at Kentucky Youth Advocates, "Kentucky's 4, 5, 6, and 7-year-olds are still waiting for Kentucky legislators to step up and do what 38 states have done – tackle the number one cause of death for young children, motor vehicle crashes, with a booster seat law." In addition to moving in the wrong direction on child and teen death rates, Kentucky's rates worsened for low-weight births, securely-employed parents, and single-parent families.

"The economic indicators are a bellwether for future progress, and the message is not a positive one," said Brooks. In addition to seeing an increase in the percentage of children living with parents without secure employment (meaning neither parent worked full-time, year-round), the state showed no progress between 2000 and 2005 on the percent of children living in poverty (income below \$19,806 for a two-adult, two-child family in 2005).

The essay of the 2007 National KIDS COUNT Data Book focuses on strengthening or finding strong, permanent relationships for children in the foster care system. More than 11,000 Kentucky children lived in foster care at some point during 2004, and more than half of those children were over age 11. As recent work from the Kentucky Blue Ribbon Panel on Adoption shows, deciding whether it is in the best

interest of children to strengthen ties with birth parents or move towards finding a permanent adoptive placement for the child poses a serious challenge for Kentucky's Department for Community Based Services.

“Our challenge as a state is to make sure social workers and judges have the tools they need to make the right decisions, and we need to ensure safeguards and quality measures within the system itself,” said Brooks. Changes that have been recommended by Kentucky's Blue Ribbon Panel on Adoption, on which Brooks serves, include developing greater protections for workers in the field, increasing fees to attorneys representing children involved with the child welfare system, and ensuring that birth parents have a fair opportunity to keep or regain custody of their children.

Kentucky Youth Advocates (KYA) is a non-profit, non-partisan organization that advocates for children in the areas of health, safety, economic well-being, and education. KYA produces a companion county-by-county KIDS COUNT report for Kentucky each year.

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