

Advocates for children raise alarm

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By Jennifer D. Jordan
Journal Staff Writer

While the percentage of Rhode Island children living in poverty has dropped to 15 percent from 21 percent in recent years, child advocates worry this progress will be derailed by a series of deep cuts to welfare and other safety-net programs for low-income families proposed by Governor Carcieri.

Faced with an estimated \$384-million deficit for the coming fiscal year, Carcieri, a Republican who has vowed to not raise taxes, has proposed widespread cuts to early-childhood programs, child care, health care and cash assistance for low-income families. The Democrat-led state legislature is drawing up its own spending proposal for fiscal 2009, but lawmakers have indicated they are prepared to make significant reductions and are reluctant to raise taxes.

Without such support programs, says Elizabeth Burke Bryant, executive director of Rhode Island Kids Count, struggling families will slide back into deeper poverty. The advocacy organization today releases the latest information on children's well-being, 2008 Rhode Island Kids Count Factbook, at an 8 a.m. breakfast at the Crown Plaza Hotel in Warwick, which Carcieri is expected to attend as he does annually.

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Bryant credits the investments state leaders have made over the years with the decrease in childhood poverty. She is asking lawmakers to continue their support, particularly as almost half of the state's 35,456 poor children live in extreme poverty, defined as a family of three with an income of less than \$8,353 a year.

"Our investments in child care assistance and health care have been a very important part of the success story," Bryant said. "I'm concerned that with less access to these programs, we run the risk of having that poverty statistic move in the wrong direction. We need to continue to invest in these programs that in the long run save the state a lot of money."

The proposed cuts include terminating cash assistance to 3,400 low-income children for a savings of \$8 million; reducing to two years from five the length of time families can receive welfare benefits, which include access to education and job training for parents; cutting 8,500 children from the state subsidized health care program, RIte Care; eliminating 400 of 2,800 Head Start preschool slots for a savings of \$3.3 million; and closing a preschool program called Comprehensive Services that serves about 255 low-

income 3-, 4- and 5-year-olds, diverting the \$1.5 million in federal financing to other areas.

Carcieri disagrees, saying his cuts to such programs are minimal and that all branches of state government must tighten their belts to help bridge the budget deficit.

“The governor does not believe that the comparatively small changes he included in his budget plan will significantly impact the progress that has been achieved,” said Jeff Neal, spokesman for the governor.

CHILD ADVOCATES say they are most worried about direct cuts to children, which include early-childhood education, health care and cash assistance through the Family Independence Program.

“It’s very disturbing, what is going on in Rhode Island right now,” said Cynthia Garcia Coll, a professor of education at Brown University. “Why is it, when things get difficult, we take the most vulnerable, the most in need, and cut those people first? For me, this is upside down, going against all the data we have that says the earlier we make investments in children, the better cost benefit for society in general.”

Research shows low-income children benefit from high-quality daycare, preschool and Head Start programs, said Garcia Coll, particularly since children from families at or below the federal poverty level lag 18 months behind their peers in learning and social skills by age 4.

“We know that poverty is the strongest predictor in a child’s development in terms of education, health, risky behavior and incarcerations,” she said. “Cutting [early-childhood] investments is the worst thing we can do for kids.”

Garcia Coll said she is also troubled by the governor’s executive order to crack down on illegal immigrants, pointing out that the vast majority of the children of immigrants living in Rhode Island were born here — 88 percent, according to the U.S. Census 2006 American Community Survey, cited in the factbook.

“You ask immigrant parents, and 98 percent of them think a good education is the best thing they can give their children, and 96 percent want their kids to be engineers, doctors, lawyers,” said Garcia Coll, who is writing a book on immigrants. “In terms of family values, immigrant families have the most American family values you can imagine. They are dreaming the American dream, like any other generation.”

Linda Katz, policy director of the Poverty Institute, says she is concerned about the proposed cuts to 3,400 children who receive cash payments through the Family Independence Program, and other reductions to the welfare program that is designed to help low-skilled parents get jobs within five years. It also provides a cushion for parents with disabilities that prevent them from working, including mental illness. Carcieri wants to limit the program to two years.

“These changes will impact the state’s most vulnerable children,” Katz said. “This will end the child entitlement to the safety-net payments of \$6 per child per day, and limit family eligibility for cash assistance to 24 months in a lifetime.”

Child and poverty advocates say that in many respects, FIP has been a success. Since the state adopted it a decade ago, the number of families receiving cash assistance has dropped in half, from 18,428 households to 9,993, and state spending on the program fell from \$58 million a year in 1996 to \$16.1 million in 2007, according to Rhode Island Kids Count.

To help parents get job skills and return to the work force, the state invested in child-care subsidies, early-childhood programs and health care for low-income families. With those investments taken into account, welfare and child care cost \$55.3 million last year — \$3 million less than the state was paying in just cash assistance 11 years ago.

In addition, Katz said the \$554 monthly payment to poor families has not changed since 1989, while the cost of living has gone up 67 percent.

“The state should be investing in these parents to give them the skills they need to move to stable employment, and we need to focus on making sure the kids are healthy and getting well educated,” Katz said. “I’ve been doing this for 30 years and I’ve never before seen a budget that looked at making the dramatic cuts that will significantly impact the well-being of Rhode Island children.”

To see a copy of the report, visit: www.rikidscount.org.

jjordan@projo.com