

# Coalition for poor trims its requests

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By Karen Lee Ziner

Journal Staff Writer

PROVIDENCE — Scaling down its requests from last year, the One Rhode Island coalition is asking the General Assembly to “do no harm” to the state’s struggling families and children and pass legislation that helps low-income families meet their basic needs.

The coalition of 160-plus advocacy, religious, labor and social-service organizations yesterday released its “Do No Harm” legislative platform for fiscal year 2008; the sixth in as many years that focuses on programs to increase family income, provide access to education and training, affordable childcare, health care, housing and food.

“Today we call on our government officials to make incremental investments in programs that help families work, pay their rent, put food on the table and have access to health care,” said Rabbi Alan Flam, president of the Rhode Island Board of Rabbis. “We believe that putting children and families first is vital, and we will be working with legislators to pass the One RI Platform and stave off cuts that hurt our children and families.”

Given Governor Carcieri’s proposed budget for the next fiscal year, the coalition faces an uphill battle.

Carcieri called this year “a time for sacrifices,” when he unveiled a \$7-billion state budget that includes knocking thousands of people off the state subsidized childcare and health-insurance rolls. Carcieri is also hoping to remove 5,750 people from the state subsidized health-insurance program, RItE Care, to save another \$19.9 million, by conducting more rigorous reviews of citizenship documents.

“Our first priority is to make sure we don’t go backwards,” said Linda Katz, policy director for the Poverty Institute at Rhode Island College which facilitates the coalition and assists in providing data to support its platform.

While last year’s One Rhode Island coalition platform carried a \$20-million price tag, Katz said the Do No Harm platform for fiscal year 2008 seeks slightly more than \$8 million in requests.

“We did want to take into account the fiscal situation of the state, and we’ve modified our requests to really target the investments we really think will make

the most difference for children and working families,” said Katz. “In terms of making progress, we’re seeking fairly modest changes to current programs.”

The priorities include increasing the state’s refundable Earned Income Tax Credit; expanding access to subsidized childcare for working families; and improving the economic well-being of very poor children on the Family Independence Program (FIP) by increasing child-support payments and parent’s earnings.

Specifics include:

- Increasing the refundable earned income tax credit to 5 percent of the federal amount, to benefit 42,000 working Rhode Islanders
- Increasing the amount of child support provided to a child receiving cash assistance through the Family Independence Program
- Increasing eligibility limits for the subsidized childcare program to 250 percent of the federal poverty level, from the 225 percent cap of four years ago. (Carcieri proposes rolling back eligibility to 150 percent of the federal poverty level.)
- Expanding eligibility for the RIte Smiles program enacted last year to allow enrollment for children over age 6

“As the governor’s cuts have reached deeper and deeper, I think there are more people who are concerned that the priorities of the state are going off track,” said Katz, who expressed hope that “the broad base of concern for the cuts will be effective in preventing them, and that even in tough budget times, we can see some incremental progress in making life better for Rhode Island’s children.”

Some 40 people turned out to the coalition’s news conference at the Federal Hill House on Courtland Street in Providence.

In response to the “Do No Harm” platform, Carcieri spokesman Michael Maynard said Rhode Island “continues to be a very generous state in terms of providing for the elderly and the poor. In fact, we have one of the most generous social-service systems in the country, including the RIte Care program, which the governor has preserved.”

Maynard said Carcieri “is pressing for reforms in several programs because our current system is too costly to the Rhode Island taxpayers.”

In light of that, said Maynard, the governor’s budget “seeks spending reductions across the board and we have tried to be as fair as we could.” According to Maynard, General Assembly leaders “largely agree with the governor and have suggested deeper cuts may be necessary.”

Maynard also underscored that the governor has proposed a 5.4-percent increase in state aid for education, and proposes another \$7.5 million investment in affordable housing in fiscal year 2008.

Katie Martinka, a parent preparing for work, expressed concern at the news conference about the impact of childcare cuts on working families and businesses.

“As a woman who will be re-entering the work force when I complete my certificate program in August, it scares me to hear that childcare assistance may not be available to me. This will impact many working moms like myself who cannot afford the high cost of childcare.”

Elizabeth Burke Bryant, executive director of RI KIDS Count, spoke of the proposed expansion of the RIte Smiles program that would allow enrollment of children over the age of 6.

“Pain caused by dental disease can significantly restrict a child’s ability to perform in school and to receive adequate nutrition,” said Burke Bryant. “Rhode Island’s RIte Smiles program is being watched nationally as a model for increasing poor children’s access to primary and preventive dental care ... we look forward to building on the program’s success and providing care for more at-risk children.”

[kziner@projo.com](mailto:kziner@projo.com)