

Another View

... and support for pre-K, child abuse and housing

By Carol Obando-Derstine

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As the process of approving the 2008-2009 state budget moves along, we implore our local legislators to keep the needs of our children and families at the forefront. It is imperative they do so despite the slowing economy. Our collective future depends on it!

Last month, the Children's Coalition of the Lehigh Valley (CCLV) conducted an annual Family Policy Summit where we assembled leaders from diverse backgrounds to unite in advocating for the well-being of Lehigh Valley children and their families. As a result, we identified four priorities that we feel are the most pressing needs of children: school finance, preschool education, child abuse and housing.

Our top priority this year is to support the [Pennsylvania](#) School Funding Campaign. We call upon Lehigh Valley legislators to establish and fully finance by 2013 a comprehensive and sustainable public education funding plan based on the core principles of adequacy, equity, efficiency, accountability and predictability. The Legislature took the first steps last year when it acknowledged the wide disparity that exists in education funding based on where a child lives and commissioned the Costing-Out Study to determine the cost to have every child meet the state's academic standards. The Costing-Out Study concluded that Pennsylvania underfunds basic education by an average of \$2,414 per student -- a total of \$4.3 billion. This results in 471 of Pennsylvania's 501 school districts needing more resources. The state's over-reliance on local taxes for public education funding creates inequities across the Commonwealth and that needs to change!

Pennsylvania has taken significant steps to provide high-quality early

education and care for its children through programs like Keystone STARS, Child Care Works, Head Start and Pre-K Counts. We call on the legislators to support the governor's proposed investment of \$48.8 million for the improvement of child-care programs through Keystone STARS and increased access to child-care subsidies through Child Care Works. We also feel the General Assembly should support an additional \$9 million investment for Child Care Works to reduce the large number of children on the waiting list.

We also ask them to increase funding by \$12.6 for Pennsylvania Pre-K Counts, which provides high-quality pre-K to 11,000 at-risk children across the state to serve additional children. In December 2007, Pre-K Counts sites had waiting lists of over 2,200 children. It should be noted that research indicates that for every \$1 invested in such programs, taxpayers can save between \$7 and \$17 in future costs.

We have also identified child abuse as a very important priority. It is paramount that we identify the underlying causes of child abuse and find ways to strengthen families. In this regard, we ask that our legislators support three things in the final 2008-2009 budget agreement, above and beyond the child welfare funding increase put forth by Gov. Rendell:

A \$2.5 million increase for the Nurse Family Partnership (NFP), which is \$1.5 million above Gov. Rendell's request.

A 3 percent cost-of-living allowance for domestic and sexual violence agencies requiring a total new investment of \$561,060.

A 3 percent cost-of-living allowance for community-based private child welfare organizations working in partnership with county children and youth agencies and the state network of family centers.

Lastly, the housing crisis is on everyone's minds as many Pennsylvanians are losing their homes. It is imperative for the state to embrace initiatives to redress this. An example is the Pennsylvania Housing Affordability and Rehabilitation Enhancement Act (PHARE), which has bi-partisan support.

These four priorities are inextricably connected, and true success is achieved when all of these needs are met. Success in school, avoiding entering the welfare or criminal justice systems, and maturing into productive, tax-paying adults depend on serving all of these needs. We urge our local legislators to do the right thing by keeping the needs of

Pennsylvania's children at the top of the state's agenda.

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