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The Children's Agenda: A Promising Beginning

LIEUTENANT GOVERNOR MARLENE JOHNSON

In Minnesota and across the nation our children are in crisis. The almost frenetic pace of change in our society has dramatically affected the American lifestyle and in the span of one generation, we have changed the definition of the family. In Minnesota, more than one-half of the mothers with preschool age children work outside the home and nearly seventy percent of the mothers with children age 6-17 are employed outside the home. Economic survival, not career options, is most often the reason why these women are employed.

These situations alone create unprecedented circumstances for children but combine with that the lack of the support systems which were formerly provided by the extended family and the community and one sees parents unable to find the help they need. They look for reliable, safe, affordable child care but they can't find it. They look for extended day care before and after school but they can't find it. They look for advice on dealing with issues such as drug abuse and teen pregnancy but they can't find it.

In addition, a growing number of families face economic hardships. They have come to be known as the working poor, families in which one or more members are employed at minimum and below minimum wage. They are poor because a full time minimum wage job pays \$7,584 per year. (Based on the 1990 Minnesota minimum wage of \$3.95.) These families fall below the federal poverty guidelines, (\$10,060 for a family of three), rarely have health care benefits, and look to government programs and social service agencies for survival.

Add to the children of the working poor the 100,000 children who depend solely on public assistance and a startling statistic appears: one-third of the people living in poverty in Minnesota are children. For these children poverty means poor nutrition, unsafe housing, and inadequate health care. Further, it is well-documented that these children face tough times ahead. They are more likely to: continue the cycle of poverty, become teen parents, succumb to drug abuse, and drop out of school.

The children in crisis are in rural and urban areas: they are African-American, Caucasian, Hispanic, Asian, and Native American. They are confused and they are in pain. They need our help.

Marlene Johnson is the Lieutenant Governor of Minnesota and the state's leading child advocate. She sits on the board of directors of the National Child Care Action Campaign and is a 1989 recipient of the Children's Defense Fund Children's Champion Award. She is a graduate of Macalester College.

The Children's Agenda

The Children's Policy Academy

Recognizing children as Minnesota's most valuable resource, the Children's Policy Academy convened in August 1988 to identify a series of policy goals to address the needs of children. The academy, comprised of policy makers, child advocates, elected officials, and leaders in the corporate community responded to their charge with a series of policy goals which ultimately became the Children's Agenda.

- Minnesota will achieve a 96 percent high school graduation rate by 1996.
- All high school graduates will have the basic skills necessary for work or future education.
- We will provide for the basic needs of all children: housing, nutrition, health care, parenting, safety, self-esteem, and growth.
- We will provide support to families and children to avoid and cope with high-risk behavior.
- We will provide support for parents in their role as parents through assistance from government agencies, employers, professional, and community organizations.
- We will structure education to meet individual needs and support transition to a self-sufficient adulthood.
- We will strengthen the link between education and the job market.
- We will coordinate public, private, state, and local efforts to meet these goals.

Components of the Children's Agenda

For the first time Minnesotans have worked together to develop a package of programs and initiatives to meet the basic needs of children and strengthen the families in which they live. Knowing full well that children's problems cannot be solved through the work of one agency or one branch of government, the departments of Human Services, Health, Jobs and Training, Public Safety and State Planning collaborated to formulate an agenda of which children would be the primary beneficiaries. Further, for the first time the Minnesota State Senate and the Minnesota House of Representatives committees on Human Services and Education held joint hearings on a single package of items.

During the 1989 legislative session, the Children's Agenda became a rallying point for many constituent groups and it gained momentum as people began to realize that helping kids made good sense. The result of this effort was more than the almost \$36 million in additional monies allocated to children's programs; it represented a strong commitment to our children and to the future of Minnesota.

Meeting the Basic Needs of Children

At the heart of the Children's Agenda are those programs which are "tried and true"— programs which have a history of success. For these programs, additional dollars were requested. In addition, some badly needed new projects were funded. In the category of Child Care and Child Development are programs such as:

- Headstart- one of the most successful and effective of all child and family development programs.
- The Child Care Fund- to subsidize the cost of child care for families working or going to school.
- The Child Care Development Fund- to start up new child care programs.

Initiatives to prevent young people from dropping out of school include:

- A Minority Faculty Fund which will enable school districts to hire minority teachers to provide support and role models for minority students.
- A Teen Parent Transportation program to provide the flexibility the students need to finish school.
- Alternative education programs as well as those tied to jobs in the community which help young people adjust to education in a non-traditional setting.

The Children's Agenda also addresses the need for increased and improved health care for children. In place now are new guidelines stipulating that the Children's Health Plan which previously provided health care for poor children up to the age of eight, now cover children up to age eighteen. These families also now have available to them mental health services covered by Medical Assistance.

Strengthening Minnesota's Families

The second general category of programs in the Children's Agenda is a series of efforts to provide services and support for Minnesota's families. Programs like the Early Childhood Family Education program provide support and training in parenting skills.

Another prong of the family support system is a group of programs that deal with the issue of minority adoptions as well as the adoption and foster care of special needs children.

Where Do We Go From Here?

A great deal of progress has been made. Existing programs have been made stronger and new programs have been put in place. This is a good start.

The Children's Policy Academy recommended the formation of a Children's Commission to clearly articulate the needs of children and to develop goals for meeting those needs. Working together, religious leaders, business people, nonprofit organizations, foundations, urban coalitions, unions, commissioners, and local elected officials will work for no other purpose than the well being of Minnesota's children.

The Children's Agenda has made many things possible for many children and their families: continued funding and the establishment of the Children's Commission will create even more possibilities. But until all Minnesotans hear the message that our children are in trouble and act to alleviate the pain and confusion they experience, the task of making better lives for our children won't be accomplished.