



BUILDING BETTER LIVES

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Children Must be Top Election Priority

*Advocates ask federal, state candidates for office:
Will you strengthen programs that are good for our children?*

SPRINGFIELD, IL – Thousands of children in Illinois live in poverty, have no health insurance and lack access to quality education. But these children are largely invisible in the 2008 campaigns and related media coverage. In response, local residents, policymakers and advocates Wednesday called on candidates for election at the state and federal levels to make children's issues their top priority.

This was the message of Step Up for Kids Day, a national, non-partisan effort to focus candidates' attention on children's well-being. The effort was led in Illinois by Voices for Illinois Children, a non-partisan, non-profit advocacy group.

"There's a fundamental question we need to ask ourselves: Are we willing to stand by and allow our children to lose out - to deny them the opportunity to succeed?" said Jerome Stermer, president of Voices for Illinois Children. "I think most Americans would insist that the answer is 'no,' and demand that we do better. We can have a tremendous impact on children's lives if we commit sufficient resources to quality initiatives."

Over thirty other local, regional and statewide organizations endorsed the Step Up for Kids Day effort in Illinois. Representatives from several of them joined a Statehouse news conference with Voices and several state leaders who face no contested races in November.

"Today is about highlighting how policies at every level – local, state and federal – can work together to give children and families the comprehensive tools they need to thrive," said state Rep. Don Moffit (R-Galesburg). "We must use our limited resources wisely, focusing on programs with a proven track record. Research repeatedly demonstrates that the returns on these investments in kids are many times greater than their cost."

With the latest figures indicating that 9.8 percent of Illinois children remain uninsured, advocates highlighted the importance of continuing to work toward providing affordable, quality health care access for children and their parents.

"The people coming through the door at Catholic Charities' clinics struggle to get basic medical care because they are uninsured or enrolled in public programs that many private practices don't accept," said Dr. Diana Widicus, the Clinic Director for Catholic Charities MedAssist program in Springfield. "Every day, I see children's faces light up when they get their first pair of glasses, and I see the relief wash over mothers who can go back to work and support their families because they've gotten the care they need. If we want families to be healthy and stable, kids and parents must have access to quality, affordable health care."

Advocates and policymakers pointed to recent progress, with Kristin Richards, Deputy Chief of Staff with the Governor's office, noting, "We're proud that Illinois is a national leader in providing health care for our children. All Kids is a groundbreaking program, and we continue working to expand and improve access to health care for children."

Advocates also pointed to early childhood education as an area in which Illinois is on the right track, thanks to such efforts as Preschool for All. However, tens of thousands of children still lack access to such services as state-supported preKindergarten and the federal Head Start program.

"Head Start has made an enormous difference in my son's life, my own life and the lives of my students," said Matt Blakey, site director of a local Head Start in Springfield. "There's no substitute for getting kids ready to learn early on, and no excuse for letting kids miss out. Policymakers must find a way to expand, fully fund and always strengthen the quality of these programs."

As the cost of living rises and incomes stagnate, local residents reminded policymakers not to lose sight of the many families struggling to pay the bills. Sheri Vaughan is a Springfield mother who vouches for the importance of state and federal tax policies that provide a boost to working families, particularly the Earned Income Tax Credit.

"I've always worked hard to support our family and give my son every opportunity to be happy and grow up healthy," Vaughan said. "The Earned Income Tax Credit helps by letting me keep more of my money at tax time, so I can put it towards basics for him, like school supplies. And if the state and federal credits grew, it would be even more helpful."

Stermer also emphasized the importance of aiming high in setting policy goals and crafting solutions – and in holding policymakers accountable for following through.

"In Illinois, we've made real progress on issues important to kids. The state Earned Income Tax Credit, Preschool for All, and All Kids are giving children and families access to critical services, and Voices for Illinois Children is proud to have supported these initiatives," said Stermer. "Yet, too many children still can't get into a nearby preschool program or into a doctor's office for a check-up. We can't stop pushing for more – for better – for our kids."

United Way of Central Illinois President John Kelker reminded Step Up participants that everyone has a role to play in promoting policies that are good for children and families. He stressed that the day was a call to action, both for electoral candidates and for the voters who must decide which candidates would best represent the interests of the youngest, most vulnerable Illinoisans.

"Step Up for Kids Day is about reminding candidates that kids come first," said Kelker, who also chairs the local Voices Leadership Committee in Springfield. "We have a responsibility to help *all* kids thrive – to help them grow up healthy and happy – and that means voters, policymakers and candidates have to get behind expanding and strengthening the programs we know work toward that goal."

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Statewide and county-by-county statistics regarding various measures of children's well-being – from health to education to families' economic security – can be found in Voices' "Illinois Kids Count 2008" databook. Check the searchable database online at <http://voices4kids.org/library/kidscount.html>, or turn to p. 56 of the paper copy of this report.