Kids Count Awards to Jerry Stermer and the Steans Family

“Don’t give up. We need the people in this room to keep working, to forge ahead with efforts to keep government honest and to get us back on track to meet the needs of the people of Illinois,” said Gov. Quinn at a packed room at Voices’ annual Kids Count dinner in September. “This has been a tough year—and there are lots of challenges ahead. But we need to make sure that all children have a chance to succeed. That’s why the work you’re all doing is so valuable, and so necessary. We must make all our voices heard, to help children today, and ensure the strength of Illinois in the future.”

Gov. Quinn had the honor of presenting the Kids Count award to Jerry Stermer, former president of Voices and now the governor’s chief of staff. Known for his commitment, collaborative spirit and deep understanding of effective advocacy, Stermer helped shape Voices for Illinois Children into a leading child advocacy group that promotes public investment in children’s education, health care, and early development.

Also honored with a Kids Count award were the Steans family—Lois and Harrison and their daughters, Jennifer, Robin, and state Senator Heather Steans. Through their family foundation, they invest their time, money, and expertise in North Lawndale, a neighborhood on Chicago’s west side. They work in partnership with community residents and organizations to support the holistic development of children birth to 5, improve public school education and engage parents and families to become more active and effective in guiding children’s positive development.

More than 450 people attended the dinner, which raised more than $350,000 for Voices for Illinois Children.

Snapshots of the pain caused by Illinois’ struggling economy include these examples: Forty young children recently lost their preschool services at the Williamson County Early Childhood Cooperative. Educators at the southern Illinois agency have also been forced to curtail out-of-school enrichment activities and slash outreach to new moms of at-risk infants and toddlers.

In a state of state budget cuts driven by economic crisis, almost everything is shrinking at the cooperative. Only three things seem to be growing: the waiting list for services, frustration among parents and teachers, and a commitment to convince policymakers to do better for children and families.

“So many of our parents don’t know where else to turn to help get their kids ready for kindergarten, or even a hot meal for their children,” said cooperative Director Linda Drust. “It’s been tough enough to make the cuts we’ve already made. I can’t imagine going further—what that would do to our community.”

Yet the ongoing economic crisis does threaten further and deeper cuts. Budget issues will dominate nearly every discussion in the upcoming spring 2010 legislative session. Only a significant revenue boost can stop the state from adding greatly to existing cuts, which already total $1 billion. Among other examples touching every corner of Illinois:

• Early childhood education and home-visiting programs that provide “parent-coaching” to the families of at-risk infants and toddlers were cut 10 percent statewide.
• Children’s mental health supports—prevention, early intervention and treatment—were slashed nearly 15 percent.
• Bilingual, alternative education and anti-truancy efforts all were cut 10 percent, and Teen REACH after-school programs by 16 percent.

Such revenue reforms will top Voices’ policy agenda for spring 2010, to protect services from further cuts and restore those already made—not to mention putting Illinois back on track to fulfill more of kids’ needs, rather than add to them.

“‘What we haven’t tried yet is a sustainable, balanced approach to stabilizing vital services for kids and families,’” said Voices President Kathy Ryg. “That means raising far more adequate revenues through a tax increase, coupled with tax-relief measures to help struggling families.”

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POOR ECONOMY, BUDGET CUTS STUN ILLINOIS CHILDREN AND FAMILIES

By Larry Joseph

President Kathy Ryg. “That means raising far more adequate revenues through a tax increase, coupled with tax-relief measures to help struggling families.”

“‘What we haven’t tried yet is a sustainable, balanced approach to stabilizing vital services for kids and families,’” said Voices President Kathy Ryg. “That means raising far more adequate revenues through a tax increase, coupled with tax-relief measures to help struggling families.”
POLITICALLY COURAGEOUS ADVOCATES STAND UP FOR KIDS

In the past two decades, Illinois has made great progress in investments for children that ensure they grow up healthy, well educated and prepared for work and life. The current economic crisis places that progress in great jeopardy.

Raising taxes is not a popular issue, but finding adequate revenues to help improve the lives of children and families in Illinois is crucial.

During the 2009 legislative session, the consequences of legislators’ failure to act began to be felt in early childhood centers, afterschool programs, mental health facilities and home visiting programs. We joined with others in issuing a massive call to action to keep children’s issues at the forefront as budget decisions were being made.

The response throughout Illinois was immediate. Citizens became even more impassioned about the potential impact of political decisions on programs benefiting children. We engaged with communities and committed advocates, many of whom are members of Voices Leadership Committees (VLCs), to develop tools, messages and advocacy strategies.

Through the State Budget Action Center on our Web site, we offered fact sheets, talking points, policy positions and updates on legislation and budget issues. We helped organize community dialogues and legislator meetings, hosted informative conference calls and sent e-alerts to help advocates make sense of an often confusing political landscape.

We would like to salute the tireless, courageous advocates of Illinois, including our fellow members of the Responsible Budget Coalition (www.abetterillinois.com), which brings together over 150 diverse organizations that represent and serve millions of Illinois residents.

Hats off to those who organized state budget community dialogues, attended numerous rallies and spoke publicly about the serious effects of budget cuts.

When committed people work together as one voice, the results can be astounding. But the job is not done. We will continue our research, refine our messages, and marshal more advocates for another legislative season. Look to Voices to help you transform your commitment, passion and political courage into effective action.

—Joan Vitale, Director of Community Engagement

FISCAL OUTLOOK FOR NEXT YEAR

Illinois’ General Funds budget enacted in July contained more than $1 billion in spending cuts, $3.4 billion in borrowing to cover pension costs, various other stop-gap measures, and no new tax revenue. The budget also overlooked the carryover deficit from FY 2009, which has taken the form of $3.9 billion in unpaid bills. Unconsolenable delays in payments to community providers are eroding the infrastructure for health and human services across the state.

Unfortunately, the fiscal outlook for FY 2011 is even bleaker. The projected deficit is at least $12.8 billion, which reflects the expiration of federal recovery funds for education and Medicaid, additional regular contributions and debt service for pension systems, continuing decline in state tax revenues, and the growing backlog of unpaid bills.

How much is $12.8 billion? This amount is equivalent to all state General Funds (GF) spending for the State Board of Education and the departments of Human Services, Children and Family Services, and Public Health combined.

To put it into broader context, the entire GF budget — aside from mandatory spending for pension costs, debt service, and other statutory transfers — is about $26 billion. Closing a $12.8 billion gap without new revenue would require spending cuts of more than 50 percent. In the absence of new revenue, Illinois faces a full-scale fiscal meltdown. Even with new revenue, tough choices will have to be made. The longer the General Assembly waits to do the right thing, the worse the situation will be.

Over the past decade, Illinois has made enormous progress in health care coverage for children, opportunities in early childhood education, access to child care services for low-income working families, and community-based services to address the mental health needs of children. Moreover, the state’s child welfare system has continued to show improvement in protecting children from abuse and neglect and providing them with safe, permanent living arrangements. The state’s huge budget deficit threatens to erase these gains. Many programs and services will be decimated, and some will be completely eliminated—with dire implications for vulnerable children and families. Illinois cannot afford to let these important investments fail.

—Larry Joseph, Director of the Budget and Tax Policy Initiative

Check www.voicesforkids.org for further updates on Voices’ policy priorities and developments.

INVESTING IN CHILDREN WILL MOVE US ALL FORWARD

When I joined Voices for Illinois Children in September, I was proud to become part of such a strong organization, with a competent staff and board, compelling mission, and history of policy accomplishments in early childhood education, health care, mental health and family economic security. Having come from the General Assembly, I didn’t need to be told that many of those gains are in jeopardy or that the state is in an unprecedented fiscal crisis.

At Voices we believe that children and families must be at the top of the state’s agenda. We support policies that improve children’s chances to grow up strong, successful and ready to contribute to our society and our economy. We focus in this newsletter on the state budget because a responsible, fair solution to the current crisis is essential to moving forward on a long-term agenda that is good for kids and vital to our future in Illinois.

Policymakers and legislators must be convinced that investing in our children—through programs like preschool, children’s mental health services, and health care coverage—will move us all forward. The dollar invested today will save the state and taxpayers more down the road—and lead to healthy, happy children, strong families and vibrant communities.

Voices is committed to engaging many more individuals, groups and communities in policy change that will produce real and lasting benefit for Illinois children. I am energized by the passion I hear when talking with people around the state about the many ways that they can raise their voices for children.

In many ways, joining Voices feels like coming home. I look forward to meeting with child advocates—old friends and new ones—listening to ideas and working together to get Illinois back on track toward becoming the best state in the nation for kids and families.

—Kathy Ryyg, President

ILLINOIS GENERAL FUNDS BUDGET ENACTED IN JULY CONTAINED MORE THAN $1 BILLION IN SPENDING CUTS.