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Florida children's instability worsens, report says

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Florida children fare worse in measures of economic well-being compared with their peers throughout the nation, according to a national report released Monday.

The Annie E. Casey Foundation provides an annual report called "Kids Count," which looks at education, health, well-being and family and community measures of children throughout the nation. Florida was ranked 38th overall, the same as last year.

For several years, Florida has ranked in the lowest quarter, said Susan Weitzel, the director of Florida Kids Count, which is based at the University of South Florida.

"The findings aren't surprising. While there's some improvement in a couple of measures, we still have a lot to do," Weitzel said.

While educational measures improved slightly — including proficiency in math and reading, and high school students graduating on time — children living in poverty and with parents lacking secure employment worsened.

And improving economic conditions is what needs the most attention, Weitzel continued.

"That also leads to educational stability and health. Without economic stability of some kind, education, health and healthy families and communities become even harder," she said.

Weitzel mentioned that the recession and housing crisis hit low-income Florida families especially hard, with a steady rise in single-parent families worsening the economic burden.

"I think we need to put some measures in place so that working families who still can't afford rent or a home to purchase have a mechanism that is not going to do more harm than good financially for them," Weitzel said.

"Children do need a roof over their head, and they do need to be able to stay in a spot for longer than a month or two. If you don't, then you fall on every other level," she continued.

Weitzel added that it's not just the lowest-income families who are struggling: Even middle-income families who are working hard are losing their homes and having trouble paying for food.

That's a reality for a quarter of families living in Alachua County and surrounding counties, said Debbie Mason, the CEO and president of United Way of North Central Florida.

"Unfortunately their wages are not sufficient to match living expenses of our community.

That's compounded by transportation issues and lack of access to affordable health care," Mason said.

As an example of how poverty affects health care, Mason cited results from a dental screening program that United Way does with the University of Florida College of Dentistry. The program screened 500 kids at 13 schools around the county, and of these, "Fifty percent of second- and third-graders had never seen a toothbrush," Mason said.

About 20 percent of families are estimated to also be "food insecure," meaning they regularly go without food.

To help combat that problem, United Way sponsors a Weekend Hunger Backpack Program for children who come to school hungry. They fill a backpack with food for the whole family for the child to take home.

United Way also has a 24-hour hotline (211) for people in need and a reduced prescription card called "FamilyWize" — free and downloadable from the United Way website — that people can use to get access to reduced-price drugs.

In the past five years, the program has saved local families nearly \$1 million, Mason said.

She added that on a positive note, the recession has brought out more awareness of struggling families.

“During the recession, people realized that they probably know someone who is hurting. It went from being a vague, faceless person with these problems, to their neighbor or church friend,” Mason said, adding, “What I think is promising is more and more employers are realizing that their low-wage employees need more support.”

One area in which Florida improved, according to the Kids Count data, was in lowering its number of teen births. However, Mason cautioned that in Alachua County, while the number of first births to teens declined, second births increased.

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