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January 12, 2009

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## **Child Advocates Release 2009 Legislative Agenda**

(Oklahoma City) - The Oklahoma Institute for Child Advocacy (OICA) unveiled its priorities for the 2009 Oklahoma legislative session, which will begin on February 2. The Agenda was developed by over 600 children and youth advocates attending the annual Fall Legislative Forum last October, and addresses the growing concerns of Oklahoma families during uncertain times.

Numerous national reports rank Oklahoma in the bottom tier of states on a number of critical issues impacting Oklahoma children, youth and families. The Children's Agenda seeks to address these identified needs by targeting four key areas, including health, youth development, the prevention of child abuse, and family poverty.

"Oklahoma is one of the unhealthiest states in the nation, including high rates of mental illness, heart disease and diabetes," reports Anne Roberts, Executive Director of OICA. "In order to turn this ship around, we simply must begin with the children."

### **HEALTH**

The majority of health problems in the 21<sup>st</sup> century are the result of human behavior, pointing to the need for making better choices regarding nutrition, physical activity and safety. Yet Oklahoma is only one of two states with no mandated health education in public schools to inform youngster about positive choices. In addition, services to help young people deal with mental health and addiction issues are sorely lacking and under-funded. Finally, the prevalence of autism in children is rising exponentially, yet private health insurance does not always cover the medically necessary interventions to treat these children – placing an enormous burden both on their parents and on the state.

#### **Children's Health Agenda:**

- Require health education in grades 6-8
- Support the multi-agency Children's Behavioral Health Initiative to address the mental health and substance abuse needs of children 0-21
- Require private health care coverage for children with autism

### **POVERTY**

Twenty percent of Oklahoma's children live in households whose family income is at or below the federal poverty level (\$21,200 per year for a family of four). Another 27% are considered "low-income" (less than 200% of FPL, or \$42,400 per year for a family of four). Oklahoma has implemented a number of successful work-support programs to help families gain employment and work toward self-sufficiency. Yet many bread-winners find that a full-time job at low wages is often not enough to support a family. Indeed, working hard and getting a raise may actually leave them with less money. This phenomenon is called the "cliff effect", whereby all benefits are abruptly cut off when a worker earns one more dollar than the eligibility limit.

#### **Children's Poverty Agenda:**

- Reduce the "cliff effect" that penalizes working families by phasing out work-support benefits more gradually.

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## **YOUTH DEVELOPMENT**

It is estimated that there are 60,000 young people in Oklahoma (ages 18-24) who are not in school or in the military and not working, and have no degree beyond high school. There are three groups of youth who are especially hard hit: youth aging out of foster care, youth exiting the juvenile justice system, and youth experiencing conditions in their daily lives that place their health, safety, physical and mental health at risk. A common risk factor among all groups is underage drinking. For most teens, the drug of choice is beer. But there is a new threat on the horizon targeted to young girls: Alcopops, flavored alcoholic beverages that are sweetened to taste like lemonade or cola. Currently, they are classified and sold “cold and ready-to-drink” alongside beer, making them cheap and easily accessible.

### **Children’s Youth-Development Agenda:**

- Create an initiative to help youth transition into adulthood through education, behavioral health, social supports and employment services.
- Appropriately reclassify flavored alcoholic beverages (Alcopops) as distilled spirits, thereby requiring such beverages to be sold only in liquor stores.

## **CHILD ABUSE**

In FY 2008, confirmed cases of child abuse and neglect in Oklahoma fell to a 10-year low of 11,714. In 1998, that number was over 16,000, evidence that the programs that Oklahoma provides to vulnerable families are working. Yet these programs are woefully under-funded and do not reach every county. Experts worry that the economic downturn, which puts families into difficult hardships, may leave parents stressed and fretful – and more susceptible to substance abuse, domestic violence and child abuse. Now is not the time to cut back on services and programs aimed at preventing and reducing child maltreatment.

### **Children’s Child Abuse Reduction Agenda:**

- Increase funding for the existing continuum of effective early intervention and prevention services.

Child advocates advancing the agenda recognize that Oklahoma lawmakers will start the Session will \$300 million less in revenue to meet state budget needs. “We know this will be a difficult legislative session, and cuts will have to be made in some areas,” states Roberts. “But by paying special attention to the needs of Oklahoma’s vulnerable children, youth and families, legislators will reap long-term dividends for the state. Oklahoma has been here before, and we were able to prioritize the areas of greatest need and make good investments. This agenda will keep us focused on what matters most to Oklahoma families: the health and well-being of our children.”

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