



## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The 2007 Legislative Session was marked by great victories for children, including significant budget investments and legislation that represented the culmination of years of work by children's advocates. Most especially, children's health coverage, early learning and children's mental health received unprecedented state support that will have a direct and immediate impact on children across the state.

These historic gains for children were fueled by consistent advocacy by individuals, organizations and political leaders working toward the common goal of improving the lives of children.

Our [Children's Action Network](#), which now numbers more than 8,000 members, sent nearly 14,000 letters to lawmakers over the course of the legislative session,



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sending a consistent message that children matter to constituents back home.

Despite pouring rain, hundreds of parents and advocates gathered on the steps of the State Capitol on February 19<sup>th</sup> for our annual [Have a Heart for Kids Day](#). Their message: "Invest in the Future. Invest in Kids."

Our [media efforts](#)—including those by the Children's Alliance and joint efforts with our close allies—garnered more than 80 newspaper stories, op eds and supportive editorials across the state from December, 2006 through April, 2007. In broadcast media, stories ran on Q13 television news and radio pieces on KUOW, KPLU and KIRO, among others.

Finally, on-the-ground advocacy in Olympia improved the bills supporting our policy priorities and helped gain bi-partisan support for key legislation.

This was truly a group effort.

The [Children's Alliance's 2007 legislative agenda](#) focused on children's health, school nutrition, racial disproportionality in the child welfare system and early learning.



Photo by Gabriela Quintana

Going into the session, the state was looking at a projected budget surplus of \$1.9 billion, enough to give human services advocates high hopes for new investments. However, the Governor and leaders in both houses of the legislature warned that the surplus would likely disappear within a couple of years and vowed to put money away for a rainy day. We were fortunate to have strong advocates for children's priorities in Governor Chris Gregoire and legislative leaders including House Speaker Frank Chopp, Senate Majority Leader Lisa Brown and others.

Governor Chris Gregoire made children a focus of the proposed budget she released on December 19, 2006, three weeks before the legislative session began. Priorities included ensuring health coverage for children and boosting investments in education—including early learning. Legislators in both houses carried through with most of the children's items in the governor's budget and added important children's initiatives of their own.

The [children's health bill](#) (SSB 5093) that was signed into law on March 13, 2007 makes Washington a national leader by providing comprehensive, affordable health coverage to all children in the state. Premiums charged on a sliding scale will open state-run programs to middle income families priced out of the employer and

private markets. The legislation also included several elements designed to ensure that children will not only get coverage, but will be able to access quality care through a “medical home.” These elements included outreach to sign up eligible families, supports for primary care providers, and nutrition and physical activity guidelines for schools.

The children’s health bill couldn’t have been drafted in such a comprehensive manner or passed with bi-partisan support without the dedicated leadership of the [Health Coalition for Children and Youth](#). Close allies from hospitals, clinics and child-serving organizations worked together to ensure that Washington’s children’s health bill would make sure children get the right care, in the right place, at the right time.

On the [early learning](#) front, the legislature enacted a Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS) which will give families standardized information about the quality of child care centers and offer support and incentives to providers to improve their programs. Establishment of such a system, which is up and running in at least 13 states nationwide, has been shown to improve the quality of child care overall. The final budget also included funds to increase child care reimbursement rates, which set the fees the state pays to child care providers for low-income working families who qualify for state support. As of 2006, the rates were enough to pay for only 42 percent of the child care programs in the state, significantly limiting the choices parents have.

We’ve known for years that children of color fare worse than other children in the state’s foster care system. Legislation passed this year represents a six-year commitment to detailing disproportionality in the state’s child welfare system, developing specific recommendations, and implementing strategies to eliminate the problem. Rep. Eric Pettigrew met with the Children’s Alliance and a broad group of other children’s advocates last year to develop his bill ([HB 1472](#)).

The measure passed both houses with overwhelming support. It calls for a state-level commission to examine why children of color show up in the foster care system at rates far higher than their presence in the child population and why they remain in the system so much longer than white children. Then, the commission will

come up with specific remedies, due to the legislature by January 1, 2009. The commission’s work and recommendations represent concrete steps towards addressing racial disproportionality in the state’s child welfare system.

Finally, in the arena of hunger, the Children’s Alliance and other anti-hunger advocates secured \$3.6 million to eliminate the reduced-price school lunch “co-pay” for kindergarten through 3rd grade. Last year, the state eliminated the co-pay for breakfast, and the number of children eating school breakfast increased dramatically. This was evidence that the co-pay, though a small amount monetarily, was enough to prevent a significant

number of families from taking advantage of the nutritious meals available through the School Breakfast Program. We made the same argument for school lunch and were fortunate to get a partial victory to boost participation in this core anti-hunger program.

Two additional issues the Children’s Alliance supported are noted here:

First, [House Bill 1088](#) will improve the delivery of children’s mental health services. This important bill, championed by Rep. Mary Lou Dickerson, expands mental health services for children including improving out-patient services, piloting expanded wrap-around services, revising the children’s mental health benefits package, revising access standards so more children can get the help they need and establishing an institute at the University of Washington to study evidence-based practices for mental health services.

Secondly, two pieces of legislation will help foster children who “age out” of the system at 18 years old make the transition to adulthood. [House Bill 1201](#) extends Medicaid coverage for this group to age 21. [House Bill 1922](#) creates an independent youth housing program to provide rental assistance in the form of stipends and help youth find housing when they age out of the foster care system.

During the 2007 Legislative Session, children’s advocates were able to reap the benefits of years of consistent advocacy, a positive budget situation and political support in Olympia to make significant and enduring changes for the benefit of children around the state.

***“I love being part of a movement and an organization which puts children and their families first. It is an honor to advocate for children.”***

*– Children’s Action Network member  
Jane White Vulliet*