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According to National Report, Challenges Persist Despite Slight Gains for Georgia's Children

ATLANTA--- One in four of Georgia's children lives in poverty, 285,000 children live without health insurance, the rate of low-birthweight babies is on the rise, and Georgia has the second-highest percentage of high-school dropouts in the nation. Those are just some of the discouraging findings from the national *2007 KIDS COUNT Data Book* released today, by the Annie E. Casey Foundation.

Though Georgia made a slight gain in the state rankings of child and family well-being from 44th to 41st, this state's inability to break out of the nation's bottom 10 indicates that challenges persist for many of Georgia's children. Despite improving on six indicators of child health and well-being, Georgia falls below the national average on nine out of 10 key indicators. The state's highest national indicator ranking at 26 is the percent of children living in families where no parent has full-time, year-round employment. Ironically, this is one of three indicators in which the state worsened.

While Georgia has made progress in reducing child and teen deaths, teen births, teens not attending schools and not working, and high-school dropouts, Georgia's children—especially those living in poverty—are still facing severe hardship.

"Too many children in Georgia are facing adverse odds from the day they are born," said Gaye Morris Smith, executive director of Family Connection Partnership, the Georgia KIDS COUNT grantee.

According to the report, the infant mortality rate in Georgia continues to stagnate, while the rate for low-birthweight babies, which increased 8 percent from 2000 to 2004, is among the highest in America.

"We thought we were holding our own in terms of low birthweight babies, but we're not," said Smith. "We were doing a good job in outreach to pregnant women and promoting access to prenatal care during the past few years, but now we're slipping. Part of that may be due to confusing health-care changes, reducing aggressive outreach initiatives and efforts, and the barriers to accessing health care for low-income women. Whatever the reason, we need to find out why."

Georgia also does poorly—ranking 47th in the nation—in the percentage of teens who drop out of high school. However, a bright spot has emerged from this dismal ranking. The economics of the situation has generated increased interest from the state, along with public and private sectors willing to invest in high-school completion. According to the Alliance for Excellent Education, if the high-school dropouts who currently head households in Georgia had earned their diplomas, the state's economy would have benefited from an additional \$2.5 billion in wealth accumulated by families.

Recognizing that education is an effective weapon in breaking the cycle of generational poverty, Georgia has invested in the High School Graduation Coach Initiative, which places a high-school completion coach in every high school in the state. These coaches work with teachers, administrators, and at-risk students to set goals, create an achievement plan, and serve as coaches and mentors, guiding the way to graduation. The private sector also comprehends the value in this initiative. Georgia Power, with help from the Georgia Chamber of Commerce, has organized key business leaders as community coaches who help high school graduation coaches provide assistance to students who are at risk of dropping out.

"Community leaders are collaborating with school leaders to improve the high school dropout rate. They're seeing results from making this a community-based problem to solve rather than purely a school-based problem," said Smith. "These newly formed initiatives and these newly focused efforts have not had time to impact the KIDS COUNT rankings for this year. If we want to see a lasting payoff in high school completion, it's going to take a strategic, sustained effort from these public/private partnerships. We are relying on alliances with organizations such as the Georgia Partnership for Excellence in Education to achieve long term results." Dr. Steve Dolinger, president of the Georgia Partnership for Excellence in Education agrees. "While we have seen modest gains in student achievement over the last few years, we will only exceed national averages of student and family well-being when we harness the power of community, business and government partnerships," he said.

Research shows investments in early childhood education reap long-term benefits for children who participate in pre-K programs. Smith cited Georgia's own investment as an example. According to the National Institute for Early Education Research, Georgia ranks second in the nation for access to pre-K for 4-year-olds.

"We focused attention and resources on increasing access and it paid off," said Smith. "But it took years. If staying focused and keeping the investments in place over time lead to better outcomes, we can expect the same thing to occur with low birthweight babies, high-school completion, and the other KIDS COUNT indicators. While this is encouraging, we need to see improvements in the well being of Georgia's children and families come at higher levels and at a faster pace."

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KIDS COUNT is a national and state-by-state effort funded by the Annie E. Casey Foundation, a private charitable organization dedicated to helping build better futures for disadvantaged children in the U.S. KIDS COUNT tracks the status of children, provides a broad annual summary of state indicators of child and family well-being, and monitors changes in these indicators over time.

Family Connection Partnership is a public/private partnership created by the State of Georgia and funders from the private sector to assist communities in addressing the serious challenges facing Georgia's children and families. Family Connection Partnership also serves as a resource to state agencies across Georgia that work to improve the conditions of children and families, and publishes Georgia KIDS COUNT information and interactive data at www.gafcp.org/kidscount. Georgia KIDS COUNT provides policymakers and citizens with current data needed to make informed decisions regarding priorities, services, and resources impacting Georgia's children, youth, families, and communities. Georgia KIDS COUNT is funded, in part, through a grant from the Annie E. Casey Foundation.