

OPPORTUNITY KNOCKS . . .

This New Year brings us many opportunities to give kids a voice. While our state and our nation must confront huge budget difficulties, as well as many other threats to a happy, healthy and peaceful New Year, we believe there also is a huge opportunity to positively affect the well being of our children.

The proper reorganization of state services for kids and families will not only help them receive what they need, but also when and where they need it. Reorganizing state government is truly an opportunity to make the very best of an extremely difficult situation. And we are now at the moment when the leadership, the vision and the will have come together to provide positive change.

Maine's children and families appreciate the hard work and thoughtful consideration given to their needs by the Governor's Advisory Council. Indeed, Governor Baldacci's leadership allowed the Council to examine the issues, review the research, and explore methods to address Maine's need for realignment of children and family services.

The Council's recommendations help move the state beyond established barriers and they point to a functional service system. The recommendations support the Governor's vision of a government structure that is an effective source of help for the most vulnerable of Maine's citizens, as well as efficient and accountable to Maine's taxpayers.

For several years, the Maine Children's Alliance showed the way toward responsible government that meets the needs of Maine's children and families. We have been a source of research and information, a common ground where disparate points of view are heard, and a steady advocate of functional government reorganization.

Inside this issue:

Ombudsman Program Ready
to Begin Second Year **2**

Maine Kids Count **3**

Board of Directors **3**

2003 Annual Contributions **4**

Maine now has an opportunity to reinvent itself, to emerge as a state that delivers critical children and family services in a manner respectful of both the recipients and the workers and the taxpayers. In coming months, the Maine Children's Alliance looks forward toward working with the Governor and the Legislature to breathe life into the Council's recommendations.

***Please join us in this crucial endeavor
to truly make a difference for kids.
Help make 2004 truly a Happy New Year
for Maine's kids and families.***

Ombudsman Program Ready to Begin Second Year!

I am a little shocked to find that almost a year has gone by since the Maine Children's Alliance began operation of the Ombudsman for Child Welfare Services program. January 16, 2004 marks a full year since we signed a contract with Governor Baldacci to become his Ombudsman for child welfare services.

A great deal has happened in the last year, of which the many people associated with this program can be very proud. There have been many people who have helped us establish what we hope will become the best ombudsman program in the country. I would like to begin by thanking two people whose presence at the Maine Children's Alliance has made our success possible; Amy MacDonald and Mary Milam.

Amy and Mary are the Assistant Ombudsman. They each bring different skills and background to the work. They have become a team who work well together and with the people outside our office who are vital to our success. Our first annual report is a testament to their effectiveness, as it indicates we have met almost every objective to which we committed.

In the following program highlights, I will thank some other people who have helped us reach our goals:

- ❖ Establishment of policy and procedure supporting a positive working relationship with the Department of Human Services – *Karen Westburg, Director of the Bureau of Child and Family Services and her staff, Sandi Hodge and Chris Beerits.*
- ❖ Development of our Ombudsman Website – *Holly Valero of HollyWorks*
- ❖ Recruitment and training of 13 well qualified volunteers – several people and agencies who helped us advertise the positions
- ❖ Development of an excellent file system – *Bonnie Colfer and Lisa Gagnon*
- ❖ Development of an outstanding database – *Lara Dionne*
- ❖ Completion of our national survey of state ombudsman programs – *Amy Libby and Lisa Hartman*

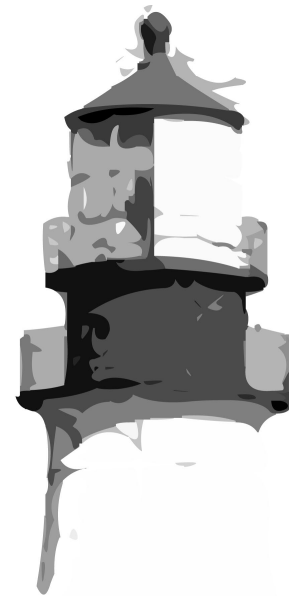
We are also indebted to the leadership of Governor Baldacci. His Office quickly moved the Program forward and has supported us through the first year. Kathryn Monahan-Ainsworth, his Senior Policy Advisor for human services has offered invaluable counsel.

Our annual report will be available after January 15, 2004 on our website. It will provide you with detailed information about the issues brought to us by the 104 people who called us last year. It will also tell you what we learned about the system's challenges in the recommendations we made about policy issues.

Much remains to be done! We have identified several objectives for the coming year:

- ❖ Clarifying and strengthening the statutory mandate for the Ombudsman program.
- ❖ Improving finance to support increased costs associated with rapidly growing requests for assistance.
- ❖ Advocating for improved policy and procedure within the child welfare program.
- ❖ Improving our training and support of volunteers.
- ❖ Improving the efficiency of our program administration.
- ❖ Providing better information about the challenges of the system in serving our clients, as well as its strengths.

We want to also thank the many DHS caseworkers and supervisors who have worked with us positively and openly. It has been a pleasure to see that our assumptions about their desire to see the system improve are well founded.



Our Website has a new look!
Check it out at www.mekids.org

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Maine KIDS COUNT

UPDATE

Research.....

Annie E. Casey Foundation awards grant for study of rural poverty to Northern New England KIDS COUNT partnership - The Maine, New Hampshire and Vermont KIDS COUNT projects are collaborating on a research project which seeks to shine a light on the hidden New England: The children and families in Northern New England who have been cut off from mainstream economic success, live isolated from strong social networks, and receive inefficient services and supports. Their research project, called Making Ends Meet Far From Main Street: Rural Family Economic Success in Northern New England, will analyze newly released data from the US Census and other sources. The project will contrast the economic conditions and community resources of rural areas in Northern New England with more urban and suburban areas. The analysis will also use data gathered from focus groups in rural communities and interviews among community leaders to paint a clearer picture of the successes and challenges of rural life in Northern New England.



Publications.....

RELEASED: "Early Childhood Development: What Matters Most?" The first in a series of Child Development and Public Policy Issue Briefs which seek to provide clear and concise overviews of research written for the public and policymakers. The series was made possible by a grant from the Annie E. Casey Foundation. Please call the office to obtain one or more copies; or you may view the paper in PDF version on our website.

The 2003 Maine KIDS COUNT Data Book will be released February 24, 2004. Governor Baldacci will speak at the press conference to be held in the Governor's Cabinet Room at the State House at 11:00 a.m.

For more information about any KIDS COUNT publication or activity, please call the KIDS COUNT Director, Lynn Davey, at 207-623-1868 x204; ldavey@mekids.org

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All efforts have been made to ensure the accuracy of this list. Mistakes and omissions can occur, however. We apologize for any errors that might have occurred.