

Remarks of the Governor on Meeting the Basic Needs of Children

HON. GEORGE V. VOINOVICH*

I want to congratulate The Ohio State University College of Law for hosting this symposium. This is the kind of activity I'm encouraging higher education to undertake. We need to harness our academic knowledge—your legal expertise—to develop stronger public policy.

This evening I have been asked to share with you my vision for children and families in this changing government climate. Throughout this symposium, you will be examining and debating critical questions regarding how the basic needs of children are and will be met, as well as who holds fundamental responsibility for meeting these needs.

To begin to answer these questions, I believe we must look beyond federal or state law . . . beyond welfare reform . . . beyond the debate over entitlements . . . to the fundamental need and moral obligation of our society to cherish, protect and nurture its children and their families.

My concern for children stems from more than a barrage of grim statistics. It comes from a deeply held belief that we are all God's children . . . and, that we are no longer treating the youngest among us as God's children.

In my heart, I also feel that the only way to ensure Ohio's economic future is to mount an all-out effort for today's children, preparing them to grow and thrive.

To deal with the problems I'm confronted with as Governor, I have often said that if I had a magic wand, I would reconstitute a supportive family life for all our children. To date, no one has handed me, or any of you, such a wand. Nonetheless, as we discuss our personal and public responsibilities for meeting the basic needs of children, we need to start with what we want for families.

As a public official, I have been up front about my commitment to children. In my first State of the State address, I laid out my vision. I have never wavered from this pledge. Our aim is to make an unprecedented commitment to one priority that I believe ranks above all others . . . the health and education of our children. Most Ohioans have had enough welfare—enough poverty—enough drugs—enough crime. Most Ohioans would love to see that debilitating cycle broken, and the people trapped within it, freed—once and for all. So would I. The only way to do it is to pick one generation of children—draw a line in the sand—and say to all: This is where it stops.

As Ohioans embraced this vision—our line in the sand—we moved to turn

* Governor of the State of Ohio. J.D., The Ohio State University College of Law. Governor Voinovich delivered these remarks on November 3, 1995, at the Ohio State University Faculty Club to Symposium authors, participants, and other guests.

this conviction into a measurable goal. That goal is National Education Goal One. By the year 2000, all children in America will start school ready to learn.

A few years ago, I chaired the National Governors' Association's School Readiness Task Force. The knowledge I gained from presiding over meetings of national experts mirrored what our local schools and social service providers were advising. As a result, Ohio mobilized around the three basic school readiness objectives: better health care, more early childhood education, and supporting parents as a child's first teacher.

Each of these objectives pose challenges, but the key to success lies in collaboration. A cooperative effort between state and local governments, nonprofit organizations, and parents is needed to improve the lives of families and children. The Family & Children First Initiative is the framework for this partnership as we work toward our goals. Eight state agencies lead this effort. What the Family & Children First Initiative is doing today goes back to the philosophy I followed as Mayor of Cleveland. Government is but one thread in the social fabric. We have to utilize all of society's resources to make a difference. I call it "symbiosis"—all of us cooperating, working together, so we can individually achieve our goals.

In moving toward the school readiness goal, I want to stress the importance of requiring measurable results for children. For too long, we have all questioned what our tax dollars are achieving. Accountability . . . which can be measured and understood by taxpayers . . . is key to an ongoing public commitment to children.

I tell my Cabinet Directors, "if you cannot measure it, do not do it." Accountability for results is also key to child development. We must closely monitor programs and services for results . . . we cannot waste precious early years in activities that don't produce.

On Health Care: Ohio has the lowest percentage of uninsured children in the nation, according to the National Governors' Association (5.1%). The number of fully immunized two-year-olds is up 16% over last year. Infant mortality rates are dropping from 9.4% per 1,000 live births in 1992 to 8.7% last year.

On Early Education: Ohio leads the nation in state funding for Head Start, with 64% of our children enrolled. When enrollment in Head Start, Public Preschool and Special Education Preschool is combined, 70% of our eligible children are in class. And, the state remains on track to ensuring that virtually every three and four-year-old whose families desire services can enroll in an early childhood education program by the end of 1998. Ohio has increased by five times state funding of child care since I took office. On a typical day, 25,000 children receive state-subsidized child care . . . which means their parents are working.

On Parental Support: The state's child support collections have risen 30% since 1991. The state has improved paternity establishment by 52% since 1991. Any discussion about meeting the needs of children that ignores the importance of prioritizing child support enforcement misses the mark. My administration now provides paid adoption and maternity leave benefits to state employees, both mothers and fathers. I want to salute the leadership of Wendy's Dave Thomas for bringing the need for this policy to my attention. I think it's interesting to note that of the 3588 state employees who utilized the leave in its first year, 2577 of them were fathers.

Overall, state leaders have made some tough choices to prioritize children. Funding for children and family programs is increasing 35% at a time when state spending has grown at the slowest rate in forty years.

Ohio's been able to prioritize children by making some "tough love" choices about welfare reform. We dramatically scaled back General Assistance for able-bodied adults in 1992 and eliminated it altogether last summer. As a result of this and reforms to Disability Assistance, we saved \$275 million to date and will save another \$885 million over the next four years. We've also kept our Aid to Dependent Children payments in check and reduced our caseload by 150,000 recipients since 1992, for a savings of \$164 million over the last three years. These savings were reinvested in education and children's programs.

However, I want to stress that the public commitment to families must go beyond money. You don't get the results I've described without harnessing the energy, or synergy, of a lot of folks. It goes back to that old African proverb, "It takes an entire village to raise a child." It's taken top-down leadership from my administration and the General Assembly and bottom-up, grassroots leadership from families and local service providers who have pushed for homegrown, customized solutions. Sometimes, local ideas clash with state bureaucracies. But, it's from this interaction that synergy for change emerges.

My state Family & Children First Cabinet Council has moved to form new partnerships, tackle family problems before they deepen, and accommodate local approaches by waiving state rules through our Regulation Free Zone law. For instance, counties used to submit a twenty-one page form with back-up files to receive funding for multineed youth. Today, it's a two-page form, with no back-up file and new funding incentives that have resulted in residential placements for these youth dropping 23%.

The state and many counties now pool their funding for these children which moves everyone past the debate over who has to pay for what. When agencies start sharing their money, that's getting past the turf wars.

I would like to give you a preliminary look at our next state project. Currently on the drawing board is an Ohio Wellness Block Grant. In a

nutshell, the state is considering taking existing categorical funding, pooling it into a block grant, and awarding it to local Family & Children First Councils. Local Councils would then be given significant latitude to make decisions for funding prevention or early intervention services aimed at obtaining better results around a few state goals. Most likely those prevention goals will focus on teenage pregnancy, child abuse and neglect, high school graduation rates, and adult illiteracy. We think a Wellness Block Grant will give counties the same kind of flexibility to achieve results for which the state has been petitioning the federal government. We also believe local Councils will better judge which programs can deliver results . . . something someone reviewing a grant proposal at the state level simply cannot do. This block grant can also serve as a “test case” for state and local governments as we all learn how best to operationalize block grants.

Another quick example of bringing needed flexibility to the system . . . My state team recently worked together to eliminate 15% of the administrative rules governing seven state agencies. One, Youth Services, cut its rules in half. And, the state team hasn’t stopped the review process . . . the rule reduction continues.

At the local level, eighty-one of Ohio’s eighty-eight counties either voluntarily created, or are now forming, Family & Children First Councils. At no point did the state mandate a new governing structure. Although I had to stop an initial recommendation from the state team that we do just that. The truth is we didn’t need a mandate. When we asked for a few pilot counties, sixty-four counties applied. And today, all of these counties are working without significant state funding. These Councils bring together education, health, and social service systems—combine them with family representation—to decide how to redirect and prioritize resources to solve community problems.

In rural counties, Family & Children First has meant nurse practitioners working with schools, streamlined intake systems, or common-sense, toy-lending libraries for families.

In Hamilton County, an urban area, a 24-hour crisis system now operates, and a children’s managed-care entity is emerging. Hamilton County agencies are actually pooling funds for children with multiple needs and securing private management of services.

The magic of turning Ohio’s vision into results is not government or the Council structure itself, it’s the common understanding that today’s children face such overwhelming issues that no one system, be it public or private or non-profit, can meet the challenge alone. It’s meant engaging corporate partners in our Adopt-a-School and Help Me Grow efforts, securing the help of the Rotary and Kiwanis on immunization, rolling out the National Guard

medical units for our GuardCare effort.

In its first nine months of operation, our Help Me Grow effort has handed out 105,000 wellness guides—which contain health information and coupon incentives to make doctor visits—to pregnant women and families with children under age two. Our 1-800-755-GROW helpline has fielded more than 60,000 calls. When Kroger's is advertising free prenatal and baby wellness guides at the checkout, and the local Domino's Pizza is delivering immunization schedules with every pizza, you know you're making a difference. This is the public/private spirit that wins results . . . not government entitlements or mandates. Not state mandates to our local Councils . . . not federal mandates to our state.

I would be remiss to discuss a vision for meeting the basic needs of children without addressing a parallel vision for self-sufficient families. We must think beyond school readiness to lifelong learning. This means focusing on school-to-work and welfare-to-work programs. Ohio leads the nation in participation in the JOBS program and is implementing welfare reforms which target job readiness and work. Only California comes close to matching Ohio's performance (32,755), and California has three times the number of ADC recipients as Ohio. Under our new welfare reform law—which, incidentally, Michael Kramer said in *Time Magazine* was “among the most intelligent in the country”¹—we're making changes. Mothers and fathers on public assistance will no longer be punished for being married or obtaining part-time jobs. Teenage mothers must live with a responsible adult to receive public assistance, and the parents of a teenage father can now be held liable for child support for their grandchild.

Our welfare reform cracks down hard on child support. At least half of the families on public assistance in Ohio are there because the non-custodial parent does not pay child support. This is no less than financial child abuse. We must make it as socially unacceptable to financially neglect a child as we've made it to drink and drive.

In developing welfare reform, Ohio did not eliminate additional benefits upon the birth of a child. Why? The facts did not support the need. The fertility rate among women on welfare matches the overall fertility rate. The best available information indicates that between 5% to 7% of women on welfare have additional children. And, states which have restricted benefits to address this issue show no solid results.

I also get tired of all the focus on this portion of the welfare problem. The real money for welfare is spent on health care—Medicaid. And, in Medicaid, the real problem is long-term care . . . not welfare families. Seventy-five percent of the Medicaid expenditures pay for 25% of the eligible people . . .

¹ Michael Kramer, *Fixing Welfare Right*, *TIME*, Aug. 14, 1995, at 37.

the elderly and disabled.

In addition, 75% of all nursing home beds are paid for by Medicaid. This is why I think we must refocus the debate on the state's ability to recoup its Medicaid costs from estates. As lawyers, I challenge you to address this issue head-on. As you know, many lawyers specialize in showing people how to hide their assets so the state must pick up the nursing home tab. I don't want to impoverish a spouse. But, don't tell the state it can't put a lien on a house or recover money from an estate. I question the ethics of lawyers who work diligently to safeguard estates for adult children at the expense of the taxpayer. I question whether such safeguards should even remain legal.

Obviously, I got off track, but it's an issue of great concern to me. It's just wrong.

Back to welfare reform. In the face of the facts regarding birth rates and given Ohio's moderate assistance payments, I urged state lawmakers to consider the problems of illegitimacy but to focus on self-sufficiency and jobs. Some of you may recall that in my last State of the State Address, I honored a former JOBS recipient from Akron, Lettie Neal. After twenty years on and off welfare, Lettie enrolled in the Summit County JOBS program, where she received training to work in the child care field. Today, she is the director of a child-care center. That's where we need to focus welfare reform. On work experience, job training and education, so that recipients like Lettie become self-sufficient.

Ohio's vision also extends to working-poor and middle-class families with job creation incentives, subsidized child care, and promoting the Earned Income Tax Credit which resulted in 31,000 more working-poor Ohioans claiming the credit worth \$464 million. The tax credit is important because it's an incentive to work.

I have touched upon the public and corporate role in supporting children, I would like to elaborate on the need to re-examine family responsibility. As the state prepares to address federal block grants and increased federal flexibility, the role of parents and families in meeting the basic needs of children and older parents becomes critical. I think all of us in society now agree that families must assume more personal responsibility for their success. In an era of individual entitlements, families have sometimes assumed the role of advocates. As such, many families learned how to lobby the system on behalf of their children for increased services. A system—which leans toward “all or nothing”—means some families who just need minimal help to manage either don't qualify for anything or wind up receiving more assistance than is prudent or cost-effective. We need to bring more common-sense to how we decide who receives services, what is an acceptable service level, and how much families should contribute to a loved one's care.

In closing, I would like to share two testimonials from fellow Ohioans, which tell me that our goals are sound and that results are being achieved. From a parent: "As parents, we became involved in Head Start. The experience gave my husband more self-esteem. In ten months, he found a job. Now we are more active in our children's education." Last year, I gave the Ohio Newspaper Association's Governor's Award to another Head Start mom, Penny Jordan. By the time Penny was done sharing her family's inspirational story, there wasn't a dry eye in the house. From a county commissioner: "Collaboration in our community is really beginning to reap harvest. County agencies are learning to listen to families who need essential supports." Instead of saying, "Why can't we do something?" We now say, "How can we do this?"

In public life, I follow two mottoes. One comes from my days as Mayor of Cleveland: "Together we can do it." The other is Ohio's state motto: "With God All Things Are Possible." I believe that by working together, and with God's help, our line in the sand will provide a healthy, educated future for this generation of Ohio's children and secure our state's future.

