



CHILDREN IN SOCIETY
Adopted: 10/19/1992
Revised 10/19/2004

Position Statement

The Montana Association of Churches calls upon the State Legislature and all the people of Montana to recognize the rights of children.

All children are entitled to the rights set forth in this position paper, without distinction or discrimination on account of race, color, sex, disability, language, religion, creed, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status, whether of the children or their families. Children should enjoy special protection and be given opportunities and facilities, by law and other means, to develop physically, mentally, morally, spiritually and socially in a healthy and normal manner and with freedom and dignity. In the enactment of laws for this purpose, the best interest of each child must be of paramount consideration.

Children are entitled to healthy growth and development. To this end special care and protection should be provided both to the children and to their parents, including adequate prenatal and postnatal care and immunizations. Children have the right to adequate nutrition, housing, recreation and health care.

Children are entitled to receive a quality education, which is free and compulsory, at least through high school. They should be given an education which will promote their culture, and enable them, on a basis of equal opportunity, to develop individual abilities, judgment and a sense of moral and social

responsibility. The best interest of the child shall be the guiding principle of those responsible for the child's education and guidance. We recognize that ideally parents are the primary teachers of their offspring.

The Montana Association of Churches encourages the Montana Legislature to continue public policies and programs that support and strengthen family life. We support the development of a wide range of family support services, activities and programs designed to promote total family well-being.

Children with physical, mental or social disabilities should be given the special treatment, education and care required by their condition. They need to have the opportunity to develop to their full potential. For the full and harmonious development of personality, children need love and understanding. Whenever possible and appropriate, they also need to grow up in the care and under the responsibility of their parents. Families experiencing problems should be provided home-based rehabilitation services, whenever appropriate, in order to strengthen and preserve the family. No matter what the circumstance, children need to live in an atmosphere of affection and of moral and material security. The State of Montana has the duty to extend particular care to children without a family, to those without adequate means of support, and to those who, for whatever reason, can not or should not live with their own family.

We support legislation to ensure the availability of safe, affordable and wholesome child care.

Children must be protected against all forms of neglect, cruelty and exploitation. We support legislation to protect children from parental abuse and abuse from others who are responsible for their care, including, but not limited to, teachers and other school staff and day care providers.

We support legislation that disallows the employment of children until an appropriate minimum age. Children should in no case be enticed, encouraged, forced or permitted to engage

in any occupation or employment which would compromise their health or education, or interfere with their physical, social, mental, spiritual or moral development.

Supporting Statement

Children, by reason of their physical and mental immaturity, need special safeguards and care, including appropriate legal protection. Montana owes to its children the best it has to give. All children merit care and protection, simply because each child has value.

Our children are our future --- they will be the leaders, the parents, the citizens of tomorrow. In responding to their needs today, we shape a better future for all.

Our children are our present --- our children bring us special gifts, today not just tomorrow. They are the sign of God's continual gift to the world. Thus, we need to respect them and place their rights as a priority in our society.

It is well known that a person's childhood experiences have a powerful impact on that person's adult life and the way he or she may be an effective parent. Parents need support and help in meeting the challenges of raising children in the face of the cultural, economic and moral pressures of our day. No institution can substitute for the committed love, daily sacrifice and hard work of parents in caring for their own children. But every institution should support parents in their essential tasks. Our society must be an ally and advocate for parents as they struggle to meet their children's needs at home and in an often hostile world where powerful economic and social forces can overwhelm the love and care of a family.

Children make up the most impoverished segment of American society and are often subject to cruelty, abuse and neglect. We believe that violence toward children will decrease only if our society as a whole undertakes the responsibility of establishing and implementing prevention policies, programs and

procedures. Those programs and services will have the greatest efficacy which respect and support the parent or parents, enable healthy parenting skills, and thus enhance the whole family's ability to function in a healthy, productive way.

Christians believe that the treatment of children is a measure of their faith. That is why we need --- each of us --- to use our values, voices, and votes to hold our public officials accountable and to shape a society that honors the conventional responsibilities each generation has to its children.

Supporting Facts

According to the Montana Vital Statistics from 2002, (population 909,453):

- 11,045 babies were born (33% to unmarried women)
- 119,000 residents live in poverty (2004 federal guidelines on poverty are a family of one person, \$9,310; two persons, \$12,490; three persons, \$15,670; four persons, \$18,850; five persons, \$22,030; six persons, \$25,210)
- Suicides accounted for 13.6% of deaths for 5-14 year olds; 20.1% of those 15-24, 24.2% of those 25-34.
- 44% of MT youth ages 12-17 reported using alcohol in the recent past.
- 21,099 women, infants and children were served each month by WIC

According to the 2000 Kids Count Data Profile for Montana:

- 21% of Montana children live in poverty (about 50,000); 10% of the children live in extreme poverty (incomes below 50% of poverty level); 28% of children under the age of 5 live in poverty.
- 25% of Montana children live in a family headed by a single parent
- 32% of Montana children live with parents who do not have full-time, year-round employment

Montana Association of Churches

American Baptist Churches of the Northwest * Christian Churches (Disciples of Christ) in Montana
Episcopal Church Diocese of Montana * Evangelical Lutheran Church in America-Montana Synod
Presbyterian Church (USA)-Glacier Presbytery * Presbyterian Church (USA)-Yellowstone Presbytery
Roman Catholic Diocese of Great Falls-Billings * Roman Catholic Diocese of Helena
United Church of Christ of Montana-Northern Wyoming Conference * United Methodist Church Yellowstone Conference

According to USDA's Household Food Security in the United States, 2001:

- Montana ranks seventh as a state in the U.S. in terms of hunger.
- 13% (46,000 of Montana's 355,000 households) are classified as food insecure.
- Only 54% of those Montanans eligible to receive food stamps participate in the program.

According to the 2000 Census, among all states Montana ranks:

- Second for child poverty
- Fifth in percentage of residents without health insurance
- Forty-third for library spending
- Forty-ninth for number of students per computer
- Forty-seventh for average teacher's salary
- Forty-third for welfare spending per capita

Childhood Hunger Study Resolution testimony by Rev. Dick Weaver, Helena, Montana (406-422-3341)

Thank you for receiving my written testimony on this important issue. I had intended to be present to testify in person, but have to be in Billings instead.

As an ordained minister serving Plymouth Congregational Church, UCC, in Helena, I am dismayed to learn that in this beautiful state of wonderful people, more than one in five children live at 100% of poverty. That's 47,000 children under 18. And if I read the numbers correctly, nearly 5,000 children live at 50% of poverty. That's a frightening number. If we as citizens of this state are unwilling to acknowledge and deal with this problem, many of these children will never come close to realizing their potential, and will become adults who struggle to find sustaining employment, good health, and the resources they need to be good parents and contributing members of society. Other tax-payers will bear the costs of this direction.

In this era of cost-cutting and cut-backs, it is helpful to know a little history. My own faith ancestry in the Congregational Churches of New England points me way back to the days of the European colonization of North America, before the United States came into being. In parts of New England, even in the 1600s, the governments had safety-net programs for supporting children that were not part of loving families as well as other people who for one reason or another were unable to stand on their own. I say this as a reminder that it is as American as apple pie and a long-standing tradition for the American people, especially people of faith and others of good will, acting in concert through our governments, to take care of those who slip through the cracks. They and we have recognized it as the right thing to do.

As a Christian, I could cite any number of scriptural verses to support the passage of this study resolution to end childhood hunger. The Hebrew prophets and Jesus himself spoke to these issues. They did not speak to the religious institutions, telling them it was *their* responsibility. They spoke to individuals, and they spoke to "the powers that be". They understood hunger and poverty as systemic justice problems, that need to be solved on a systemic level.

And in these times when we need to reduce cost, it is the intelligent thing to do. It is far more economical to invest money in proactive preventive measures such as nutrition, education, and finding ways for groups to work together, than it is to deal with hunger-related issues that have blossomed into full-grown problems because no one cared to deal with them earlier.

The Study Resolution on Ending Childhood Hunger in Montana is worthy of our support and worthy of your positive vote. I hope you will move this resolution to the floor and support its passage.