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July 17, 2007

To: Members of the Budget Conference Committee
From: Charity Eleson, Executive Director
Re: 2007-2009 Biennial Budget Bill

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As you seek to find compromises between the Assembly and the Senate versions of the 2007-2009 biennial budget in the days ahead, the Wisconsin Council on Children and Families (WCCF) asks that you ensure this budget succeeds in creating opportunities for children in Wisconsin to thrive. Investments in the health, education and well-being of our youngest citizens are consistent with the fundamental values of most Wisconsin citizens and provide returns on public investments that will continue to benefit the state for years to come.

There are numerous challenges in this budget and a variety of different decisions that will affect children and families. I have attached our comprehensive analysis of the effect that different proposals advanced in the budget process have on children and families, which is a document I hope you will carefully review; but I want to use this memo as an opportunity to highlight four particular areas of concern. They include early care and education, health care coverage, Youth Aids, and property tax relief for low-income households.

Early Education and Care: Members of the Joint Committee on Finance crafted a sound bipartisan compromise (authored by Representative Rhoades, Representative Stone, Senator Decker and Senator Jauch) to provide sufficient funding for Shares, which provides low-income working parents help to ensure their children can have adult care and supervision while their parents are working. Additionally, the Joint Committee on Finance approved expanded funding for 4-year-old kindergarten that would allow school districts without 4-K to get some much-needed help to defray their first year costs. Wisconsin's 4-K programming and Wisconsin Shares provide the underpinnings that can help us build a strong early care and education system. They provide the building blocks for the state to move toward more effectively preparing every child to succeed in school and eliminating the substantial achievement gap that exists for children of color in Wisconsin. We ask that you support \$70.2 million over the biennium for these two programs as approved by Joint Finance.

Health Care: Health care is one of the top concerns of Wisconsin citizens. The Wisconsin Legislature has an opportunity to substantively address those concerns and produce better health care outcomes by taking the steps needed in this budget to craft a plan that will, at minimum, cover all children and extend coverage to the state's more vulnerable uninsured populations. Governor Doyle has offered a plan that makes judicious use of federal dollars and cost savings reallocations to ensure coverage for all children. It is critical to adopt that plan; but we also urge you to go beyond that and find the compromise needed to develop a plan for Wisconsin that ensures health care coverage for all.

Youth Aids: The Youth Aids formula is an innovative funding formula that encourages counties to provide community-based supervision to youth who've gotten into trouble with the law by charging counties for the cost of juvenile corrections placements. When juvenile offenders can be safely supervised in the community, community-based services produce better outcomes for adolescents than institutional care. The increase in the Youth Aids allocation that was approved by Joint Finance was a much-needed, long-overdue increase to the appropriation. The increase will address the steady erosion in funding from inflation and substantial increases in the state rate charged to counties for juvenile corrections. We ask that you support the \$26.8 million over the biennium as approved by a bipartisan vote of the Joint Finance Committee.

Property Tax Relief: The Homestead Tax Credit provides targeted property tax relief for low-income households. The Joint Finance Committee approved measures to make the Homestead Tax Credit a more powerful property tax relief tool by indexing it for inflation. We urge you to maintain the provisions as approved by a bipartisan vote on the Joint Finance Committee.

I appreciate the challenges that you are faced with in the budget deliberations ahead and understand you have many competing demands. WCCF and its board of directors believe that every person in Wisconsin benefits if children are healthy, well-educated, and economically secure, and the actions that you take in this budget can assist in making those assurances to the children in our state. WCCF staff will be pleased to provide you with any additional information you need. Please contact Sabrina Gentile, at 284-0580, ext. 306 if we can be of any assistance.