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Poverty Task Force Releases Recommendations on Economic Security

Year-long study finds solutions vital to Arkansas families

LITTLE ROCK – After a year of research, the Arkansas Legislative Task Force on Reducing Poverty and Increasing Economic Opportunity today released a series of recommendations aimed at cutting poverty in the state in half in 10 years. The report includes 31 recommendations to build family economic security for all Arkansans.

“Poverty hurts individual Arkansans, but it also has a long-term impact on our economy,” said Rich Huddleston, co-chairman of the task force and executive director of Arkansas Advocates for Children and Families. “Our businesses need a healthy, educated workforce. To get there, we need to ensure that our children are in good health and get a quality education.”

The task force recommends that Arkansas adopt a goal of reducing poverty to pre-recession levels in five years and by half in 10 years. More than one in five Arkansans—527,400—live on incomes below the federal poverty line, which is \$22,000 for a family of four. More than one in four Arkansas children lives in poverty. A 2006 study estimated that child poverty costs the Arkansas economy \$6.2 billion a year.

The 31 task force recommendations fall into six categories: economic and community development, education and workforce development, health, individual income supports, tax policy and system needs.

For example, an economic development recommendation includes cultivating small businesses by providing working capital loans of up to \$50,000 and technical assistance to rural and minority-owned small businesses. In education, the task force recommends improving the college graduation rate and extending access to high quality after-school and summer programs to more at-risk children. Health recommendations include enrolling more children in health insurance and establishing a center for health literacy to help Arkansans navigate and use health services.

To help working families, the task force recommends improving access to subsidized child care and high quality early childhood education and creating a state Earned Income Tax Credit.

“These common-sense solutions can bring economic security to generations of Arkansans by focusing now on community economic development, health, education and tax relief for working families,” Huddleston said. “In the next decade, Arkansas employers will need to hire over 200,000 more workers who have at least some college education. But each year only 18,000 Arkansans start college and more than half of those never get a degree. Unfilled jobs will drag down our economy unless we do something quickly. We can do better.”

In addition to the goal of halving the poverty rate, the task force developed a series of benchmark goals to measure the state’s progress in five years, 10 years and 20 years.

For example, goals in the next 10 years include: Increasing the median household income from \$38,820 to \$48,000, reducing the infant mortality rate from 8.2 per thousand live births to 7, and cutting the percentage of incoming college freshman who need remedial courses from 54.6 percent to 40 percent.

The task force was created by Act 722 of 2009 and was charged with recommending “public policy strategies and legislation that have the potential to reduce poverty on a statewide or regional basis.”

Work began in September 2009 with research on the impact of poverty on Arkansas families. Members held town hall meetings throughout the state to gather research and ideas on poverty solutions. The final report has been delivered to the offices of the Governor and leaders of the House and Senate. It is available at www.aradvocates.org/poverty

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Arkansas Advocates for Children and Families is a statewide, non-profit child advocacy organization established in 1977. Our mission is to ensure that all children and their families have the resources and opportunities to lead healthy and productive lives and to realize their full potential. On the web at www.aradvocates.org.