

## Office of the Governor

PO BOX 004  
TRENTON, NJ 08625

### NEWS RELEASE

CONTACT: Wendi Patella  
609-777-2600

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### **Governor Whitman Expands Subsidized Child Care for Low-Income Working Families Announces Initiative Package to Strengthen New Jersey Families**

Gov. Christie Whitman and Human Services Commissioner Michele K. Guhl today announced an initiative to eliminate the waiting list of 7,500 children of low-income working families waiting for subsidized child care. The Governor also called for the creation of a Center for Youth Policy and Programs and the development of a mental health plan to expand assistance to emotionally disturbed children and their families.

"The family will always provide emotional support. The family will always be responsible for developing mutual respect between parents and children, and for authority," said Gov. Whitman. "The family will continue to shape all of us- today, tomorrow and in the century to come. The initiatives I am announcing today make it easier for families to focus on being a family."

Beginning in July, the \$100 million child care initiative will make child care available to 7,500 children whose families have registered their need for subsidized child care at various child care centers and agencies around the state.

"This is really a quality of life issue," Gov. Whitman said at the Governor's Conference on Strengthening Families for the 21st Century held in Atlantic City. "Since these families are working, most of them are paying for child care on their own, sometimes spending as much as 50 percent of their salary on it. By helping to pay for their child care, we are providing a strong incentive to continue working, but at the same time giving working families a break."

The initiative, which is being funded over three years through unexpended federal welfare block grant dollars, is also a response to the rapid drop in families on welfare.

"This initiative acknowledges that child care has become as fundamental to working as the traditional navy blue business suit," Commissioner Guhl said. "As we move into the next millennium, it will be efforts such as these that will help to keep New Jersey's working families strong and whole."

The program will offer vouchers to some 7,500 families who have been waiting for subsidized vouchers to become available. The vouchers allow families to select child care in the setting they feel most comfortable with and that best meets their needs. That includes a licensed child care center or a registered family day care home.

Previously, the Department of Human Services had estimated that there were some 20,000 families waiting for subsidized child care. Knowing that there was great duplication in that estimate, the Department recently conducted a study, which found that there are actually about 7,500 families waiting for child care. Some of these families are waiting for a voucher to purchase care, others want child care in a specific center that is at capacity. Families in both of these groups will be offered a child care voucher if they still meet the income requirements.

The families that will qualify for this initiative can earn up to \$27,700 for a family size of three.

Currently, the state spends \$231 million to provide child care for 55,300 children of welfare recipients and low-income families. That doubles New Jersey's spending on child care since fiscal year 1996 when it was \$103 million.

This initiative is part of a five-year administration commitment to child care, which includes:

- Bright Beginnings - A nationally-lauded \$8.5 million effort to create 8,500 new child care slots; increase the number of registered child care providers and, offer professional development to child care providers.
- Family Friendly Centers - A \$2.5 million effort that made available grants of up to \$50,000 to 50 schools to develop centers where children can stay until their parents return from work.
- Child Care Inspectors - Increase the state licensing staff for child care centers by 10 so that inspections could be done annually rather than once every three years.
- Bright Beginnings II and Quality Enhancement Initiative - These two efforts combine for a \$12 million effort in the state's largest municipalities to expand child care slots through major and minor renovations and new construction as well as to improve child care through professional development and new equipment.

Enhancing her commitment to empowering and strengthening New Jersey's families, the Governor also asked the Department of Human Services to develop a plan to create a Children's Mental Health System of Care initiative. The initiative will improve and reform the state's system for dealing with children with emotional disturbances. The state will be able to more effectively manage current services and expand the range of services available for New Jersey's children and families.

Citing incidents such as the recent tragedy at Columbine High School in Colorado, the Governor said while there is no law that will ever completely protect our children from harm, this initiative will help emphasize the need to put safeguards in place wherever possible for young people and their families.

"We need to give families an easy way to access mental health services," said the Governor. "To augment the intensive in-patient and residential services we already provide for emotionally disturbed children, we need to fill the gaps in

early intervention and community-based services aimed at helping kids in their home, their schools and their communities."

Services will include group and treatment homes, intensive in-home services and respite, partial care and behavioral assistance and psychiatric community residences.

Governor Whitman also called on the Secretary of State, DeForest B. Soaries, Jr., to establish the Center for Youth Policy and Programs. The Center represents another tool to promote personal responsibility among the youth of New Jersey.

The Center will provide resources for agencies and organizations that foster personal responsibility among youth, and will also establish a statewide youth advisory committee. In addition, it will develop a youth leadership training institute, a mentor program and a mechanism to spotlight successful youth programs around the state.

The Governor's Conference on Strengthening Families for the 21st Century is a two-day event hosted by DHS and the Atlantic County Children and Families Initiative. Feature speakers and workshops on a variety of human services topics, the conference brought together service providers, early childhood educators, clergy, social workers, and health care providers.