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Lt. Governor, Legislators Unveil Legislation Proposing Creation of Children’s Cabinet

OKLAHOMA CITY –State leaders announced a plan today to streamline services for agencies and organizations that serve Oklahoma’s children. Lt. Governor Jari Askins, Sen. Jay Paul Gumm, Rep. Joe Dorman and others discussed legislation that would create Oklahoma’s first-ever Children’s Cabinet.

“Despite the efforts of many in and outside of state government, Oklahoma consistently falls behind when it comes to children’s issues and we can do better,” Askins said. “Now is the time to work together to create a vision that will ensure the future success of our children. We must determine what we can do to best use our resources and address children’s needs,” she explained.

Senate Bill 697 and House Bill 1655 would create an Oklahoma’s Children’s Cabinet to identify challenges facing all children and youth and to develop long-term strategies to address their overall quality of life. Policy recommendations will cover a wide range of issues, including academics, health and well-being, safety, employment training and job access. By serving as a regular forum for decision makers, tough issues facing Oklahoma’s children will be addressed with a comprehensive policy instead of the current piecemeal approach.

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“There is much work to be done,” said Sen. Gumm (D-Durant). “We still have a myriad of children’s issues in the state. By creating the Children’s Cabinet, we will be able to work together with other agencies and specialized organizations to approach these problems with long-term, workable solutions.”

Oklahoma ranks consistently low or below average in national studies on children’s health, safety, academics and quality of life. For example:

- Oklahoma still ranks 40th nationally in infant mortality rates, despite a 5% decrease
- Oklahoma ranks 45th in child deaths (after a 12% increase in five years)
- The state’s child poverty rate increased 13% in six years, ranking Oklahoma 44th
- The High school dropout rates ranks Oklahoma 36th despite a 43% decrease
- The teen death rate in the state ranks 45th (after a 17% increase in five years)
- Child abuse neglect has increased 7.4% over the last 14 years
- There have been over 21,000 Oklahoma juveniles arrested in 2005; 800 for violent crime

“We have an opportunity to borrow from the success of other states’ Children’s Cabinets and make a positive, meaningful difference in the lives of Oklahoma children. We can refocus and refine our efforts by bringing everyone to the table and so they can work to develop comprehensive plans together,” Rep. Dorman (D-Rush Springs) said.

The Children’s Cabinet will work to develop, recommend and implement coordinated state policies to improve the health and welfare of Oklahoman children and families. Composed of 15 top ranking officials whose agencies have working interests in children’s policy in the state of Oklahoma, the Cabinet will have no fiscal impact on the state by utilizing existing government agency expertise and resources. The Oklahoma Commission on Children and Youth, which will provide support staff, will work closely with members of the Children’s Cabinet.

“This proposal is a winner for the state, it requires no new funding in year when money is sparse and would help us to better address some of our state’s most pressing issues,” Askins concluded.