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ARE LOW-WAGE WORKERS AND THEIR FAMILIES A PRIORITY IN 2007?

NCCP's Guide to Watching the State of the Union Address

NEW YORK, January 22, 2007—On the eve of the President's annual State of the Union speech, the National Center for Children in Poverty (NCCP) at Columbia University asks, will the concerns of our nation's working families be addressed? NCCP has compiled this checklist as a guide to watching the State of the Union address to determine if our nation's leaders are truly dedicated to meeting the needs of America's families.

"The state of our union is only as strong as our nation's families—and we are finding that more and more families are struggling just to get by," said Dr. Jane Knitzer, NCCP's Director. "This checklist identifies critical problems facing low- and moderate-income families and some of the solutions that we hope to hear proposed."

Does the President's address or the Democratic response recognize any of the following major PROBLEMS facing low-income children and families?

- Child poverty remains stagnant.*** The child poverty rate has been stagnant since it began to tick up in the early 2000s. Despite some indications of economic growth, child poverty has not returned to the lows seen in the late 1990s. Today, 18% of America's children live in families that are officially considered poor.
- Full-time work is not always enough to provide for a family.*** Research consistently shows that a full-time job at low wages is not enough to support a family. In fact, on average, it takes an income of *twice the federal poverty level*—\$40,000 a year for a family of four—to make ends meet. Nearly 30 million Americans work in jobs that pay poverty-level wages.
- Many families do not have access to critical supports and services, such as child care, paid sick leave, and mental health services.*** Many families lack access to affordable, high-quality child care. Nearly 76% of low-income workers do not have any paid sick leave to care for themselves or a sick family member. And an astounding 75% to 80% of children and youth in need of mental health services do not receive them.
- More children lack health insurance.*** In 2005, for the first time in nearly a decade, the number of children who lack health insurance increased. Eleven percent of all American children are uninsured. Fully 20% of low-income children lack health insurance. Health insurance coverage is critical to improving children's access to care as well as to ensuring good health.

- Too few young children have access to quality early experiences.*** Programs like Early Head Start can prepare young children for a productive life, but only 62,000 infants and toddlers are currently served. Low-income 3- and 4-year-olds are less likely to have access to preschool programs than their more well-off peers.

Does the President or the Democratic respondent identify policy SOLUTIONS to the problems facing low-wage workers and their families?

- Full-time work should be enough to support a family.*** For millions of low-wage workers, full-time work alone is not enough to financially support a family. Policies that would better support low-wage workers and their families include increasing the minimum wage, expanding earned income tax credits, and increasing access to benefits such as paid sick leave and affordable child care.
- Public health insurance improves children's and adults' health care.*** Public health insurance programs, like Medicaid and the State Children's Health Insurance Program (SCHIP), provide coverage to millions of parents and children every year. Policymakers should ensure that these programs continue to provide affordable, quality coverage to children and parents.
- Quality early care and learning experiences improve the odds that children will become productive citizens.*** Children need nurturing parents and caregivers and supportive early learning environments. Programs that target families with infants and toddlers, such as Early Head Start, have been shown to improve children's cognitive development and their behavior, as well as parenting skills. Policymakers should also invest in preschool for 3- and 4-year-olds.
- Children need access to quality mental health services.*** One in five children has a mental health condition and most of these children do not receive the services they need. Effective policy strategies include expanding quality mental health services and supports; helping with the transition to adult services; requiring prevention and early intervention services for all children with a special emphasis on families that experience trauma and violence.

Addressing the needs of America's low-wage workers and their families should be a high priority for our nation's lawmakers in the coming year.