Salt Lake City – While Utah is being touted as the best in the U.S. in economic circles, its ranking in child well-being is slowly eroding. The newly released KIDS COUNT Data Book shows Utah dropped once again in child well-being from 11th to 14th. This year’s Data Book shows that Utah improved in six indicators, stayed the same in two indicators, and worsened in eight indicators.

Each year the Annie E. Casey Foundation’s KIDS COUNT Data Book ranks the states on 16 indicators of child well-being: four indicators in each of the areas of Economic Well-Being, Education, Health, and Family and Community. Utah’s No. 2 ranking in Family and Community was its best, while it dropped three spots in Education and now ranks 30th in that category. Utah also ranked 14th in Health and 11th in Economic Well Being. Utah dropped three spots in overall ranking and is among only 17 states that dropped in ranking. Utah, Georgia, Pennsylvania, Tennessee, and Alaska experienced the largest drops in their rankings.

The new report emphasizes that early intervention and two-generational strategies are the roadmap for improving child well-being. “We are not seeing huge changes in our indicators,” said Terry Haven, deputy director for Voices for Utah Children. “What we are seeing is other states making much needed investments in children and seeing the results.”

While Utah’s economic growth and prosperity should be applauded, it is unfortunately not translating into improvements for our most vulnerable population, Utah’s children. Although Forbes magazine ranks Utah the best state for business for a third straight year, and ALEC ranks Utah No. 1 for economic outlook; Utah ranks 51st in a recent report by Wider Opportunities for Women, which grades state-level policies on their potential to improve the economic security of workers, families, and retirees.

“We need to value our children as much as we value our businesses,” says Haven. “They are 33 percent of our population and 100% of our future.”

The negative impact of the recession affects our children and families. Utah worsened in all four of the indicators in the Economic Domain. Utah’s economic indicators show:

- Child poverty rose from 11 percent to 16 percent from 2005–2011
- Children living in households with a high housing cost burden rose from 32 percent to 37 percent from 2005–2011
- Children whose parents lack secure employment rose from 19 percent to 25 percent from 2008–2011
- Teens not in school and not working rose from 6 percent to 8 percent from 2008–2011
A new report by the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities recently stated, “Five years after the start of the Great Recession, state revenues remain 5 percent below pre-recession levels, after adjusting for inflation, even as the number of people needing state services has grown. So, it’s not surprising that more than a dozen states have enacted or are seriously considering revenue increases to begin reinvesting in schools, roads, and other important services.” Many of these states are also the states in the top 5 ranking of the KIDS COUNT Data Book.

Policies that Utah leaders will be discussing during the next legislative session, such as quality preschool for at-risk children, and recommendations from the newly formed Intergenerational Welfare Reform Commission and the Intergenerational Poverty Advisory Committee, will be crucial if Utah wants to improve their ranking and once again claim a spot in the top five states best for child well-being in the country. By providing high-quality data and trend analysis, KIDS COUNT can enrich the discussion concerning ways to secure better futures for all children and to raise the visibility of children’s issues through an evidenced based lens.

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