Saving Family Child Care Program a Big Win in '09 Legislative Session

Oregon's family child care program employs and trains caregivers so low-income workers can go off to jobs confident their children will be well supervised and cared for, allowing thousands of parents and children to live the American Dream in the Oregon Way.

Yet, for several unsetting weeks during the 2009 legislative session, this enlightened model of economic and social progress teetered at the brink of oblivion, seemingly doomed by the state's $4.2 billion budget gap between projected revenue and anticipated expense.

The governor and the legislature proposed eliminating subsidies for more than 3,500 families in the program at a cost of 1,800 positions, initiating average 6% increases in co-pays for parents hard-pressed to participate at current levels, decreasing pay rates for workers by 10-14%, and refusing to consider creating paths to health coverage for childcare workers.

That's when members of SEIU Local 503 launched a persuasive campaign to convince legislative leaders that destroying Oregon's employment-related day care program was not only bad social policy, but also bad economics. Eliminating families and workers from ERDC in the name of savings would cost the state two jobs — SEIU 503 members and their parent clients— overburdening other government programs and draining more money from the economy.

Legislators listened and in the end restored the program to full funding for one year, setting the stage for the state to negotiate a new two-year contract that

- maintains existing rates, which was crucial to retaining dependable providers who care for low-income children in safe, reliable homes and is a real victory in these economic times;
- continues funding for training;
- strengthens the grievance process with steps and timelines for resolving disputes;
- paves the way for SEIU 503 to develop and administer a health insurance plan for child care workers that's funded under the state's Family Health Insurance Assistance Program starting in 2010.

Further, legislative action established mandatory paid orientations for new child care providers that will include a union presentation.

Now members are preparing to return to the legislature in 2010 to secure guaranteed funding for existing eligibility levels for about 3,000 families in the contract's second year.

"Settling a contract was only part of the battle," said child care local president Portia Moye, a Portland-based provider who chaired the bargaining team. "It could not have happened without the work we did at the Capitol. And we know we have more work to do."