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Partnership Leads to Healthier Kids, Fewer Costly Hospital Visits *Plans Forming to Spread Program Throughout Michigan*

GRAND RAPIDS, MI – An independent evaluation of an innovative approach to children's health care in west Michigan has found the program is succeeding in significantly reducing the number of expensive emergency room visits and hospital admissions while improving kids' health.

Since launching in 2008, the Kent County Children Healthcare Access Program (CHAP) has cut the number of ER visits 14 percent at participating health care providers, and inpatient hospital admissions are down 12 percent. The decreases are even more significant among children with the most significant needs: a 35 percent drop in ER use and 62 percent drop in hospitalizations. Additionally, there was a 40 percent increase in families with a specific plan to manage their child's asthma – the most common chronic children's disease and one of the leading causes of hospitalization.

The independent evaluation of the program by SRA International also included a cost benefit analysis that takes into account the societal benefits – such as fewer school days missed. It found that the immediate social benefits exceed the costs by one-fifth – a return of \$1.20 for every \$1.00 invested. That is a conservative analysis and can be expected to increase over time, since the benefits of good health in childhood are compounded as people age.

“The Children's Healthcare Access Program is focused intensively on prevention and early intervention,” said First Steps Executive Director Rebekah Fennell. “Children and the community benefit when we invest our resources in prevention. Children stay healthy, and we avoid the unnecessary emergency department visits and preventable hospitalizations that increase healthcare costs for everybody.”

The impact of the program proves its need to be replicated throughout Michigan, said Jack Kresnak, President & CEO of Michigan's Children, an independent children's advocacy group based in Lansing. A new report from Michigan's Children examines the CHAP model and access to health care for publicly insured children. The report shows that while the number of children relying on public insurance jumped from 23 percent in 2001 to 39 percent in 2010, the number of doctors accepting public insurance has dropped significantly, making it almost impossible for many families to access health care.

More than one-third (35 percent) of those covered by Medicaid or Healthy Kids said they had trouble finding providers who would accept their coverage. As a result, many end up in hospitals for preventable illnesses. Earlier study has shown that the statewide cost savings would be between \$150-\$200 million a year if publicly insured children in Michigan had the same hospitalization rate as privately insured children. *Focus on Michigan Communities: Children's Health Care Access Program in Kent and Wayne Counties*, is available at www.michiganschildren.org.

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“We can’t afford to maintain status quo when it comes to health care,” Mr. Kresnak said. “Our economy can’t support it and our children can’t bear the tremendous cost of inadequate preventive care. We know that coverage alone does not guarantee health care. CHAP is a cost-effective solution that should be supported and replicated throughout Michigan.”

Expansion of CHAP is reliant in large part on state and county leaders offering support, including incentives for providers, Mr. Kresnak said. Current efforts rely heavily on foundation funding.

Organizers in Wayne County, where 47 percent of children are covered by Medicaid, recently received a \$1 million grant from the Kresge Foundation to launch the Wayne Children’s Healthcare Access Program. It will serve 3,000 children directly and 25,000 indirectly during the two-year pilot. Services will be provided to low income families experiencing disproportionately high rates of asthma, exposure to lead and other environmental toxins, obesity, infant mortality and morbidity, sexually transmitted infections, and developmental delays. Organizers in Kalamazoo and Calhoun counties hope to implement the model within the next year.

“Children who are healthy do better in school, so the CHAP model is not just saving money it’s also increasing the odds that low-income children will become better educated and go on to become productive adults,” said Judy Y. Samelson, chief executive officer of the Early Childhood Investment Corporation, which is providing seed money for similar CHAP model efforts in communities across the state. “That’s good for everybody.”

The Kent County Children’s Healthcare Access Program (CHAP) is a collaborative, community-based approach to improving the health of low-income children while better utilizing existing resources and decreasing costs. First Steps launched the project in 2008, in partnership with the Helen DeVos Children’s Hospital, Priority Health, the Great Start Collaborative of Kent County, the Asthma Network of West Michigan, Cherry Street Health Services, and numerous healthcare practices and human services agencies.

A guiding principle of CHAP is that all children should have a consistent, high-quality medical home—a doctor’s office or clinic where they always can go for regular checkups, immunizations and treatment when they are sick. The program involves health education and support services for families as well as important changes within health plans, primary care providers, and human service agencies. Some of the changes are obvious to families, such as extended evening hours that allow them to take a sick child to the family doctor rather than the emergency department. Others — like a simpler referral process for mental health services — are not as recognizable but greatly improve access to the care children and families need.

“There’s no one silver bullet or quick fix,” explained Dr. Tom Peterson, Executive Director of Safety, Quality and Community Health at Helen DeVos Children’s Hospital and Medical Director of CHAP. “CHAP is much more than a program or service. It’s a new approach to pediatric care that brings together all aspects of the healthcare system to coordinate our efforts and ensure that we’re doing all we can to improve children’s health and make the best use of limited resources.”

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First Steps is a public-private partnership that works to strengthen and coordinate the system of early childhood services in Kent County. Our community vision is that every young child will enter kindergarten ready to succeed in school and in life. www.firststepskent.org.

Michigan’s Children is a statewide, independent voice for children and their families. We work with lawmakers, business leaders and communities to make Michigan a place where all children have the opportunity to thrive. www.michiganschildren.org.

The Early Childhood Investment Corporation is a public/private initiative working to restructure Michigan’s investment in children from birth to five through state and local community efforts. <http://greatstartforkids.org/>