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Friday 8th August, 2008

Action on child poverty urgently needed where we live, say Northland health professionals

Whangarei's Manaia Health PHO has welcomed the report to the Children's Commissioner 'A Fair Go for all Children' which urges the government to adopt a sustained, coordinated plan of action to end child poverty in New Zealand.

The report's call for action is borne out by local trends. Census information reveals that most children in Northland are being born into poverty. In 2006, 85% of all babies were born in the five most deprived deciles; 49% in the two most deprived deciles.

"Child poverty is the number one issue facing Northland" says Chris Farrelly, CEO of Manaia Health. "We wholeheartedly endorse the recommendations in this report – and hope this spurs the government and political parties into action."

"The link between poverty and the health of our children cannot continue to be ignored," Mr Farrelly says. A child growing up in poverty is three times more likely to be sick and has on average a 1.4 times higher risk of dying during childhood than a child from a high-income household.

"If you ask anyone working in health, education or social services they'll tell you many of the 'symptoms' they deal with are directly related to poverty" says Ngaire Rae, Health Promotion Advisor at Manaia Health.

Housing need is particularly acute in Northland. Despite a period of economic boom crowding rates actually rose in Northland between 2001 and 2006. In 2006 20.3% of local children and young people lived in crowded households, compared with 16.5% nationally. 39.7% of children in the most deprived areas lived in crowded conditions.

The Whangarei Emergency Housing Trust has to turn away about 12 people each week they are so busy. In Whangarei alone Housing New Zealand has a waiting list of 580" says Ms Rae.

“Manaia Health is taking action where we can. We are one of the few areas in New Zealand that has free health care for all children under six. We’ve also supported the Healthy Housing Tai Tokerau project which will see up to 4000 low-income homes retrofitted over the next five years.

“But as health professionals we can’t put more money in families’ empty pockets. We all rely on fair policy and practice to do that,” Ms Rae concludes. One of the clearest findings in the report is that government policy matters. Most of the variation between child poverty levels in OECD countries can be accounted for by government policy.

“This report provides a great ‘start here’ list,” Mr Farrelly says. “We must take action if we are serious about the health and wellbeing of our children, now and in the future.”

“This issue is significant for our whole population, the children of today are tomorrows workforce and the future carers for the adults of today. An investment in our children is actually an investment in ourselves,” Mr Farrelly says.

For more information visit <http://www.occ.org.nz/home/childpoverty>