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ILLINOIS RECOGNIZED AS NATIONAL LEADER IN CHILD ABUSE PREVENTION

***DCFS Strengthening Families Illinois the focus of national conference;
Acting Director McEwen shares Illinois' success in linking child welfare
and early education centers to support families and safeguard children***

SAN DIEGO – Illinois was recognized today as a national example for its success in establishing collaboration between child welfare and early education centers to strengthen families and ensure the safety of children. Over 300 leaders in child welfare, early education and government convened in San Diego today to share innovative approaches to the federal Strengthening Families initiative, with Illinois highlighted as a model for other states to follow.

"Illinois has provided national leadership and innovation in helping childcare centers across the state understand how important their work is to supporting families so that potential problems are caught early and child abuse and neglect is prevented in the long run," said Judy Langford, Director of the Strengthening Families Initiative. "Illinois is also foremost in the country in linking early care and education with child welfare so that children in kinship and foster care have the opportunity to be in quality childcare centers where they receive the support they need to enter kindergarten ready to learn."

Sponsored by the Center for the Study of Social Policy, the summit is expected to draw up to 300 individuals leading Strengthening Families efforts in states and localities across the country. Participants will include early childhood education providers, child welfare workers, state government leaders, elected officials, and parent leaders from the pilot states of Alaska, Arkansas, Illinois, Missouri, New Hampshire, Rhode Island, and Wisconsin, as well as a strong contingent from 18 other states where implementation is underway. The Illinois team was asked by conference leaders to give multiple presentations on their approaches to statewide interagency collaboration, parent partnerships, policy and practice improvement, professional development and program evaluation.

DCFS Acting Director Erwin McEwen leads the team of Illinois collaborators, and spoke to the conference on the importance of family support and the Strengthening Families Initiative to prevention of child abuse and neglect. "Collaboration between child welfare and early education to

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support families and safeguard children is not a common thing in our country, but it must be, and it is an important priority in Illinois,” said McEwen. “If you believe, as we do, that child welfare should work to strengthen families, not divide them, then building protective factors around children through working with early education professionals is a critical task. For many families, their local early education center is the most consistent community support available, and we can build on the relationships between parents and those centers to create safer, stronger families for Illinois children.”

The Strengthening Families Leadership Summit takes place May 10–12, 2007, at the Westin Horton Plaza in San Diego, California. The Summit will share findings from the Strengthening Families Initiative’s two-year pilot phase and will involve participants in shaping the next phase of this rapidly expanding national movement. The Summit is sponsored by the Center for the Study of Social Policy and supported by the National Alliance of Children’s Trust and Prevention Funds, FRIENDS National Resource Center for Community-based Child Abuse Prevention Grantees, Doris Duke Charitable Foundation, and A. L. Mailman Family Foundation. The Strengthening Families Initiative is based on research showing that abuse and neglect are prevented when early childhood programs strengthen five protective factors in families:

- Parental resilience
- An array of social connections
- Adequate knowledge of parenting and child development
- Concrete support in times of need
- Children’s healthy social and emotional development

Illinois’ innovations have included the identification of a sixth protective factor: promoting healthy parent-child relationships. The Center for the Study of Social Policy helps states and localities implement creative and effective strategies that strengthen disadvantaged communities and families and ensure that children grow up healthy, safe, successful in school, and ready for productive adulthood.

Strengthening Families Illinois is a collaboration between DCFS and over 40 public and private partners, including the Illinois Department of Human Services, Illinois State Board of Education, Illinois Center for Violence Prevention, Action for Children, Chicago Department of Children and Youth Services, Illinois Family Partnership Network, Illinois Head Start Association, Ounce of Prevention Fund, and Voices for Illinois Children. The Illinois initiative has established 6 regional networks, encompassing over 60 centers. DCFS has also revised statewide child welfare policy to now require education to begin at age 3 for all state wards, and changed its foster care placement policy for wards to look first to place the child within a foster family in their current school catchment area, helping to support family reunification and the educational stability and success of children. For more information on Strengthening Families Illinois, visit the initiative’s website at www.strengtheningfamiliesillinois.org.

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