



Posted on Mon, Apr. 02, 2007

Ads ask: Can Kansas be best place to raise children?

BY SUZANNE PEREZ TOBIAS
The Wichita Eagle

Beginning Monday, the voice in a familiar series of television commercials will ask:

"What if the best state in the entire nation for raising a child could be Kansas?"

"And what if we could make it true by the year 2020?"

The campaign is the start of the Kansas Health Foundation's latest attempt to make Kansas a better place for children and families. The commercials have been airing for a couple of months.

But now, the foundation is setting a deadline.

"It's a dream -- a wonderful dream -- but we think it's absolutely possible," said Marni Vliet, president and chief executive of the foundation.

Inspired by President Kennedy's 1961 pledge to land a man on the moon within the decade, foundation officials said they hope the 2020 deadline will stimulate and refocus efforts throughout the state to help children grow up healthy, happy and well educated.

"With this (campaign), we are putting our shoulders right into this effort, which we think is just critical," Vliet said.

The health foundation has committed \$3.1 million to the campaign. In addition to radio and TV ads, the group will launch a Web site -- www.betterstateforchildren.org-- to facilitate community discussions about the goal and how to achieve it.

The money also will fund efforts by about 200 trained ambassadors to "take the message deep and wide into the community, to get them rallied behind this goal," said Chris Power, a foundation spokesman.

Measuring progress toward the goal, however, could prove tricky. Asked which state currently holds the "Best State to Raise a Child" title -- New York? California? South Dakota? --Vliet couldn't say.

"There are so many different things to measure and so many ways to possibly do it," she said. Measures such as prenatal care, teen birth rates, high school dropout rates and poverty all affect children's well-being, she said. So do cases of child abuse and neglect, immunization rates and school performance.

"We're not envisioning this as a race among the states," she said.

"But we do think we'll be able to tell if we reach our goal."

The foundation is working with the Kansas Health Institute to begin measuring at least one indicator -- school readiness -- this fall.

Vliet said the institute hopes to establish baseline data on how well prepared Kansas children are -- physically, socially, emotionally and intellectually -- when they enter kindergarten.

For now, though, the health foundation hopes its radio and TV ads, which feature pastoral images of smiling kids and adults, will spread the message that children are important.

"What if a dream could suddenly take root and begin to grow?" a voice says.

"What if it could become something strong and permanent -- something essential to all of us?"

The idea, Vliet said, is that we all hold a stake in our children's success.

"We're talking about a cultural change -- more conversation, more people embracing this goal," she said. "And now there's a deadline."

Reach Suzanne Perez Tobias at 316-268-6567 or stobias@wichitaeagle.com.

© 2007 Wichita Eagle and wire service sources. All Rights Reserved. <http://www.kansas.com>