

## **MEDIA RELEASE**

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### **Public Health Association says money needs to be spent now on eradicating child poverty**

The Public Health Association (PHA) says money spent now on eradicating child poverty will be nothing compared to the money that would need to be spent in later years to counter its aftermath.

A new report from the Child Action Poverty Group; *Left Behind: how social and income inequalities damage New Zealand children*, finds that despite a better economy, significantly more people in the workforce, and the *Working for Families* package, far too many children still live in poverty.

Increasing wages and extensions to *Working for Families* may reduce that number somewhat but there are an estimated 150,000 children in severe and significant hardship who have been left behind by being left out of the *Working for Families* package.

The PHA's national executive officer, Dr Gay Keating, says politicians who do nothing about what is happening in the country's poorest homes are not good economists and that money spent now on eradicating poverty will be an investment in the future.

"UNICEF argues that most of the serious problems facing today's industrialised countries have their roots in child poverty. It's not rocket science to realise that supporting our young should be front and centre of any Government's agenda, to reap the enormous benefits of a more healthy and stable society not so far down track.

"A child growing up in New Zealand in poverty is three times as likely to be sick as a child growing up in a higher income household. These children are still attacked by old-fashioned diseases such as tuberculosis, meningococcal disease, rheumatic fever, gastroenteritis, bronchiectasis and pneumonia because so many of them have inadequate nutritious food, live in cold damp houses, and where poor transport makes it difficult to get to health services."

Dr Keating says a strong economy does not mean everybody is uniformly better off.

"This report shows New Zealand had the highest rate of growth in inequality in the OECD from 1982 to 2000 and that a raft of major tax policy changes has the potential to make that even worse. The recent rise in prices of everyday items is having a disastrous effect on those 150,000 children who were already in severe or significant hardship.

"A child's need for food and a warm bed does not change depending on whether or not their parent is getting a benefit. The children left out of *Working for Families* are being left further behind. We need to ensure that all families can afford two of the basics of healthy life – adequate, warm housing and sufficient nutritious food.

"All children need to have the advantages that *Working for Families* currently offers to only some.

"The PHA believes GST should be removed from fruit, vegetables, bread and other cereals and milk and we should consider a trial to provide free high nutrient breakfasts to children in primary schools serving low-income areas."

"As 'Left Behind' highlights, poverty is a far greater factor in producing long-standing health, educational, or social disadvantage than any individual lifestyle or behavioural choice."

**For more information contact:**

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