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STEVE ADUBATO, host:

Strengthening New Jersey's families, next on CAUCUS.

(Announcements)

ADUBATO: Welcome to Agenda New Jersey, a special CAUCUS series looking at key issues affecting the quality of our life in New Jersey. I'm Steve Adubato. Families are the basic building block of our society, but when families face poverty and other crises, their well-being is in danger. What can be done on a state level to provide support to New Jersey's families. Here to discuss this question and more are De Miller, president and general counsel for Legal Services of New Jersey; Kevin Ryan, chief of staff to the Department of Human Services; and finally Cecilia Zalkind, executive director of the Association for Children of New Jersey. I should also say that De, you and Cecilia are the co-authors of this publication, "Strengthening Families." This is one of many reports in the Agenda New Jersey series.

Agenda New Jersey is a series that has been--a series of public policy reports that has been commissioned by The Fund for New Jersey. Let me give you some of the other reports in this Agenda New Jersey series. And by the way, our telephone number, be on--you see it right there, right? As I say it, our crackerjack team in the control room puts it, 233-9886, area code 973. Other reports in the Agenda New Jersey series: Campaign Finance Reform, very important; Saving Our Environment; Education; Building Our Cities and Fiscal Responsibility.

Cil, let me ask you. Strengthening families, how is that the responsibility of government, particularly state government? Isn't that the family's responsibility?

Ms. CECILIA ZALKIND (Executive Director, Association For Children Of New Jersey) : Well, in an ideal world you would say that, but most families need help in parenting. And there are many families who have obstacles and problems that interfere with their ability to parent. They need help, and I think that's traditionally been an obligation of the state to protect its vulnerable citizens.

ADUBATO: What kind of families are we talking about?

Ms. ZALKIND: Well, I think it runs the gamut of families who are involved in the child welfare system because of abuse, neglect issues which are often due to some parental issues. Sometimes parental substance abuse can be a factor. We can talk about parents who are dealing with raising developmentally disabled children, children who

need access to mental health services. I think it's a whole range of issues. It could simply be families who are working but not earning enough in New Jersey to support themselves. They need some help with things like child care and health care.

ADUBATO: That's the government's responsibility, De?

Mr. DE MILLER (President, Legal Services Of New Jersey): A large part of our perspective is focusing on poverty, and the fact that without governmental help people really are not able to escape from poverty all by themselves too often. There are really three groups of people, I think, that we're talking about. One are people who are able to find work and make it on their own. The second group of people are people who are able physically to work but have, for a variety of issues--reasons, a great deal of difficulty doing that without some assistance from government because they're poor and they're overcoming a lot of hurdles. And thirdly, a group of people who can't work at all, and they obviously need the most high level of assistance.

ADUBATO: And the Department of Human Services, OK, charged with this responsibility in a lot of areas. Department of Human Services houses DYFS--OK, Division of Youth and Family Services. Talk to us about this, Kevin. Cil, sai--said recently--in a piece, an article in The Star Ledger, she was quoted as saying, "Everyone is tip-toeing around this issue in the first year because of the economy." But then you say, "This is the best time for change"--the best time to change the Department of Human Services to respond to the needs that have just been outlined by the two co-authors of this report. Your response.

Mr. KEVIN M. RYAN (Chief Of Staff, New Jersey Department Human Services): First of all, I think the report's a major contribution to the new administration. It really sets a context for where enhancements and reforms need to take place. And, you know, I want to thank De and Cil and also Mark Murphy at the Fund For New Jersey for commissioning the papers, but then giving us those papers during the transition. And--and certainly, we've used them as thought pieces to help us think about where we want to go.

ADUBATO: Wait, wait. Explain that to us--thi--this report, the "Strengthening Families" report. The new administration comes in in January, we're doing this program in early April, what do you do? So the Fund for New Jersey commissions these reports, you get Strengthening, you know, Families. You get it, and how do you talk about it?

Mr. RYAN: Well, Cil and De talk about a number of issues in the report that have to do with funding priorities, systems change, and this is a great moment in state government. I think Cil alluded to it in that piece. You know, the--the gov--the governor just recently proposed his budget. And while the vast majority of the gov--of the government has become smaller and many departments have had their

budgets contracted by 5 percent or more, the--the governor's really cast his lot with vulnerable people, with children in poor families, and the Human Services' budget has actually increased so that there's a real strong commitment to vulnerable and at-risk children, working poor families, the developmentally disabled, the mentally ill. That's a remarkable thing for a governor to do with a \$6 billion deficit.

ADUBATO: OK. So when we say it's a wonderful opportunity to change, what exactly are we talking about?

Mr. MILLER: For openers, I think that the old system of welfare as we knew it has ended and it needs to be re-envisioned, and it--it's really a concern state governmentwide. It's not just a concern of the Department of Human Services. I think the governor and his staff agree that it really needs the undivi--poverty cuts across department lines, needs to involve the departments of Health and Human Services and Education and Labor, all focusing on getting greater levels s--of assistance to people who need it but can work, and also a needed level of assistance to those who cannot work.

ADUBATO: OK, let's be real specific here. You say that welfare grants are, quote, "ridiculously underfunded at \$424 for a family of three."

Mr. MILLER: Per month.

ADUBATO: Per month. But the vast majority of people watching this show might say, 'What are you, kidding me? I don't care how much they're getting. A dollar is too much. I'm not doing it. I don't want to be a part of that welfare system.' Some might say that; you say what to them?

Mr. MILLER: Welfare system has been changed dramatically. There's a flat five-year time limit on welfare for openers. People...

ADUBATO: Let's be clear, five years on welfare...

Mr. MILLER: Five years on welfare and then no more welfare for life for those adults. So--and secondly, the--the other major change that came with the reform of federal law in 1996 was a requirement that people work. The only people who are exempted from that are those who physically are unable to work. So it's not welfare anymore that's the issue. The rolls have dropped by close to 80 percent.

ADUBATO: The number of people on welfare.

Mr. MILLER: Right, the welfare rolls. And really what we now need to do is focus on the folks who are left, who are--the ones who have the greatest difficulty making it on their own, finding those jobs and keeping those jobs.

ADUBATO: Cil.

Ms. ZALKIND: I think also in addition to the people who are left, 'cause I think you're right, those are individuals who really need the greatest assistance. Many are disabled; they cannot work. But you have an emerging group of families in New Jersey who did hear what welfare reform required and did work, many who left welfare on their own, got jobs and have really been struggling to maintain those jobs to--to become self sufficient for themselves and their families. New Jersey is a state that has a very high cost of living. Housing alone in New Jersey is very expensive. So those families are very vulnerable. They may have left welfare, but they haven't left poverty.

ADUBATO: Right. Let's stay on this because you talk about the cost of living in the state of New Jersey. One of the recommendations in the report--by the way, if you've just joined us, this is part of our Agenda New Jersey series. This is mirroring the Agenda New Jersey Initiative, which, in fact, is a series of public policy reports that have been commissioned by the Fund for New Jersey. You see the telephone number and the Web site up on your screen. You can get all these reports on the Web and the other reports beyond "Strengthening Families," which is co-authored by Cil, you and De; the other reports--campaign finance reform, saving our environment, education, building our cities and fiscal responsibility.

However, what strikes me--now I lost my page--is that on the question of minimum wage--this is what I'm thinking. One of the recommendations is, you say in your report, the state minimum wage should be raised to \$6.50 per hour, and then be indexed to the annual inflation rate.

Mr. MILLER: Right. It's very...

ADUBATO: Can we afford it?

Mr. MILLER: It's not a--that this is, interestingly, a government role, but it--this is not something that's financed by government. This is something that would be the responsibility of the employers. And h--society has gone through a history of peaks and valleys with minimum wage. And we have not had a minimum wage increase at the state or the federal level in many years. It's well behind the rate of inflation. It's unrealistically low. And we really need to avoid the paroxysms of these sudden drops of minimum wage and...

ADUBATO: But how does that strengthen families? You raise the minimum wage to \$6.50 per hour; how does that strengthen families?

Mr. MILLER: Families which are poor cannot survive and stay together. It is very, very hard to make it when you don't have housing, when you can't find clothing for your kids, when you can't find school supplies for your kids and you can't find adequate health care. Poverty is the key, a major key to keeping families together.

It has to be addressed.

ADUBATO: Kevin, I'd like you to respond to two points here. One is that welfare grants are ridiculously underfunded at \$424 per month for a family of three. Your reaction?

Mr. RYAN: I agree. I think welfare grants are far too low. I sp...

ADUBATO: Does the governor agree?

Mr. RYAN: I think that we're taking a hard look at this. You know, Steve, I spent the last 10 years working with homeless kids at Covenant House first in the South Bronx and Times Square and then more recently in Newark and Atlantic City. And I saw how poverty broke families apart. I saw how teen-agers end up in shelters, because their parents are working night jobs and day jobs and the cash grant that they get from the state is not cutting it. So we have to take a hard look at that. The state has not reflected on and raised the cash grants in the welfare system for a very long time, and it needs some serious reflection.

ADUBATO: The politics of this, what is it?

Mr. RYAN: Well, I think it's complicated. I mean, I think there are people, as you said at the beginning of the session, who think that this is a bad system and--and continue to think about the antecedent system, Aid to Families with Dependent Children, when folks were on the program for a long time and we were proliferating these images of welfare mothers. It's just not the reality today. We're not talking about the welfare poor; we're talking about the working poor.

ADUBATO: Cil, how can we get those watching and others to be engaged in this discussion if they say, you know, 'That's not me. My family's not on welfare. All right, somebody that--that's fine, that's their business. That's not my issue. I'm strengthening my own family.'

Ms. ZALKIND: Well, I think that--actually, I don't know if the public would respond in that way because I think people do recognize that they live in a community; you know, your town is your community. What happens to other children impacts on your family as well. What other families face impact on you as a--as a family, as a parent and also as a citizen. I think that people can be engaged in looking at what other families need. You know, I think we're in a very different environment for welfare reform. There was a lot of concern five years ago about the impact of welfare reform, some of which I think still remains, especially for those individuals who have not been able to find jobs. But we've had families who've responded and who are struggling just to keep self-sufficient. I think those families need support and I do think they have support from the broader community.

ADUBATO: Let's talk about some of the other recommendations in the "Strengthening Families" report. I--I saw one other here that struck

me. We're talking about unemployment insurance and temporary disability. What are we advocating here in the report?

Mr. MILLER: For one thing, trying to make unemployment insurance and temporary disability fill the gap for the real world of low-wage workers, people who only work for a short period of time, then the job doesn't continue, or people who are only able to find part-time work. There's no reason that people who are doing everything they possibly can to find some work, whether it's part-time, whether it's short-term, shouldn't be protected when that work ends through no fault of their own. And that's the kind of reform which is fundamentally needed in--in the unemployment system.

ADUBATO: Cil--excuse me, Cil, aren't we also talking about--a woman gives birth, OK? And--and the law says what right now in terms of how much time she has in which her job will still be there?

Ms. ZALKIND: Well, I think we have a Family Leave Act in New Jersey that is applicable to certain size organizations--small organizations are exempt--and I think it's an unpaid leave system. I believe it's 12 weeks of unpaid leave.

ADUBATO: Right.

Ms. ZALKIND: You know, other states are certainly looking at whether that should be paid leave to support someone who makes the decision to stay at home for those 12 weeks and have a job--have something to support themselves during that time and a job to come back to.

ADUBATO: OK. The other part of this--Bill, say that again. We were--are we talking about child support? Child support enforcement, a big piece of strengthening our families? And if so, how?

Mr. MILLER: It's a critical piece. It doesn't affect or help every family because not every family has a non-custodial parent who is making enough to really provide a lot of support. That's part of the employment problem. But for al--an ever-growing number of people, especially now that welfare has time limits, child support is really going to be effectively the major income stream. And so it has to be en--effectively enforced.

ADUBATO: Let--let me--let me ask you this, Kevin. The governor--you talked about the governor's commitment, all right...

Mr. RYAN: Mm-hmm.

ADUBATO: ...to Department of Human Services budget, you know, a \$6--\$5.3 whatever billion def...

Mr. RYAN: Eight--almost eight. Oh, I thought you meant our budget. No, you're right.

ADUBATO: I thought it just went up in the last couple of hours.

Mr. RYAN: No, good question.

ADUBATO: But as we do the program--we're taping this program on April the 3rd--the budget deficit--the structural deficit is like--I don't know--\$5.3 billion. You were saying that the governor's not looking to cut from the Human Services and that sends a message.

Mr. RYAN: Mm-hmm.

ADUBATO: Other part of that question, if I were to ask you what this administration's policy is--or family policy is--or policy about families, how would you describe it?

Mr. RYAN: I mean, I think we're evolving it. I--it's--it's front and center. I think the major contribution that Cil and De make in this piece is that they talk about system fragmentation. You could be in a county--you could be a family in a county and you could be receiving welfare benefits and you could also be involved with the child welfare system, and those systems don't talk. So in our house, at the Department of Human Services, we have to change a culture, but it's bigger than the Department of Human Services--the Department of Labor, the Department of Education, the Department of Transportation. We have to see it as our primary responsibility to strengthen families. That's a culture that we're going to change and that's coming directly from the governor's office. And when that changes, I think we're going to begin to see street reform. We're going to begin to see things happen with families experiencing service delivery on the street in a way that's meaningful. That's going to take some time but that is definitely one of the governor's top priorities.

ADUBATO: Real quickly, before we move to--move to the department of youth and family services--or the Division, excuse me, of Youth and Family Services, what do you mean by service delivery?

Mr. RYAN: Well, I mean that you can have a district office in a county that doesn't ever talk to the county welfare office.

ADUBATO: Why?

Mr. RYAN: That's a really good question. I mean, I think it has to do with system disintegration, that you have a state--you--you have a state entity that provides a paradigm--Right?--that provides a purview for the delivery of services to folks at the county. And in some counties, like Monmouth, for example, my home county, we have a very strong human services community. There is some connectedness. In other counties, these folks don't talk. And if those folks don't talk, you tend to have one group see themselves as being responsible for maybe helping a family, maybe strengthening that family, and another group sees its responsibility maybe as providing a cash grant or maybe checking up on a work activity. It's the most sacred thing

govern--government can do.

When you asked at the beginning of this session, you know, is this the responsibility of government? It absolutely is the responsibility of government. It's the most important thing government can do...

ADUBATO: What happens if government...

Mr. RYAN: ...is support families.

ADUBATO: What happens if government were not to do it?

Mr. RYAN: I think that there would be many a tragedy. And I think we see that every day at Covenant House. I mean, why did I leave Covenant House to come and join this administration is because...

ADUBATO: Tell folks what Covenant House was and is.

Mr. RYAN: I'm sorry?

ADUBATO: Tell folks what Covenant Hou--House is.

Mr. RYAN: Covenant House is a program that serves homeless teen-agers, shelter program, transitional living program, street outreach services. And I saw--how many times did I--did I work with a kid and see in that kid a lost opportunity? You know, why didn't the school connect with the family? Why didn't the health clinic connect with the family? And Commissioner Harris, who would have been here today, but for the fact that she's committed in her first two months to be at every psychiatric...

ADUBATO: Commissioner of family se--excuse me, Kevin.

Mr. RYAN: Yeah.

ADUBATO: Commissioner of the Department of Human Services.

Mr. RYAN: Right. Department of Human Services. She would have been here but she's committed in the first two months of her time in office to see every state-run psychiatric hospital, developmental center, residential treatment home. So she's doing that today. But her top priority is to understand better how we can strengthen and support families.

ADUBATO: And again, the Division of Youth and Family Services--DYFS. Cil, at the Association for Children of New Jersey, I mean, I know, because we've worked together on a whole range of issues, the interaction you've had with DYFS. In this report, Strengthening Families, DYFS is a big piece of it. Blueprint for strengthening families, blueprint for reforming DYFS. How would it change?

Ms. ZALKIND: I think we need to examine whether DYFS, as it exists,

is a viable, functioning agency. I think it's been charged to be the be-all and end-all for families.

ADUBATO: What's its responsibility regarding children? How many children and who are those children?

Ms. ZALKIND: Well, it has a dual mission. Its mission is to protect children from abuse and neglect, but its mission is also to keep families together. That is a very broad category. I think the division has actively about 50,000 children on its caseload at any given time, the majority of which actually are children in their own homes, where the division is hopefully providing services to those families. There are about 10,000 children in out-of-home placement, close to 7,000 in foster care, the rest in residential placement, group-home facilities. If you look at the division's budget, if you look at its workload, a lot of attention goes to the out-of-home placement population, as it should, because those are children who have the state, in a sense, as their parents. But...

ADUBATO: A ward of the state, is that where that expression comes from?

Ms. ZALKIND: Well, in many cases, yes. I mean, in--in some cases the parent, of course, retains legal rights to the child and some decision making, but it's the division that's providing the day-to-day care. You know, what we suggest in the report is it's time to examine, first, whether the division is doing an effective job of keeping families together. I don't think that question has been addressed. And secondly, is there a better way of doing this? We've spent a lot of time talking about the needs of families for economic assistance, which is absolutely true, but families also need other types of assistance, often that involves parenting. They may have problems themselves in parenting; they may have a child who has special needs.

ADUBATO: You know, just--you got me thinking about this, this parenting thing, largely because I make tons of mistakes as a parent and will continue to. Why don't we--in the spirit of strengthening families, why don't we train people to become parents? Ho--do you talk about that at all in the report, in helping people become better parents? And if so, how do we do that?

Ms. ZALKIND: Well, I think we talk about it in terms of having the state take on some responsibility for providing prevention and early intervention services to families before they get in trouble, before parenting issues emerge. So parent training, parent support, I think, can be a very important part of that.

ADUBATO: Where could they get in trouble?

Ms. ZALKIND: Well, you know, you have a young parent, someone who's under a lot of pressure; you have a--a family who's working, not

making a lot of money, facing transportation problems, getting to work, getting the child care; a parent who's parenting a child that has some need, a child who may have a mental illness, they need help. Many parents have no place to turn. It's very nice if you have a family or a community network in place to help you, but not all families have that.

Mr. MILLER: A lot--a lot of people need, I think, the--what's generally seen as counseling and that kind of an emotional--emotional support. But the other thing--just to hark back to an earlier theme that you have to take off the table is the economic pressure, the economic stress.

ADUBATO: Right. Right.

Mr. MILLER: If you can't help them deal with the poverty from low-wage working jobs that are sort of dead-end jobs with no benefits, if you can't assist them somehow in--in that--facing that reality, the--the difficulty--the--the job of parenting becomes almost overwhelming.

Ms. ZALKIND: Yes.

Mr. MILLER: It's very...

ADUBATO: There's another issue that's raised here, helping the extended family, funding for kinship care. W--what does that mean?

Mr. RYAN: Well, it's a great innovation that I believe Cil is responsible for, and that is providing cash supports to grandparents or to extended kin in caring for children. And that program, I think, now is eligible for individuals or perp--persons up to 150 percent of the poverty level. And one of the recommendations that Cil and De make is that the means test there be increased so that--that persons within 300 percent or 350 percent of the poverty level be eligible for that.

ADUBATO: Explain to people what that means, this whole means--the--the jargon sometimes gets lost on people. Gets lost on me.

Mr. RYAN: Sorry.

ADUBATO: Means test means what?

Mr. RYAN: Yeah. It means you're testing somebody's income and so they wouldn't be eligible for the program unless they're making 150 percent of the poverty level.

ADUBATO: And what's the poverty level?

Mr. MILLER: Family size of three, a little over \$17,000 compared to

what our study, cost of living and other studies have shown. The real cost of living is probably about two and half times that...

ADUBATO: OK.

Mr. MILLER: ...in New Jersey.

ADUBATO: And so you're talking about changing--there'd be recommendations to change that, Cil?

Ms. ZALKIND: Yes. Well, first, the kinship care program is brand-new in our state. It was signed into law by Governor DiFrancesco in October and we're very pleased to see it remain intact in the budget because it's just implemented this January. It's a really important first step to providing assistance to relatives, grandparents, aunts and uncles, who step in to take care of a child when a parent is not in the picture.

ADUBATO: Again, government providing assistance to do that.

Ms. ZALKIND: Yes.

ADUBATO: Trying to minimize the amount of economic pressure on the family so that they can concentrate on the other aspects of family life. Is that it?

Ms. ZALKIND: Yeah. And also, I think that when you talk about government stepping in to provide support, in my mind it's not a question of whether government is going to do that, it's a question of when. Because if you don't do that up front--you know, if you don't provide a child with the education that he needs, if you don't provide a family with the support it needs to remain intact as a family--you face much greater governmental cost. It costs a lot more to have a child in foster care than it does to support this kinship-type program.

ADUBATO: And it--excuse me, but it costs a lot more, 10, 15, 20 years down the road...

Ms. ZALKIND: Absolutely.

ADUBATO: ...for that child who's now 22 who's in the correction system.

Ms. ZALKIND: Absolutely.

ADUBATO: And what are we really talking? It's like 30, 35 grand per inmate, something like that?

Ms. ZALKIND: Or more.

ADUBATO: Or more...

Mr. MILLER: I'd say much more than that.

ADUBATO: Is it much more than that?

Mr. MILLER: Yeah. Yeah. I mean, I've heard estimates--there are a variety of estimates, depending on what level of security you're talking about, but the--the estimates run from 40 to 50 on up to--and I--I was hearing 80 as well.

ADUBATO: But, De, am I making too much of that? Now De says--I mean, excuse me, Cil says, if you don't pay--you either pay me now or pay me later. You're saying that if we don't do the right things now and invest early on, I'm saying, well, one of the costs could be down the road.

Mr. MILLER: Absolutely. I absolutely think you're not making too much of it.

Ms. ZALKIND: Right.

Mr. MILLER: That's absolutely a correct statement of the threat.

ADUBATO: OK. Here we go; got about a minute and a half left. Say that you actually had the ability to create this blueprint to strengthen our families. What would we do? Give me one thing, Kevin.

Mr. RYAN: Gosh, it's bigger than one thing.

ADUBATO: J--just pick one thing.

Mr. RYAN: If I had to do one thing, I would--I would say across the board the federal government, the state government, county governments have to see it as their primary responsibility at every turn to strengthen families. That doesn't mean leveling the playing field; it means tilting the playing field in favor of children and families.

ADUBATO: De, one thing.

Mr. MILLER: I think that you've got to focus on the group of people who have the most difficulty making it in the working world and make sure you're providing services and other assistance to them to keep them out of poverty.

ADUBATO: Cil, three seconds.

Ms. ZALKIND: Invest in prevention. It's going to cost more now, but it'll save money in the long term and it--you know, the human savings, I think, will be incalculable.

ADUBATO: And this administration, from what you see, is committed to it?

Ms. ZALKIND: We're re--I'm very encouraged by what the administration's response has been to the report, but more importantly to the budget. I think the proof is in the money.

Mr. RYAN: Amen.

ADUBATO: Proof is in the money. Listen, we'll continue to talk off the air, but I want to thank all of you for talking about how we can strengthen our families. Thank you so much.

Ms. ZALKIND: Thank you.

ADUBATO: Great discussion.