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CHILDREN'S ADVOCACY INSTITUTE RELEASES 2000 CHILDREN'S LEGISLATIVE REPORT CARD

The Children's Advocacy Institute (CAI), a non-partisan academic center and statewide advocacy group based at the University of San Diego School of Law, today released its 2000 Children's Legislative Report Card, which shows how California legislators voted on 23 child-friendly bills considered by the Legislature in 2000. The 2000 Report Card includes a narrative description of major child-related issues considered by the Legislature and detailed descriptions of child-friendly bills in the areas of economic security, child support collection, health care, injury prevention, child care, education, and child abuse prevention and intervention. The Report Card also includes a chart documenting legislators' floor votes on these bills. Because this was the final year of a two-year session, this issue of the Report Card also includes each legislator's cumulative score for the entire 1999-2000 legislative term.

"Through their votes on important bills, legislators can make a real difference in the lives of California's children," said Kathy Dresslar, CAI Senior Policy Advocate. "All too often in the political arena, legislators 'take a walk' rather than stand up for children - and children suffer as a result. The Report Card provides a record of children's policy progress in the legislative session, and the votes that made it happen." CAI is pleased to announce that 31 legislators received 100% marks for the bills graded in the 2000 term. Of those 31 legislators, the following eighteen received 100% marks for the entire two-year legislative session: Senators John Burton and Hilda Solis, and Assemblymembers Elaine Alquist, Ellen Corbett, Martin Gallegos, Robert Hertzberg, Hannah-Beth Jackson, Sheila Kuehl, John Longville, Alan Lowenthal, Kerry Mazzoni, Kevin Shelley, Darrell Steinberg, Virginia Strom-Martin, Helen Thomson, Tom Torlakson, Antonio Villaraigosa, and Scott Wildman.

The Report Card also discusses the difficulty in commanding accountability in the legislative process because of the use of the "suspense" file. "Many significant child-related bills are not part of the grading process. Legislative leaders held these important bills captive in the suspense files of the Senate and Assembly Appropriations Committees, refusing to allow the bills to even come up for a vote - thus killing these measures without having to vote against them publicly," said Robert C. Fellmeth, CAI Executive Director. "The suspense file policy of setting aside policy items with major cost implications until the Budget Act is passed and revenues are accounted for is fiscally sound. But suspense file decisions should ultimately be made in a public forum with public votes for accountability."

Fellmeth noted that many of the most significant bills for the most vulnerable children failed to make the priority list for release from the suspense files of the Assembly and Senate. He also noted that just a handful of legislators draft those priority lists (the Speaker of the Assembly, the President Pro Tempore of the Senate, minority party leaders, and the chair and vice chair of the Appropriations Committees), after considering the personal and political priorities of individual bill authors. Many of the bills killed on suspense files passed on bipartisan votes with wide margins in policy committees and in prior floor votes. "No one truly expects the legislative process to be free of politics, but official actions must be subject to public accountability," said Fellmeth. "The suspense file system allows legislators to kill important bills without getting their hands dirty. As such, it is an affront to the democratic process." CAI is an academic center at the University of San Diego School of Law, with offices there and in Sacramento. CAI advocates for the health and well-being of children before the courts, the Legislature, and the state's regulatory agencies.

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