

INTRODUCTION TO THE  
REVIEW OF FLORIDA LEGISLATION  
MEETING THE NEEDS OF FLORIDA'S YOUNGEST  
CITIZENS

THE HONORABLE LAWTON CHILES  
GOVERNOR OF FLORIDA

As we approach Florida's 1998 legislative session, many issues will vie for the attention of lawmakers in our Capitol, including issues related to economic development, the environment, the elderly, and crime and punishment. One area guaranteed to see activity this session is legislation relating to the needs of Florida's youngest citizens.

I personally will lead the charge to ensure that all children have access to early medical care, strong and self-sufficient families, and quality early education and care services to ensure that Florida's children are prepared to succeed in school. The Governor's Commission on Education will issue a proposal to provide a framework for our activities into the year 2000. This proposal will call upon business leaders in our state to help spread the message that taking care of our children and their families makes good business sense for Florida. I will invite distinguished business leaders to join their colleagues to speak for Florida's children.

Florida also will undertake the long-awaited task of ensuring that all uninsured children have access to medical insurance that provides quality preventive-care services. Florida can no longer allow nearly 800,000 children in our state to go day-after-day without health insurance. The cost of using our emergency rooms as primary health care providers is prohibitive and does not support the healthy development of our children. Through the federal Child Health Insurance funds recently appropriated by the United States Congress, Florida will have access to \$270 million to create and expand health insurance delivery systems to meet the needs of our uninsured children.

Additionally, we will take more steps to ensure that children are kept safe from adults who hurt them through abuse and neglect. We will continue our efforts to ensure that the staff members who investigate reports of abuse and neglect are well-trained and well-compensated. These people enter some of the most dangerous situations in our communities and make life-changing decisions regarding our children. We must be sure, for the future of our children and of our state, that these investigators are the most qualified staff available. We will also highlight examples of communities that have successfully implemented programs which strengthen families and provide support so that children are not endangered through abuse and neglect.

The 1998 session will provide Florida lawmakers with another opportunity to make a real difference in the lives of our children and the future of our state. We owe it to our children to see that appropriate legislation is passed during this upcoming session that will fundamentally meet the needs of our youngest citizens.