Idaho group illustrates how to elevate issues affecting children

by **Noreen Womack, M.D., FAAP**

Idaho recently lost millions of federal dollars for child care when a bill to change state licensing requirements to meet federal standards failed to get a hearing. Many pediatricians and voters were unaware of the bill until after it failed.

Afterwards, Idaho Children Are Primary (ICAP) was created to bring issues affecting children and families to the forefront of legislative and policy discussions. The 501(c)(4) nonprofit organization rates every state bill pertaining to children and families by asking: "Is this good for Idaho kids?" At the end of the legislative session, ICAP publishes the Kids Matter Index (KMI), which indicates how often each legislator voted for kids and families.

"The general public is often unaware of their legislators' votes on issues relating to kids and families," said ICAP President Diane Schwarz. "The KMI is a tool that parents can use throughout the session and in election season to hold their representatives accountable for their votes that directly impact Idaho's kids."

ICAP has partnered with other organizations involved in children's advocacy, including the AAP Idaho Chapter.

"ICAP has helped the Idaho Chapter look at legislators' actions and voting as it relates to the most important issues facing children in the state of Idaho," said Chapter Executive Director Sherry Iverson. "The well-respected board critically looks at key issues that the majority of Idahoans feel are important, which helps our chapter develop the most effective ways to advocate for children and providers. As a small chapter with limited resources, this work has been invaluable."

One of the keys to ICAP's success is the makeup of its eight-member advisory board. It includes a bipartisan mix of pediatricians, educators, former lawmakers and businesspeople, as well as former Idaho first lady Patricia Kempthorne. All decisions regarding bills must be unanimous.

In addition, the group's expenses are low. The founders, legal and nonprofit consultants, and advisory board members all volunteer their time. Expenses include maintaining a website (www.idahochildrenareprimary.org), social media presence and mailing award certificates and letters to lawmakers.

"ICAP has provided a desperately needed accountability metric for voters, who generally deeply value the interests of children but often don't know how to determine whether elected leaders are actually promoting those interests," said Idaho State House Minority Leader Ilana Rubel (D), who played an advisory role in ICAP's conception. "ICAP empowers the public to make informed voting choices that help children, and informs politicians how they can use their power to improve kids' lives."

Dr. Womack is an early childhood champion for the AAP Idaho Chapter.