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CONTACTS:
Robert Fellmeth (619) 260-4806
Lupe Alonzo-Diaz (916) 444-3875

CHILDREN'S ADVOCACY INSTITUTE RELEASES
2002 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 *2002 Children's Legislative Report Card*, which shows how California legislators voted on 25 child-friendly bills considered by the Legislature in 2002. The *2002 Report Card* includes a narrative description of major child-related issues considered by the Legislature and detailed descriptions of 25 child-friendly bills in the areas of poverty, nutrition, health and safety, special needs, child care, education and child protection. 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 2001–2002 legislative term.

“Children can't vote or contribute financially to a political campaign,” said Lupe Alonzo-Diaz, CAI Senior Policy Advocate. “They are entirely dependent on the Legislature to make the right choice. The *Report Card* documents the progress of children's policy in the legislative session, and the legislators that made it happen.”

CAI is pleased to announce that 38 legislators received an A+ (100% mark) for the bills graded in the 2002 term. Of those 38 legislators, the following 23 received an A+ for the entire two-year legislative session: Senators Richard Alarcon, Liz Figueroa and Betty Karnette, and Assemblymembers Elaine Alquist, Wilma Chan, Ed Chavez, Judy Chu, Ellen Corbett, Manny Diaz, John Dutra, Hannah-Beth Jackson, Fred Keeley, Paul Koretz, Carol Liu, John Longville, Fran Pavley, Simon Salinas, Kevin Shelley, Joseph Simitian, Darrell Steinberg, Virginia Strom-Martin, Helen Thomson, and Pat Wiggins.

Eight legislators received an A+ two 2-year legislative sessions in a row, 1999-2000 and 2001-02. They include Assemblymembers Alquist, Corbett, Jackson, Longville, Shelley, Steinberg, Strom-Martin, and Thomson. Further, only two legislators achieved the distinguishing mark of earning an A+ for three consecutive two-year sessions (1997-98, 1999-2000 and 2001-02): Assemblymembers Alquist and Shelley.

The *Report Card* also discusses the difficulty in commanding accountability in the legislative process because of the use of the “suspense” file. “Many crucial child-related bills never see the light of day because they are killed in the appropriations committee. Instead of allowing the committee members to debate the fiscal merits of a bill, bills die in the suspense file because the Senate and Assembly Appropriations Committees refused to hold a public vote,” 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 in 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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