“It really has been a wonderful example of different people from all different situations taking the gifts they have and pooling them.”

Indiana first lady Judy O’Bannon

Eastern European orphan gets 2nd chance at life

**Overseas guest**: Natalia Vasila was born in Moldova with a hole in her heart and intestinal abnormalities. She was the first baby O’Bannon visited in Moldova.

**Judy O’Bannon, doctors from Fort Wayne and Indianapolis collaborate to save 4-year-old.**

By Celeste Williams

Natalia O’Bannon, doctors from Fort Wayne and Indianapolis collaborate to save 4-year-old.

Dr. Mircea Dragou, who came to Indiana with Natalia, said the girl needs an adoptive family as well as medical care.

Poverty rate high in Natalia’s homeland

Indiana first lady Judy O’Bannon helped bring 4-year-old Natalia Vasila to Indianapolis for surgery to correct her heart defect. Doctors were unable to perform the operation in Natalia’s homeland, Moldova, a small, poor country in Eastern Europe.

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**Malnourishment**

Natalia was deathly thin. From her fingertips to her toes, she was blue from a lack of oxygen caused by a hole in her heart. Yet the skinless color represented never reached the 4-year-old’s spirit. She lived, even when she could barely walk and her shallow breaths could not blow out a candle. And she lives it all. After surgery has given her her throat looks and pink toes.

Three weeks ago, Natalia Vasila was flown to her home — an orphanage in the Eastern European country of Moldova, to St. Vincent Hospital in Indianapolis to have her heart repaired.

Natalia is one of 25 foreign children born in each year to St. Vincent from countries where delicate surgery they need is not possible. Through its Children’s International Heart Program, hospital officials work with charitable organizations to locate children and arrange the trip, said Sister Sharon Richards, who directs the St. Vincent charity care program.

Since the program started last year with a $750,000 budget, about 200 children have come from Mongolia, Haiti, Bosnia, Kosovo, Honduras and Moldova for surgery. Natalia was an unusual case, in part because of the intervention of Judy O’Bannon, wife of Gov. Frank O’Bannon.

Also, Richards said, most cases that are accepted by the hospital can be corrected in one operation. Natalia is scheduled for more surgery this week at St. Vincent to correct another birth defect. After that, she’ll go back to Moldova, but likely will return for more surgery.

V. Simon Abraham, the pediatric cardiovascular surgeon who performed Natalia’s operation along with Sargu Parvaz, said while successful surgury is satisfying. The reality is, thousands.

**See ORPHANS Page 7**

INDIANA’S FISCAL CRISIS

Budget being mishandled, study says

By Kevin Corcoran

Gov. Frank O’Bannon has repeatedly blamed the state’s poor financial condition on an ill-fated economy. “We’ve been fortunate in the past decade to be able to say yes to a lot of projects that benefited our state,” O’Bannon said Monday. “But we’re on a different course in different economic times now.”

Yet there’s more to the story than he’s letting on, according to a new national study by the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, a liberal, Washington, D.C.-based think tank.

Years of outside state spending under O’Bannon and a politically charged legislature — including a series of tax cuts that weren’t properly planned for — laid the groundwork for the current budget deficit.

“If a budget is a fiscal roadmap,” the budget center concluded, “Indiana appears to have charted a course directly toward a financial crisis.”

“Other than delaying and adjusting a previous tax cut that had balanced in cost, the 2003 General Assembly took no actions to remedy the state’s long-range fiscal problems.”

Instead of solving spending this year to keep the state in the red, revenue, O’Bannon proposed using such remedies as borrowing from future years to temporary take-off the budget in hopes the downturn would be short. Lawmakers went along and voted in a variety of their own budgeting “gimmicks.”

**Revenue falls again; O’Bannon makes cuts**

By Kevin Corcoran

Amid further revenue losses, Gov. Frank O’Bannon on Monday unveiled a plan to cut state spending by nearly $300 million in fiscal year 2006. 

Flanked by state budget analysts, O’Bannon also reiterated the administration’s 3-month-old policy of approving only necessary state spending, which could mean delaying as much as $847 million worth of projects.

The governor announced these minor cuts after reporting tax collections in August fell $431.3 million short of projections. The August revenue shortfall — coupled with July’s $63.2 million shortfall — offers the clearest indication yet the economy won’t recover in time to spare the O’Bannon administration from making further tough choices in coming months.

The August revenue shortfall means that one of every $15 the state had counted on collecting in sales, income and other taxes failed to flow into state coffers.

Collections of all major taxes fell short, putting the state a total of $1,254.5 million behind what it had expected to collect in the first two months of the budget year. That money would be more than enough to cover the cost of full-day kindergarten for a year.

Yet collections of all sales taxes also are running nearly 4 percent behind the same two-month period last year. In 2000, Indiana collected about $1.3 billion during July and August; this year, the state collected $1.29 billion over that same period.

In all, O’Bannon said, tax collections have failed to meet expectations in nine of the past 14 months. And each missed revenue goal only worsens the state’s nearly $860 million budget deficit.

“Little reason to think we’re going to recover any time soon,” O’Bannon said.

Contact Kevin Corcoran at 1-317-402-2658 or via e-mail at kevin.corcoran@indystar.com

See BUDGET Page 5

State revenue takes a tumble

Total tax collections for each July and August over the past five years have been declining. The state used to take in more money than it projected but now collects for less than expected.

Differences in what actually was collected vs. what officials had expected to collect:

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Source: State Budget Agency

Staff Graphic / John Bigley

#### Moldova at a glance:

- **Population**: 4.4 million
- **Population below poverty line**: 75% (1999 est.)
- **Government type**: Republic
- **Source**: CIA, The World Factbook

Staff Photo / Rob Goebel

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Source: State Budget Agency

Staff Graphic / John Bigley
probably hundreds of thousands of children are in need around the whole world who will not get access to care.

Moldova, a country of 4.4 million people, is located between Romania and Ukraine. It suffers from the sicknesses of years of war and cold war. In many ways, the country typifies problems that have plagued Eastern Europe in the decade after the fall of the Soviet Union: poverty and ethnic and economic strife.

Taken by her parents to the orphanage when she was 2, Natalia would have been missed. The doctors at the orphanage were surprised when she showed up with the name O'Bannon. She said she was adopted from the orphanage and had been greatly improving in the past few months.

That was the first hurdle. The red tape was a tangle. For many of these children, the surgery they need is not complicated, said St. Vincent's Richard "Getting them here is complicated."

O'Bannon said the level of cooperation in Indiana, though, was remarkable. The hospitals, known for their ability to work together as never before, said, "It really has been a lot of work, but they've been doing it for a few months and the doctors have been wonderful." A week after the Aug. 24 surgery, the bright-eyed girl was walking around in her new sneakers and boots around in a red dress. The orthopedists were thrilled to be the center of attention.

Natalia and her doctor are staying at the home of Victor Kubik, the Indianapolis head of LeFort International, a charitable organization.

"She saves and amazes people," Indianapolis first lady Judy O'Bannon said of little Natalia O'Bannish. "I am awed and amazed."