



FREE FROM ABUSE AND NEGLECT 2006 Community Commitment Issue

ALL CHILDREN SHOULD BE FREE FROM ABUSE AND NEGLECT

Adequate community, family and child supports reduce risk and keep children safe from harm

Families with good formal and informal support systems, economic security, good health, positive interpersonal relationship skills and education are better able to respond to stress and threats in appropriate and healthy ways that keep children safe from harm. Socially isolated families lack important informal and formal supports. Safe communities that afford access to a full range of family supports also protect families in times of crisis and reduce the risk of child abuse and neglect.

Child maltreatment and re-abuse rates exceed national averages and the standard set by the federal government. There were fewer than 30 victims per 1,000 children in fiscal year 2004-05, a drop from 2000-01, 2001-02, and 2003-04 levels of 34.1, 33.6, and 32.3 victims per 1,000 children, respectively. Likewise, Florida has experienced modest improvements in re-abuse rates. Of children abused in 2003, 8.8% were re-abused within six months; while the comparable value for 2002 was 9.6%.¹⁰

There are more than 43,000 children in state custody in Florida. More than half of these children will remain in foster care for an average of three years and will change placement at least three times. Less than half the children who grow up in foster care graduate from high school. Many have developmental or emotional disabilities that are seldom properly treated while they are in state custody. A significant number are referred to the delinquency system because no one "parents" or teaches them self respect and personal responsibility. Too many are abused by the very persons the state entrusts to provide care. Children in foster care suffer from post traumatic stress disorder at twice the rate experienced by soldiers returning from duty in Iraq.¹¹

Although Florida is slowly improving child and family well-being, there remain far too many children and families at risk of and suffering from child abuse, neglect, threatened harm and abandonment. Because Florida moved to a "community based" system for child protection and welfare there are now 22 separate agencies contracted to oversee foster care services throughout Florida. The State's major child serving responsibilities reside in five state agencies: Department of Children and Families, Department of Health, Department of Juvenile Justice, Agency for Health Care Administration and Agency for Persons with Disabilities. This fragmentation, though well-intended, has created separations that prohibit timely and seamless delivery of services to families in crisis and the children suffer as a result.

Florida's child welfare system can benefit from reforms that include:

- Enhancing Transparency & Accountability
- Implementing Recommendations of Past Studies;
- Improving Communication & Coordination among Agencies;
- Youth Empowerment;
- And a continuum of services that support prevention through a permanent home for every child.

While policy discussions around child maltreatment often focus on improving the child protection system, they will not address the root causes and opportunities for prevention. Prevention programs that focus on providing healthy, safe and nurturing experiences for all children in Florida to prevent them from entering the child welfare system is the most effective way to address these issues. Even the best prevention programs typically focus on parental behaviors without changing the social, economic, or health conditions that create or contribute to the negative behaviors.¹² At present, the costs associated with treatment of child abuse and neglect dwarf prevention spending by 400 to 1.¹³ Florida's systems needs to be expanded from providing a "safety net" to creating a community-wide commitment to support all parents and children with a range of services from universal supports to the intensive, individualized services for those most in need.^{14 15}

Research demonstrates that children are best protected from abuse and neglect by:

- **Income support policies that ensure livable wages.** Financial security reduces family stress and crisis.
- **Educational and parent skill building supports.** Improved educational levels as well as home visiting and parent skill building and support programs that are associated with better parenting skills and increasing family supports.
- **Family formation supports.** Resources and services are needed that support healthy marriages and pregnancy planning, including family planning and abstinence programs to reduce teen pregnancies, lengthen inter-pregnancy intervals, and reduce unplanned pregnancies.
- **Mental health and substance abuse prevention and treatment programs.** Ample/ effective programs are essential to keeping children safe.
- **Economic and social policies that encourage both parents to be engaged in the care and nurturing of their children.** Children benefit from both parents' involvement in their care and nurturing.
- **Integrated and comprehensive family support services.** Access to needed resources and services and thorough family assessment helps to ensure that families have adequate supports in times of crisis and stress.