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Troubled teens finish last in state's youth priorities

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Guest columnist

A safe home, a hope for the future and a place in the hearts of adults are the foundations of success in our youth.

Unfortunately, Oregon's teens are not assured of any of these things. A few short years ago, a youth in distress could be assured of placement in a foster home. Today, despite increased spending on social support, this is not the case.

Three surveys done in the past year herald a disturbing trend for teens — things are getting worse. The Children First organization graded Oregon with an "F" for treatment of teens, a sentiment echoed by the Annie E. Casey Foundation. Meanwhile, the Children's Rights Council survey ranked Oregon 40th among the United States as an appropriate environment to raise children in, having fallen from 29th in 1998 and 22nd in 1995.

Personally, I have spent 12 years as an active child advocate, reviewing the cases of children in Oregon's state social welfare system. While I have seen improvement in some areas of service delivery, the conditions for

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teens are appalling. Under the current Department of Human Resources system, a seven-level trage program, children ages 13 to 18 are usually only served in secure facilities and residential treatment programs.

The statewide budget for services to teenagers is more than \$271 million. Of that amount, \$222 million is earmarked for services to children who have diagnosed or identified problems that a program or service tries to improve. For youngsters ages 0 to 5 in this category, more than \$423 million is used for protective services and foster care. In the teen population, the expenditures are on secure facilities through the Oregon

Youth Authority, residential treatment and, finally, Services to Children and Families.

Most of the options available to teens are punitive, not rehabilitative.

Paul Bellatty, an analyst with Portland State University's Child Welfare Partnership, recently told the Oregonian that older youths are the lowest priority for the State Office for Services to Children and Families. Troubled youth ages 13 to 17 make up only 8 percent of the agency's caseload.

The agency is overworked, understaffed, and truly lacking in the financial resources to help older children. This is distressing in a state that spends more than \$1.4 billion on social programs for children ages 0-18.

Less than five years ago, a friend of mine saw marked improvement in a student at Ponderosa Junior High School. Thinking she had reached her student in a way that no other teacher had before, she asked him what made the difference in this new diligent approach to his studies. The answer was foster parents who helped him with his studies.

With the new emphasis on teenage offenders and social programs, such as Reduce Adolescent Pregnancy, the

funds are not available for a similar young person to find appropriate care. More than likely, a displaced teen will find himself or herself on the street, rather than in a safe, nurturing environment.

Studies done in the Oregon metropolitan areas of Portland and Eugene show that more than 90 percent of homeless youth have used some form of drugs or alcohol; 36 percent of the girls reported childhood sexual abuse; and 38 percent had been in foster care before coming to the streets. These are coupled with the increasing rates of teenage arrests in a period of decline overall in crime statistics throughout the state.

Keep in mind that the youth of today who are not reached and encouraged will continue the cycle of neglect and abuse with his or her own children. Young children seem to work through the system most effectively, while teens seem to fall through the cracks.

Prior to the 1993 legislative session, things were improving in Oregon's efforts to help all of its children. That year, however what was then the Children's Services Division was split into three bureaucracies — Services to Children and Families, the Oregon Youth Authority and the

Commission on Families and Children.

The workload is split, but who is assuring that all children who need safe, permanent homes are getting them? Accountability must also be addressed.

A 1996 audit showed that 41 cents of every dollar is spent on administrative costs through the Commission on Families and Children. Is this the best rate of return on the states investment in its youth?

It is time to audit the entire child welfare system and see what is working and what is not. Each newborn has the potential to be a vital and contributing member of Oregon's communities. That promise does not end at puberty.

What can be done? Write to your state senators and demand an accounting of where funds are going, and how effective these programs are. Also, look for opportunities to reach out to local youth.

One voice can be dismissed, but together the chorus becomes undeniable. It will ultimately become music to our young people's ears.