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Status of Oregon's children likely to worsen

By ARNIE GREEN

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Oregon is failing its children. That is the heart of Children First of Oregon's annual Report Card on the Status of Children just released.

You must understand that the input data for these grades came from a time before the worst of cuts for services for children began to take effect. It can only get worse. Even the positive trends portend dark days ahead.

For example, the report notes that confirmed cases of abuse and neglect have declined for the past several years. The report fails to mention that for years the state's child welfare agency has been under siege from budget cuts and subsequent reductions in resources. It has had to trage its cases.

Cases that would have been opened at the first phone call to the agency

GUEST OPINION

Years ago, we not opened at all today. These are mostly teenage girls. They have often suffered years of abuse and neglect and are only now coming to our attention as they exhibit the behaviors associated with post-traumatic stress disorder.

Another positive trend celebrated in the report is that dropout rates have declined for the fourth straight year. One of the reasons might be found in the establishment of a huge program put into place under the former governor to identify at-risk school kids and provide a wide array of mental health, alcohol and drug and support services. This program has been all but eliminated.

I first began working with at-risk school kids in the valley in 1979.

YouthWorks (now a part of Community Works) was able to field more counselors in schools across the county than it can today.

I like to think that the work our agency has done along with OnTrack, Southern Oregon Child Study and Treatment Center, Mediation Works and county mental health has made a difference in the dropout rates. If I'm right, expect the rates to shoot back up again.

So much for some of the cheering notes in the report. The negative trends are scary. 17 percent of children live in extreme poverty. The number of children without health insurance is growing, and 25 percent of eighth-graders report alcohol use.

I made the mistake recently of watching one of those disaster movies. It was about a volcano erupting in the middle of some major metropolitan center. The protagonist in the movie, a

volcanologist, began picking up very small signs of the big blow. Of course, no one believed her. How could there possibly be a volcano under the city?

I am feeling a little bit like that character now. The first signs of a system about to implode are there if you are looking in the right places.

You can see the stress in the faces of social workers, counselors and therapists who are still working. Fewer beds in the kid prisons mean that tougher kids will be in a diminished community-based treatment system. The kids who were in community residential treatment will be served by what's left of day treatment. The kids who were in day treatment will be served by what's left of outpatient treatment.

The outpatient kids will be not served. Their behaviors will escalate until they need a kid prison bed and the hydraulic cycle will be complete.

Will the big blow come in the form of a mass shooting or some other major incident? Will it just be a relentless lava flow of drug and alcohol abuse and their related crimes, increasing dropout rates and teen pregnancies, and abused and neglected youth living on the streets being sexually exploited by the predators? I don't know, but it will come.

The tragedy is in the lives ruined, the children, youth, families, friends and those who are victimized when their behaviors reach the flash point.

What is also tragic is that we know how to prevent many of these behaviors. We know how identify issues early and intervene. We know how to treat even some of the most damaged children. We were close to having a reasonable system of care. Watching it disappear is frightening and unbearable.

Arnie Green is executive director of Community Works.