

EDITORIAL

County must take firm stand against child abuse

Far too many children in Douglas County are victims of abuse each year. In 2003, officials reported 166 county children were victims of some kind of abuse or neglect, either sexual or physical abuse or inadequate access to food or shelter. Another 156 were in threatening situations where there was an extreme risk of harm.

While experts will point out that annual rates will increase due to better reporting, it's worrisome to see the high rate of abuse in Douglas County.

It's difficult to get accurate ratings on such things. The Children First for Oregon organization that distributes annual figures is cautious in explaining the difficulty in comparing figures. There is no way to measure, for example, the amount of child abuse that is never reported to authorities.

Unfortunately, for a variety of reasons including funding, many reported cases of abuses are not investigated.

If 166 cases were reported in this county, how many were not?

We in Douglas County should not be willing to tolerate anywhere near this amount. While it is lower here than in a number of counties, we still have about 23 percent more cases reported each year than the state as a whole.

It isn't easy turning these numbers around, but we can do more.

There are a number of steps we can take to better protect children. An immediate action is to encourage people to report the obvious signs of abuse. Many professionals are already bound to do so.

It's imperative that children are removed from threatening situations before they are seriously harmed or killed. It's not uncommon when police raid meth labs or dealers' homes to find young children present.

Child endangerment charges usually follow and the children are taken to safety.

More can be done to lessen the factors that lead to child abuse. Experts say that the incidents of abuse climb in households where there is a drug or alcohol abuse problem, history of criminal trouble, unemployment and inadequate housing.

Adequate health care is crucial to the health of young people as well.

These are difficult times in Oregon for funding. The Oregon Health Plan, which previously covered a large percentage of this county's poor, is being stripped away. Other social services are also being reduced at the state level.

In response, we can pressure lawmakers to do all they can to fund programs that are directed at keeping children safe and healthy.

We can contribute more to community programs directed at either helping families cope with hard times, or directly benefiting children.

We should not reach the level of indifference where, when confronted by an unacceptable number of child abuse cases here at home, we just turn the page.