

Panel addresses child abuse

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Mistreatment is often related to drug abuse, not always income

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Attempting to raise awareness of child abuse issues, the Benton County Commission on Children and Families held a community forum at the public library Thursday afternoon.

A panel of speakers represented agencies that offer a spectrum of services — from education and prevention to intervention and criminal prosecution — to protect Benton County's most vulnerable citizens.

Panelists discussed various factors that contribute to child abuse — such as parents' lack of education, drug and alcohol abuse or economic stress — but they were quick to point out that low-income parents are not necessarily more likely to abuse their children.

"Low-income is not equal to abuse," said Dulcy Neeley, coordinator of the Healthy Start program. "It's easier to find those (cases of abuse) because

(low-income citizens) are more involved with agencies. But it happens across all economic lines."

The Healthy Start program attempts to reach parents of all income levels. Healthy Start outreach workers greet the new parents before they even go home from the hospital with "welcome baby visits" and can follow up with child abuse prevention education at subsequent home visits.

Many parents can benefit from this ongoing coaching, Neeley said, offered during the period in which an infant's forming body and brain are most vulnerable.

"Parents have a very difficult job, and we're here to support parents with that very difficult job," she said.

When abuse does happen, several agencies strive to intervene to protect kids.

Reports of child abuse are generally made to the Oregon Department of Human Services' Child Welfare Division, either directly or through law enforcement.

In the majority of these cases, DHS tries to work with the families involved by providing educational and counseling services in the home or referring the parents to appropriate

services available in the community, said Sven Johnson of the Corvallis Child Welfare Division office.

That can mean giving the family information about food stamps to lessen economic stress or getting addicted parents into drug treatment.

If a child is severely abused or in danger, exposed to drug abuse or domestic violence, or subjected to chronic neglect, DHS might seek to take the child out of the home, Johnson said.

According to the nonprofit research group Children First, about 46 percent of reported cases of abuse are checked out, and in about 26 percent of the cases, abuse is found to have occurred.

According to Children First, 51 children in Benton County are victims of abuse or neglect or live in at-risk homes. At about three children per 1,000, Benton County's abuse rate is significantly lower than the statewide rate of 10.8 per 1,000.

Still, the county prosecutes about 80 people for victimizing children every year, said District Attorney Scott Heiser.

About one-third of these are sexual abuse cases and most of the rest are physical abuse cases, he said.

Court Appointed Special Advocate director Kathleen Paris said local residents might have a false sense that child abuse is a rare occurrence in Benton County, which has a relatively affluent and well-educated population.

"It's not all over in Linn County, like sometimes we try to pretend," Paris said. "I think it's important that the community be aware of the level of child abuse in the community."

Most panelists agreed that drug and alcohol addiction is the major contributor to child abuse and neglect in the county.

Methamphetamine has a particularly devastating effect on the structure of families and the lives of children, Johnson pointed out.

"Methamphetamine is a huge problem, whether we realize it or not," he said.

Karen Scheler, director of the Albany-based ABC House, which provides a safe space for children who have suffered physical or sexual abuse to receive exams, treatment and counseling in one location, agreed.

"Our numbers of drug-related abuse is just skyrocketing," she said. "We have to, as a society, address that issue."