

The blunt reality of child abuse on the South Coast

BY ELISE HAMNER
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Coos County's statewide ranking for child abuse can get a person down, or it can get people talking.

Earlier this year, when the nonpartisan children's advocacy group Children First For Oregon reported the county's child abuse and neglect rate is 189 percent worse than the state average, a lot of people were talking locally. And they still are.

Tuesday the group's policy and outreach associate, Beth Kapsch, came to Coos Bay to discuss the report that compared the status of children health and safetywise county by county. And she did most of the talking, as about two dozen people at the Coos County Commission on Children and Families meeting listened.

Kapsch bluntly reminded them of the realities.

There were 9,447 confirmed child abuse/neglect cases in the state in 2003; about 490 in Coos County. Reports of child abuse in Oregon increased steadily over the past decade, by more than 61 percent, she said. There was no corresponding increase in the level of resources for investigations.

"Coos County is doing a really good job of going out and assessing those cases," she said.

Maybe that explains the county's higher confirmed child abuse statistics, she suggested, or maybe there just are more cases.

Kapsch's statistics left people shaking their heads. But more, she talked about how state policies and spending can help struggling families.

The state needs to expand alcohol and drug abuse prevention and treatment programs. It needs to adequately fund child welfare, police and court systems so all reports are investigated. And, Kapsch said, the state needs to be working for vulnerable families to get support, for instance to ensure they have housing and health care.

"It seems the No. 1 priority should be promoting economic opportunities, ..." interjected county Commissioner Nikki Whitty, also a commission member.

Kapsch didn't disagree. And she kept talking.

Foster care was next on her list. In 2003, she said, 339 kids locally stayed in foster homes at least once. Almost 27 percent of them were moved to more than one home that year.

Being a foster care provider is tough, she said. Add to that the fact there aren't enough homes and those families are taking in more kids — that brings even more instability.

Children First's staff of four is making sure individual Oregon lawmakers know foster care families need better support and continued reimbursement for taking in children. They are lobbying at the state Capitol, meeting with legislative committees. They are sending messages out to schools that something as simple as changing residency policies can make a huge difference on success for children forced to move from home to home.

"We want to make sure these kids stay in their home school," Kapsch said, adding there may be such legislation this session.

More, she said, older foster kids need continued insurance coverage

and scholarships as they age out of the system.

Most of the people listening to Kapsch were commission members or people working in social service programs, but not all. "It's very depressing, but it's not surprising," Coos Bay resident Mari Hopkins said of Kapsch's talk.

"It's very depressing, but it's not surprising."

Marie Hopkins, Coos Bay
on the Children First For Oregon report

Hopkins moved the area a few years ago and said while her family has grown, she is concerned about the community's children. That's why she came. She said she felt listening would help her become a better voter, and she walked away having learned about one promising program.

"The summer food program was a real positive thing I haven't seen in other states," she said.

Kapsch had mentioned hunger. She reminded her audience that Oregon is a leader for having residents without enough food to eat. Coos County is no exception.

Eleven percent of eighth-graders here report family members skip meals because they don't have enough money, she said. The state needs to invest more in children's nutrition programs. During the school year, more than 2,800 Coos County children ate free or reduced-cost lunches at school. In summer, she said, only 906 local children received the service.

"During the summer, these kids are still hungry. These kids need to eat year-round," Kapsch said.

The state can help families free up money for food by giving out more food stamps and ensuring there is more affordable child care, housing and health care.

And it was health care, that Kapsch mentioned again and again.

"Medical debt is a huge reason that families become financially vulnerable," she said.

And Kapsch wasn't done speaking.

On any day in Oregon, more than 113,000 children have no health care; in this county more than 1,600 daily. The state needs to continue to support and increase school-based health centers where young people can get medical care. Marshfield High School will be next, she said, explaining a center is in the works.

All of the money does not have to come from the state, Kapsch said. Federal officials will pay \$2.50 for every \$1 Oregon invests in health insurance for children.

"So it makes sense. It makes good economical sense," she said.

This is the first county this year Kapsch has traveled to discuss Children First's report. She expects more counties to call. They always do. And when they invite her, she plans to show up talking.

On the Net:
Children First for Oregon
<http://www.cffo.org>