

# Help Oregon put children first

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Children First for Oregon recently released the 2004 Status of Oregon's Children County Data Book. It reports that in 2003:

- 9,450 Oregon children were found to have been seriously abused or neglected;
- 13,450 of our children were in foster care, our last resort for children who are not safe at home.

This is particularly disheartening, since Oregon's child-abuse rate declined for several years, and now it is rising again. Why? We know that the economic recession has put increased stress on families. And, at the same time, Oregon has made deep cuts in proven prevention services.

We all care about children. When we see a child in serious need, we open our hearts.

But what about the children we don't see? How can we keep them from becoming victims of abuse and neglect? Although there is no easy answer, there are things that individuals and communities can do:



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1. Deepen our understanding of the core problems, understanding that child abuse happens at every income level or ethnic background. Many adults who lack parenting skills or cannot meet their family's basic needs may become abusers. Adults who suffer depression, mental illness and drug or alcohol addiction may

feel unable to control their lives, let alone provide the nurturing parenting so essential to a child.

2. Support programs such as Healthy Start, the statewide home-visiting program that helps families learn how to meet the needs of their newborns. With intensive Healthy Start services, child abuse drops significantly. Salem's Family Building Blocks, a Relief Nursery, has been successful in keeping children in their own homes, out of the foster care system, and also has had proven results in reducing homelessness, unemployment and substance abuse in these high-risk families.

3. Implement community strategies that provide families with "wrap-around" supports that address multiple needs. A child needs a doctor, a dentist, a caring teacher and a safe home. A child needs the love and nurturing of at least one adult. These things are essential for a child to grow into a healthy adult.

4. Build communities that reach out to neighbors through faith organizations, businesses and personal commitment. We must support the well-being of all children, to value their families and to honor their cultures.

Child abuse touches all of us. What a child learns at a young age affects what he or she will have to offer society in the future.

Call your county Commission on Children and Families. Ask how you can get involved. And support your governor and legislature in their fight to eliminate this invisible tragedy.

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