

# Legislators hear testimony about foster-care issues

## Lawmakers urged to fight efforts to limit foster program

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Law enforcement officials worry that a federal movement to reform child welfare doesn't take into account Oregon's exploding number of foster-care cases.

Republicans in Congress want to shift the focus of foster care to prevention, but Oregon sheriffs and police chiefs say the plan would cut a hole in the net that saves children from homes scourged by methamphetamine abuse.

Children in abusive homes are more likely to grow up to commit crimes and use drugs, local sheriffs told state lawmakers Wednesday. They want the Legislature to ask Congress to reject a proposal that would cap federal foster-care support.

"If we don't invest in foster care now, we'll pay later when our communities and loved ones are at risk of crime and violence," Marion County Sheriff Raul Ramirez said. He was joined by Polk County Sheriff Robert Wolfe.

The proposal introduced in Congress by a California Republican would limit future foster matching dollars from the federal government.

*See Foster Care, 2A*

The 2004 proposal, introduced by California Republican Wally Herger, would cap federal dollars given to states to pay for foster homes. It would give states flexibility in spending the money on prevention in order to shift the reliance from temporary housing to permanent homes.

States that limit foster-care placement would be rewarded with extra cash to pay for case-workers and family services.

A national organization of law enforcement officials, Fight Crime: Invest in Kids, expects Herger to reintroduce the idea this year. The group is recruiting local law enforcement around the country to oppose the limit.

## Local cases balloon

Marion County has the highest rate of children in foster care in Oregon, Ramirez said. In the last three months of 2004, 200 children were taken from abusive or neglectful parents, many of whom were using meth.

The problem is growing. Less than three months into 2005, at least 200 more children have been pulled from dangerous homes, Ramirez said.

"It's increasing to the point where it's getting out of control," the sheriff told lawmakers on a health and human services panel.

Statewide, reports of abuse and neglect increased 17 percent between 2001 and 2003, according to Children First for Oregon. Less than half of reports of children in danger were investigated, the non-profit found.

The officers and district attorneys involved in Fight Crime: Invest in Kids Oregon say that responsible foster homes are the first step to

Online 

For more about Fight Crime: Invest in Kids Oregon, go to [www.fightcrime.org/or](http://www.fightcrime.org/or)

interrupting cycles of generational violence.

In a former career as a deputy district attorney in Marion County, Peter Shepherd said he came across the case of a 50-year-old parolee who plied a homeless teen with LSD, then sexually abused him.

"If that kid had been in a safe foster home rather than a homeless kid, then I never would have had to prosecute that case," said Shepherd, now the Oregon deputy attorney general.

## State cuts are concern

Foster families often soak up costs when government foster-care payments are cut, said Tina Kotek, policy director of Children First for Oregon. After years of declining support, there's a limit to how much those families can pay.

"We're at the edge where families cannot afford it anymore," Kotek said. It is difficult to replace responsible caregivers who leave the program, she said.

In addition to the threat of losing federal support, Kotek is concerned about state money.

Gov. Ted Kulongoski has proposed reducing payments to families who host special-needs children by 20 percent, she said. He also proposed freezing cost-of-living increases in the payment until next year.

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