

Make children top priority

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A 1998 study found that more than 60 percent of parents involved with Marion County Child Welfare were affected by drug abuse or criminal involvement. More than half abused alcohol, were domestic violence victims or were teen parents. Drug involvement was present in almost half the cases. Parental incarceration increased 194 percent between 1993 and 1997. The study concluded, "Marion County serves one of the most difficult populations in Oregon."

Marion County is home to four of Oregon's 11 prisons, two state juvenile centers, the state hospital for the criminally insane, and the county jail — that makes eight correctional facilities in our county. Because families often move close to loved ones, we have a disproportionate number of families with an incarcerated parent. Children First for Oregon reported our 2003 abuse and neglect rate was 44 percent worse than Oregon's rate.

But in Marion County we have many resourceful, determined people working together to help families at risk: Healthy Start, Family Building Blocks, Court-Appointed Special Advocates, Liberty House, Community Safety Net, Salem Leadership Foundation recruiting foster parents through faith-based partnerships, Child Welfare's neighborhood foster care initiative, and Catholic Community Services Forever Homes. In 2001, we rejoiced when Marion County finally joined the statewide "system of care" for abused and neglected children.

So what has happened since 2001?



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Guest
Opinion

First, significant cuts to child-abuse prevention and intervention: locally determined programs, cut 35 percent; Healthy Start, cut 16 percent; Relief Nurseries, cut 15 percent; Family Resource Centers, cut 100 percent.

Second, methamphetamine. Law enforcement states that up to 90 percent of local violent and property crimes are meth-related. This scourge raises our insurance rates, pollutes our environment with caustic chemicals, impedes our ability to feel safe in our homes, and challenges our already-stretched public-safety and human-services resources.

Again, resourceful, determined leaders, like Dick Withnell and Anna Peterson, spearheaded the "No Meth" campaign. Salem Area Chamber of Commerce quickly joined forces and, through Marion County's Public Safety Council, surrounding communities followed suit. Mayor Janet Taylor and the Salem City Council funded four new officers to attack meth houses and related crime. Between 2003 and 2004, arrests went up 34 percent; criminal

charges, 37 percent.

But there was an unintended consequence: the children. We had no idea so many children were fending for themselves while the adults in their lives used, cooked and dealt methamphetamine. In just nine months during 2004, 891 child-abuse petitions were filed in Marion County courts.

A supervisor recently described child-welfare workers remaining with children in their office cubicles from 2 a.m. until 8 a.m., when they could begin calling for other resources. There are just not enough places to put all these children.

We need to make our children our priority. And while certainly schools are of vital importance to our youngest citizens' futures, so are the support services that help them overcome such unthinkable circumstances.

We must continue the fight to prevent child abuse on every front. We must support programs with proven track records in reducing child abuse and neglect. Our children are counting on us.

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