

Matt Gillard and Michael Foley: Help fight child abuse and neglect

Matt Gillard is president & CEO of Michigan's Children. Michael Foley is executive director of the Michigan Children's Trust Fund. 12:44 p.m. EDT April 22, 2015



(Photo: Rod Sanford | Lansing State Journal)

In a perfect world every child would grow up experiencing a happy, healthy childhood, safe from harm, and able to fully realize their potential as adults. But we know we don't live in a perfect world. Thirty years after the start of the national observance of Child Abuse Prevention Month, the rate of childhood abuse and neglect in our state continues to rise.

Why? Increasing economic stresses are one big reason. And there are clear connections between child maltreatment and limited parenting skills, social isolation, domestic violence, untreated substance abuse and behavioral health problems. Worsening childhood poverty rates combined with a troubling trend of competing priorities that have led to a reduction of child abuse and neglect prevention and intervention programs. The result is that too many families hurting, and too many children's futures threatened.

Through new scientific study occurring nationally and in Michigan, we are confirming what common sense has also told us: that adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) can lead to toxic stress and poor health outcomes in life. Groundbreaking research is exploring the impact of ACEs on children's brains and bodies and as they grow.

What does "ACEs" mean? Physical, sexual, or emotional abuse, of course. But also neglect and household dysfunction, including mental illness, a parent's incarceration, domestic abuse in the home, substance abuse, and even separation or divorce. These experiences are, of course, not all the same. But in varying degrees, they all have one terrible thing in common: they have a profound impact on a child's developing brain and body. Impacts include links to heart disease, diabetes and cancer. And ACEs in a child's formative years can lead to poor lifelong health and even early death.

Ironically, funding for child abuse and neglect prevention programs in Michigan has been cut while the number of substantiated child abuse/neglect has grown over the years. There were nearly 34,000 children confirmed victims of abuse in Michigan in 2013. Nearly one child in 10 lives in a family that's been investigated for abuse or neglect, and in some counties that rate is even higher at one in four children, according to the *Kids Count in Michigan Data Book 2015*.

For many years, prevention programs in Michigan have relied primarily and inadequately on federal dollars and private philanthropy that varies by community. Michigan is one of the few states in the country that doesn't supplement federal dollars, and promising solutions consistently struggle as a result. One example: the highly successful Early On Michigan program, which provides early intervention services to families with infants and toddlers with developmental disabilities or disabilities. Early On is federally required to evaluate and appropriately serve young children who have been victims of maltreatment and their biological, foster, or adoptive families. Help from Early On can mitigate the harm caused by ACEs and give children a better chance to reclaim their childhoods.

Looking at the developing FY2016 state budget, there are opportunities to further invest in child maltreatment prevention programs or family preservation programs. However an early version of the House budget actually cuts nearly \$3 million in funding for those important programs.

April is Child Abuse Prevention Month and it is the perfect time to educate our policymakers on the true value of investments that build protective factors, support families and prevent child abuse and neglect.

We, as citizens, must challenge our representatives in Lansing to invest in these programs and strategies that we know make meaningful differences for our most vulnerable children and families. Support that comes from programs like *Early On* and the Direct Service Grants funded by the Trust Fund strengthen prevention and intervention strategies that help keep kids out of harm's way. We must do better now. And, with the leadership of concerned citizens, we can.

Rally

An opportunity to communicate with legislators about the importance of prevention services will take place at 11 .m. Thursday morning at the Awareness Day rally on the steps of the Capitol. Learn more about this Michigan's Children's Trust Fund-sponsored event at www.michigan.gov/ctf

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