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Go Back

Print Page

Guest Column: State should spend more to help vulnerable children

By Doreen Olko, Special to Digital First Media

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After 44 years in law enforcement, and 22 years as the Auburn Hills Chief of Police, I will be retiring from the profession this summer with gratitude and with pride. Serving the Auburn Hills community, both in times of security and in moments of need, has been an honor and the foundation of an incredibly rewarding career.

But before I officially hand in my badge, I want to take a moment to reflect on an issue that never gets easier for law enforcement leaders even as our number of years in the profession grows. It's an issue that impacts not only our youngest citizens, but the health and wellbeing of

our entire society. As such, it is an issue that I believe demands action from our city halls to the halls of our state capitol.

That issue is child neglect and abuse.

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You see, whenever my officers and I enter a home where a child has experienced neglect or abuse, we know that child will not only deal with trauma in the moment, he or she will most likely experience repercussions of that toxic stress well into adulthood.

Research shows that children who have one or more Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs), including neglect and abuse, are more likely to abuse drugs, be arrested, and miss work due to issues with physical and mental health. ACEs impact a child's social-emotional and cognitive development, and therefore their likelihood to later hold down a job and to become a productive, law-abiding citizen.

But there's not just a public safety cost for allowing this issue to go unaddressed, there's a fiscal cost, too. According to the group Michigan's Children, researchers found child maltreatment cost Michigan \$1.8 billion in 2002.

That is a cost no state — and no child — should bear.

Fortunately, we have groups that are ready to address this problem. Specifically, The Children's Trust Fund's local Child Abuse and Neglect (CAN) prevention councils are effective partners in preventing abuse and neglect from ever happening in the first place.

These councils helped reach 100,000 children in our state in 2016. But that's only half the number of children who live in families that are being investigated for abuse and neglect. Since 2009, the group Kids Count found that the number of families that have been investigated for child maltreatment has increased 51 percent.

Simply put, our state's most vulnerable kids need more help. And our state should recommit funding to the efforts dedicated to addressing this rising need.

Increasing funding for The Children's Trust Fund would not only assist these effective prevention councils, it would support the 24 direct-service programs they fund around the state. From visiting families in their homes to providing everything from prenatal services to counseling, these services include a range of programs that research shows are effective in reducing abuse and neglect. More importantly, these programs meet families where they are.

After more than four decades of serving the state of Michigan, and 22 years serving Auburn Hills, I can assure you that smart investments like these are the best way to ensure my officers never have to walk into a home where abuse and neglect has taken place.

By funding programs that reach the families and children most at-risk of abuse, state lawmakers would not just be committing to short-term investments in public safety, they would be investing in creating stronger communities for generations to come.

Doreen Olko is the Chief of Police for Auburn Hills Police Department and a member of the national anti-crime organization Fight Crime: Invest in Kids.

[Go Back](#)[Print Page](#)

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