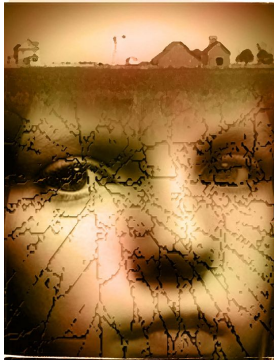


To help the lives of Michigan's children, help families

Matt Gillard, Detroit Free Press guest writer 12:15 a.m. EST November 20, 2014



(Photo: Rick Nease/Detroit Free Press)

With 1 in 4 Michigan children born into poverty today, too many of our children will face serious obstacles to success. Poor children are more likely to face health problems, a shortage in basic needs and a lack of educational opportunities. The support of one's family has traditionally been the first and best response across time.

But what happens when a family is beset with financial calamities, unemployment, mental illness, medical problems, domestic violence or any number of struggles that upend a parent's ability to fully provide the shelter, safety and support their children need? Public investments must help children thrive while helping their parents move ahead.

In January, a new Michigan Legislature will be sworn in. Its ability to discern the best use of public resources that employ the most effective public policies will be crucial for making decisions that impact the lives of thousands of Michigan children — the state's future work force.

Before lawmakers act, they should consider what public policy experts across the country know works best for creating better outcomes for children and families. Today, we know that poverty interventions are best when they focus on children and parents at the same time. This approach is called a two-generation strategy, which leads to more successful outcomes and saves public resources through efficiencies.

Last month, a group of lawmakers and philanthropists heard from families who benefit from two-generation programs in Wayne County. Parents talked about support for identifying health and mental health services, support for leaving unsafe relationships, finding high-quality early childhood programs, locating transitional housing and other key support.

A parent with bipolar disorder talked about her early Head Start program connecting her to mental health services for herself while also connecting her children to early intervention. She was among several parents who described their mental health struggles and the need for mental health services, not only for themselves, but also for their children.

Some stories focused on ways to improve existing systems. Former foster children who are now foster parents themselves recommended better awareness for abuse and neglect prevention services, in addition to more comprehensive, coordinated services for young people aging out of the foster care system.

There is a benefit to services that treat families holistically — not as separate pieces — ensuring better success for families and creating new hope for complex social challenges.

Those of us who advocate for the public resources that help struggling families and children become successful know how important it is to invest in programs that have proven records of accomplishment. For newly elected and re-elected lawmakers, the smartest decisions will be those that recognize that programs that have a child- and parent-component offer the best options for all families to thrive.

Matt Gillard is president and CEO of Michigan's Children an advocacy organization focused on public policy in the best interest of children.

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