

Gillard: State funding needed to combat child abuse

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For children who have experienced the trauma of abuse and neglect, and their parents who often lack skills and resources, the way back together is seldom easy. More than half return to their parents after spending time in foster care while many cycle in and out of foster care for years.

The reality is that thousands of families in Michigan, where 13,000 children reside in foster care each year, are fragile and live with enormous stressors ranging from fiscal insecurity to mental health concerns. To ensure that families remain together while making sure that children remain safe and secure, important public supports and services are required.

Today, Michigan data clearly shows a rising trend in the number of Michigan children in families where abuse or neglect is confirmed, with a 29 percent increase from 2006-2014, based on the latest Kids Count report.

As we observe Child Abuse Prevention Month and advocates from across the state gather before lawmakers at the state Capitol, it's important to know what is being done to help vulnerable families and traumatized children, why it is not enough, and why Michigan policymakers must prioritize investments in family support programs to reduce the number of children at risk.

We know a lot about preventing child abuse and neglect. The key is to strengthen families and boost protective factors, like knowledge of parenting and children's healthy development – physical and emotional – positive social connections, resilience through adversity, and accessible support in times of crisis.

Unfortunately, not all families are gifted with these strengths and when stressors enter their world through poverty, financial distress, domestic abuse, drug and alcohol addiction, or incarceration – children frequently suffer.

The Children's Trust Fund of Michigan was established to be a public/private support to communities who are working to prevent abuse and neglect. CTF does this through 73 local councils across Michigan that best know the needs of their communities and through direct service agencies that are skilled at delivering programs to protect kids and strengthen families.

These services include home visiting programs that offer one-on-one personalized education and support, instruction in positive parenting techniques, parent cafes to build social networks, mentoring programs and outreach to local safety nets in community programs and services.

Unfortunately, there isn't enough money to fully operate enough of these programs in Michigan. Financial constraints limit CTF from supporting all the qualified and needed services that apply for their annual competitive grants. Through continuous fund-raising, CTF raises a sizable amount of private funds from direct donations – about a half-million dollars a year from its annual auction, another \$200,000 from the state income tax check-off box and license plate sales, plus another half-million dollars generated from investment interest.

A dark-themed promotional banner. At the top left, there is a white rectangular box. To its right, the text reads "Get your first 3 months on a subscription for as low as". Below this, the price "99¢/MONTH" is displayed in large, white, sans-serif font. Underneath the price, it says "CLICK BELOW TO UNLOCK". At the bottom center, there is a grey button with the text "UNLOCK YOUR 99¢ OFFER" in white, uppercase letters.

Other private companies such as Lansing-based Jackson National Life and Cinnaire annually contribute \$30,000 and \$50,000, respectively. Though the federal government provides Michigan with \$750,000 a year for prevention work, what's lacking are public dollars from the state, itself.

Studies clearly show that abuse and neglect in the younger years has a direct impact on the well-being and future success of those children into adulthood. While private funding is the main support of child abuse and neglect prevention in Michigan, remedies will remain woefully inadequate unless the state steps up to help. Let's call on our state legislators to make public investment in this critical work and give more Michigan children a chance for a better future.