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Maine Voices: Don't drop child abuse prevention funds from state budget

Much of the pain these children suffer is avoidable through early intervention.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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WISCASSET — I've been in law enforcement for 24 years. I've seen a lot of bad things happen to good people, but among the toughest cases I've seen involved innocent children who were victims.

According to the most recent report from 2009, almost 4,100 children in Maine were substantiated victims of child abuse and neglect in that year.

An untold number of cases go unreported or undetected. In 2009, five Maine children under the age of 3 were killed at the hands of adults who were supposed to be caring for them.

These deaths may have been accidental or unintended, and I'm sure the adults involved deeply regret their actions.

Sadly, no amount of remorse can reverse their actions.

Babies can cry inconsolably and very young children can act out in ways that cause parents to become tired and frustrated.

Many new parents lack the knowledge, experience and family support they need to understand the development of infants and young children.

This inexperience can lead to inappropriate discipline or even escalate into

incidents of criminal child abuse and neglect, where law enforcement authorities must intervene.

Fortunately, many of these cases are avoidable.

By providing voluntary home-visiting services to young families very early in their children's lives, we can prevent child abuse. There are several low-cost programs in Maine -- such as Healthy Families, Parents as Teachers and Parents Are Teachers, Too -- where trained professionals work with at-risk parents to teach them how to care for babies and young children.

Home visitors help parents learn about their child's health, nutrition and developmental needs and teach them appropriate actions to take at stressful times.

Research shows that evidence-based home visiting programs can dramatically reduce child abuse and neglect and the likelihood that at-risk children will commit violent crimes later in life.

A study of one high-quality home visiting program found children whose families received the visits were half as likely to be abused or neglected, compared to children in families who were left out.

These services can also reduce future crime. While most victimized children never become violent criminals, being abused or neglected sharply increases the risk that children will grow up to commit violent offenses.

Approximately 160 Maine children each year will become violent criminals as adults who otherwise would have avoided such crimes if not for the abuse and neglect they endured as children. Year after year, abuse and neglect creates more violent criminals in Maine.

These serious criminals could spend their adult lives in and out of the correctional system.

The daily cost to our taxpayers to house an inmate in a county jail ranges from \$95 to \$145 per day. That's an annual cost of between \$34,675-\$52,925 to our criminal justice system per individual.

Given these high correctional costs, it's clearly worth the effort to focus on preventing child abuse and neglect in the first place.

Unfortunately, the governor's current budget proposal would totally eliminate state funding for these prevention services.

Many of Maine's law enforcement leaders oppose this budget cut and hope the governor and state legislators will reinstate home visitation funding during the course of budget deliberations.

Balancing the budget will require tough decisions by lawmakers and Gov. LePage.

But many of my law enforcement colleagues and I believe that it's critical that we maintain the investment of \$4.6 million in the biennial budget for home visiting programs supported through the Fund for a Healthy Maine.

Helping vulnerable kids get a good start in life and avoid later involvement in crime will save us far more than the cost of the programs.

We hope our policymakers will maintain state funding for home visitation and look for ways to strengthen these programs. It's a necessary commitment for preventing child abuse and keeping communities safe for years to come.

- Special to The Press Herald