

FROM THE COMMUNITY

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Child-abuse prevention calls for community-wide investment

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Our community recently experienced the tragic loss of two young children. And while renewed and impassioned dialog about preventing such tragedies is now happening, it's a dialogue that must actively continue and lead to real action so we as a community finally address the needs of the thousands of children who don't make front-page news.

Simply put, child abuse and neglect is a community issue that demands a broad community response. The future survivors of child abuse — physical, sexual and emotional — have an even deeper and longer-term impact on our future as a community.

Consider how the challenges we face in violent crime, school dropout rates, substance abuse, demand for mental health services and reliance on social services are directly related to child abuse and neglect. These are the disturbing facts:

- Survivors of abuse are six times more likely to become abusive parents.
- Seventy-five percent of high

school dropouts have a history of abuse.

- Forty-five percent of abused children become adult alcoholics.

- Eighty percent of violent juvenile and adult prisoners were raised in violent homes.

But how is our community actually helping at-risk children? For an issue so vital to the health of our community, you would be shocked. Underfunded and overburdened public and private agencies are on the front lines, fighting to address escalating demand for support. A tenuous web of community partners is struggling to catch these fragile families before they fall into full-blown abuse. And, too often, a single break in one fragile thread of support — a program budget cut, a benefit requirement changed or a policy mandated — can end in tragedy.

The easy, but costly, approach is simply to say, "Let's get tough on crime." But think about what that 13-year-old experienced before he was incarcerated. What could we have done for him as a 3-year-old to change that path? The truth is that we can and

must help that 3-year-old and his father or mother to break the cycle of abuse by teaching parents the skills they need to become competent while simultaneously remaining vigilant in watching over and protecting their children during the most difficult of times. But we must commit together, as a community, to breaking that cycle — in deeds as well as in dollars.

Prevention has never been at the forefront of child welfare. The United States annually spends an estimated \$258 million on foster care, incarceration and other societal costs in response to abuse and neglect. Yet, the federal government invests only \$10 in child-abuse prevention for every case reported. Many times families become involved in the system far too late for any type of intervention or remediation to be effective or lasting.

How can we change this? The first step is fully accepting that we are all responsible for making absolutely certain that each and every child in our community grows up free from abuse and neglect. These children are our chil-

dren, too. This means helping us on the front lines by advocating for more support.

Vote for policymakers who will pass laws and dedicate public funds to protecting our children. Offer your time, talent and donations to organizations doing child-abuse prevention and intervention. Become a voice for children in our community. Care enough to call and report suspected abuse or neglect. Intervene during the incidents you witness in the grocery store or waiting room where you feel a child is in danger.

As a community, we have a choice. Do we help the at-risk 3-year-old today or wait 10 years and cry out when he becomes the next perpetrator of abuse? Early intervention works. It breaks the cycles of abuse. It strengthens families and communities. It saves millions of taxpayer dollars in abuse-related costs.

But, most importantly, it saves children's lives and gives fragile families a chance.

Leek-Nelson is president and CEO of Providence House — A Crisis Nursery.