

Ounce of Prevention Fund is worth a pound of cure

Jim Hmurovich | Special to the sentinel
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Difficult economic times bring challenges and opportunities. While many Florida families are facing financial and emotional challenges, policymakers have an opportunity to evaluate how they can best invest our scarce public and private dollars to ensure the greatest return for our families and communities. Financiers and economic-development professionals understand and agree that investments in children now reduce expenses for remedial services later.

Prevent Child Abuse America has been investing in the prevention of child abuse and neglect for 36 years. Our national network has grown to 47 state chapters. The Ounce of Prevention Fund of Florida is celebrating its 20th anniversary. That's two decades of shaping prevention policy and making sound investments in innovative prevention programs that provide measurable benefits for our state's children, families and communities.

Like many other states, Florida is experiencing significant budgetary challenges. Now more than ever, state policymakers and legislators should continue to avail themselves of the expertise and counsel for which the Ounce of Prevention Fund is known.

How can the Ounce of Prevention Fund help? Through research, evaluation and funding innovative prevention programs, this fund can help us answer important questions like:

*What services and strategies will decrease the likelihood of children having to encounter the child-welfare system?

*How can systems integration improve access and utilization of services by Florida's families while decreasing overhead costs?

*How can state fiscal policy be aligned with public policy that promotes healthy child development so the right investments are made to improve long-range outcomes?

*How can we better communicate the importance of healthy child development so the public understands the impacts of child abuse and neglect on numerous social ills and issues?

*How can the results of early investments in children be understood by the public to result in enormous financial and economic returns in the future?

The Ounce of Prevention Fund will continue to be part of the dialogue in thinking through these issues and in implementing services to improve the quality of life throughout the state. Planning that uses evidence-based and outcome-driven strategies to ensure the availability of a complete array of services to all of Florida's children and their families, regardless of wealth, must continue.

As a participant in Florida's child-abuse-prevention planning efforts, the Ounce of Prevention Fund will remain a critical resource to policymakers and legislators as decisions are made about what Florida's families need and how to meet those needs so that every child grows up healthy, safe, nurtured and ready to succeed in life.

The federal government's latest maltreatment report is clear: the younger the child, the higher the rate of child abuse. Research confirms that a child's early years are critical to brain development, development that sets the stage for performance throughout the child's life. Conventional wisdom tells us it makes more sense (and "cents") to prevent child abuse and neglect before it ever occurs.

One of the most outstanding and proven programs administered by the Ounce of Prevention Fund is Healthy Families Florida, a nationally accredited home-visiting program for expectant and new parents who are experiencing life situations that place their children at high risk of abuse and neglect. The program serves more than 13,000 families throughout Florida each year, teaching them the skills they need to provide safe and nurturing experiences that promote healthy brain development so their children cannot only survive but thrive.

An independent, five-year evaluation shows that Healthy Families Florida has a significant impact on preventing child abuse and neglect. There is 58 percent less child abuse in families that receive these intensive services than in families that receive little or no Healthy Families services.

Difficult economic times bring difficult challenges along with difficult decisions for policymakers. A decision by the Florida Legislature to maintain current funding for Healthy Families Florida is the right one, and its ongoing support is a wise and sound investment in Florida's future.

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