

## Child welfare must become real priority

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By Carol Spigner

Keeping children safe and secure ought to be easy.

Sadly, in a world where families are dissolving, where children are taught that many adults can't be trusted and where the systems designed to protect children in need are in crisis, it is not.

Despite the fact that we hear and say often that children are one of our highest priorities, in reality, too often, this is little more than a cliché. Our behavior as a society is not consistent with our words.

There is an old African proverb: "It takes a village to raise a child." Growing up in a black community in the 1940s and 1950s, I felt connected to those around me. As a community, and as families, we nurtured and protected one another, and the children flourished.

Today, our connectedness to the community, and sometimes to our own families, has fractured. We work longer hours, live far from extended family members and lack meaningful relationships with neighbors. For our most vulnerable families, this challenge is made much harder due to poverty, limited social support and inadequate transportation.

Families aren't what they used to be. Where once the word connoted images of two parents with mom at home, now single parents, blended families and skipped-generation families are increasingly common.

We have a hard enough time protecting our own children, let alone the children of the nation. But if we don't care for these children, who will?

The responsibility for protecting the abused and neglected falls to the nation's child welfare systems. Sadly, the systems designed to help children in crisis are themselves in distress. Cases of maltreatment of children in the system are regularly splashed across the front page.

These high-visibility failures are due in no small part to problems plaguing courts and child welfare agencies. Caseworkers, lawyers and others in the system complain of overwhelming caseloads, limited pay and lack of resources needed to help parents properly care for their children. Child welfare workers have a difficult, emotionally exhausting job performed without the benefit of community support.

Rarely do caseworkers, children's lawyers or foster parents hear, "I want to be just like you when I grow up." The child welfare system suffers from the same lack of support that many of our vulnerable families suffer.

Despite these ongoing challenges, child welfare agencies, juvenile and family courts and their staff work hard to improve children's lives. We hear about the failures, while the successes rarely make the news. In fiscal year 2001, for example, 263,000 children left foster care. Of those, 57 percent were reunited with a parent or caretaker and 18 percent were adopted.

We must try to improve the outcomes for all children in foster care so that 100 percent of those who enter the system leave to join a safe, permanent family.

The Pew Commission on Children in Foster Care was launched in May. This commission is developing recommendations to improve foster care so our most vulnerable children have the best chance of securing loving and nurturing homes.

The 16 experts on the commission have been drawn from across the country and all facets

of the foster care system, including former congressmen, judges, caseworkers, foster and adoptive parents and alumni of the foster care system.

As a nation, we all agree that the safety and well-being of our children should be one of our highest priorities. Protecting children in need should be a national effort.

How can we improve outcomes for children in foster care? How can we fulfill our responsibility to protecting our most vulnerable population?

How can we not?

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