

Child abuse trust fund gets off to slow start

It's off to a slow start — but it's law.

To prevent child abuse, the Michigan Legislature last year created a state Child Abuse Prevention Board and established a trust fund with a goal of \$20 million.

"In Michigan, over \$250 million is spent every year on treatment services," said state Rep. Debbie Stabenow, D-Lansing. Stabenow was chief sponsor of the package of laws that created the board and the trust fund.

"Yet because treatment is often too little, too late, it does not stem the rising tide of cases."

Meeting resistance in an economic recession to a new program, Stabenow and co-sponsors such as then-Rep. Syl-



Rep. Debbie Stabenow
"a rising tide of cases"

via Skrel, R-Livonia, sold their colleagues on an income tax check-off system.

"Michigan's trust fund would be started with voluntary contributions through a check-off on tax returns, allowing taxpayers to contribute 2% of their refund to child abuse prevention. Other contributions would be accepted from foundations, bequests, donations and general funds," she said.

AS OF mid-April, Michigan taxpayers donated a bit more than \$350,000 of their refunds to the child abuse trust fund — a bare 1/60th of the fund's goal.

Until the \$20-million goal is reached, half the contributions will be banked to earn interest, and the other half will be spent on grants to local abuse-prevention programs, according to terms of the act. A 15-member state panel administering the fund may distribute grants to:

• Local child abuse prevention councils.

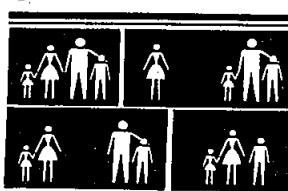
• Schools, churches, hospitals, and other local public or private non-profit agencies.

The local agency must provide a 50-percent match. Half of the match may be such "in-kind" services as staff salaries and overhead.

How safe is the money? That will be up to the Legislature. In times of financial crisis, Michigan state government has been known to borrow from the veterans' trust fund and the Kammer land trust fund to pay current bills.

THE IDEA of preventing child abuse came from Dr. Ray Hofer, professor in Michigan State University's department of pediatrics and human development.

Michigan is the third state — after Kansas and Washington — to set aside money in a trust fund solely for preventing child abuse.



focus on families

Child abuse is virtually epidemic — or at least on the increase, Stabenow argues.

In 1981, "Over 35,000 cases of suspected child abuse/neglect were reported to Children's Protective Services (an office of the state Department of Social Services). That's about 1 percent of the child population," Stabenow said.

"And because the problem is still 'in

the closet,' experts say only about one-third are likely to be reported."

"Child abuse" is defined as "harm or threatened harm to a child's health or welfare by a person responsible for the child's health or welfare." The harm may be either "non-accidental physical or mental injury" or sexual abuse.

"Neglect" is "harm to a child's health or welfare by a person responsible for the child's health or welfare

which occurs through negligent treatment, including the failure to provide adequate food, clothing, shelter or medical care."

The state can expect to see more child abuse and neglect in an economic recession — a time of stress, she said. In the majority of cases, two factors are present: 1) poverty and unemployment and 2) isolation and lack of social support.

Historically, child abuse is an old, old story. Ancient Greeks and Romans considered their children property, destroying weak and deformed infants. Illegitimate children often were killed to avoid shame, according to the National Committee for Prevention of Child Abuse.

Children were treated harshly in the New World. The Massachusetts Bay Colony in 1648 adopted a "Stubborn Child Law," invoking the death penalty for misbehaving children. Full punishment, however, rarely was invoked. Whipping was substituted.

We need a team'

Child abuse multiplies in Oakland

By Suzie Rollins Singer
Staff writer

Child abuse is an old topic that keeps on hurting young people year after year. The characters are different, but the scene is the same.

"The numbers of youngsters and teenagers beaten, burned, raped and kept in unsanitary living conditions — sometimes without food or clothing — keep growing nationally as well as in Oakland County."

"I think part of the reason we're seeing the numbers grow is that we have a better reporting system. Now people working in the hospitals and schools are more alert to abuse and neglect," said Eugene Moore, Oakland County's chief probate judge.

"Child abuse has always been with us, but we're finding out about more victims and getting them intervention," Moore said.

IN OAKLAND County, child abuse cases have multiplied while neglect cases have remained stable.

In 1970, 31 petitions were filed with the Oakland County Probate Court charging parents with abuse. By 1975, the number had more than doubled, to 64. In 1980, it was 110; as of 1982, it

was 132 — double the 1975 figures.

Petitions filed for neglect (failure to care for, support and maintain) numbered 149 in 1970, 108 in 1975, 147 in 1980 and 141 in 1982. However, there are other categories of neglect including abandonment, failure to provide education or medical care and a poor home environment.

Overall, Oakland reported these totals of neglect and abuse cases: 205 in 1970; 238 in 1975; 315 in 1980 and 409 in 1982. The National Committee of Prevention of Child Abuse stated that there were about 885,000 abuse cases reported last year.

NEW PARENTS most often reflect on their own childhood when developing their parenting skills, and sometimes it's a poor example.

If they were neglected or abused, they have a tendency to carry on the learned behavior, Moore said.

"A lot of people don't have parenting skills and never will have them," said Wayne Callahan, county intake director.

Callahan has ideas for revamping the court system to work more closely with the abuse and neglect cases.

"The court needs to have an interdisciplinary team," he said.

"THE BIGGEST problem a judge has is deciding what's the right thing. The most critical thing the court can do is make the proper disposition."

"We need a team comprised of the protective services case worker, the court case worker, the foster care worker and a psychoanalyst who are all working on the case to meet and decide the concerns of each case and make a recommendation to the judge," Callahan said.

"Right now, all of these people are involved, but they aren't talking to each other until the day in court," he added.

Moore said Callahan's proposal excites him and is an excellent idea.

"Wayne is working on it right now. He's trying to bring the directors of the forces together for a monthly meeting to start communication," he added.

CALLAHAN SAID there are so many considerations to weigh when recommending a disposition for a family that it is essential to examine all the alternatives.

"The first question asked is if the child is in danger of being in the home. Is there sexual abuse, how old is the child and does the child want to leave

the home?" he said.

Often young children want to stay with their parents regardless of the abuse. With teen-agers, it's sometimes difficult to prove that they aren't incorrigible, Callahan said.

What really irks Callahan are repeat offenders.

"For instance, we've got a case where the stepfather has sexually abused all three daughters in the home at different times. He's brought into court, goes to counseling and then is back a year or two later. We've got to get some clout over these kinds of guys, but we don't because the prosecutor and the police say it's too much hassle to get involved," he added.

Educating attorneys, known as guardian ad-litem, who represent the abused and/or neglected children also could improve the system, Callahan said.

"I would like to see a seminar for attorneys developed so they would all be educated about abuse and neglect, and then the judge would only appoint those attorneys who attended the seminar," Callahan said.



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Parent tells of breaking cycle of child violence

Editor's note: The writer is a staff member of Observer & Eccentric Newspapers who wishes to remain anonymous.

"My own horror story started when I was 4. The juvenile system in my home state took me away from my parents because they had neglected me. For the next 10 years, I was shuttled back and forth from foster home to foster home."

"Each foster family was different. Some lived 'way out in the country. Some had kids of their own. Some eked out a modest living boarding homeless children."

But one similarity binds all the foster families together in my memory. No one — neither the foster parents nor their own children — liked me.

IN EACH family I was odd child out, an orphaned Martian who didn't really belong. The fact that I was "different" from everyone else was demonstrated over and over to me in a lot of little ways and big ways.

The foster family ate dinner in the dining room. Many times, I ate bread and butter on the basement stairs.

The family watched TV. I cleaned the bathroom. The foster parents' kids got away with murder. I was punished for every misstep.

In one family, my punishment was to sit for hours in a dark, cobweb-filled basement wall hole. In another, I got a hickory switch snapped across my legs.

In still another, a foster father once used a blowtorch on the ends of my fingers because I had stolen 10 cents. My fingers still bear the scars.

THEIR ABUSE inflicted pain as much on my mind as it did on my legs and fingers. And it is that psychological pain which can create another generation of child abusers.

I worried: Would I, too, become a child abuser? Newspaper stories allow some parents an easy "out" for what they do. The excuse is that abusive parents are merely repeating the sins of their own parents, that they are lashing out at their own children the way their own parents struck out at them.

The explanation is that they have not learned how to control their own anger or rage because they don't have a good self-image or because they don't know how to deal with a crisis.

Tragically, for some these excuses are true.

NOT EVERYONE who has been beaten or abused as a child grows up to see that violence is

'In each family I was odd child out, an orphaned Martian who didn't really belong. The fact that I was "different" from everyone else was demonstrated over and over to me in a lot of little ways and big ways.'

not the way to cope with a crisis. Not every abused child grows up to like himself or learns how to let off steam.

But for every once-abused parent who drags the cycle of violence into another generation, many others break out of it. They learn not to use their childhoods as a convenient excuse for inflicting the same on their children.

These parents learn somehow that they alone — not some forefather — are responsible if welts, burns and broken bones are inflicted on a son or daughter.

I know these parents exist because I am one of them.

A once-abused child who is thrust into parenthood doesn't know how to give love. He or she never learned by example how to cope when things go wrong. Once-abused children often fear parenthood, for a crying child might unleash the beast buried in their minds.

So it was with me.

I MARRIED not knowing how to give love. I had children when I didn't have the faintest idea how to be a parent. And I lived in dread that the angry beast inside me would one day terrorize my children.

I wish I could say that in one sudden burst of wisdom I learned the secrets of loving, coping and parenting and that I never abused my children.

The sting of the hickory stick against my flesh taught me what love and parenting are not. But it took many years of searching to find what both of them were.

During my search, my children were my own personal guinea pigs. If I made a mistake, they paid the penalty.

There is a big gap between keeping your cool and slapping a child around a room. Sometimes I was closer to keeping my cool. Other times I was closer to slapping out. A few times, I did lash out.

VERY EARLY on, the sheer self-disgust I felt after hitting my children made me switch to other punishments.

Over the years, that feeling of self-disgust, plus the memory of being beaten myself, kept me from hitting my children as I unraveled the secrets of loving and parenting.

If I did hit my children, I can't blame the bad lessons of childhood. I am responsible for what I do.



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