

Making the Case: *Why Prevention Matters*

Across the nation there has been great progress in work to improve the health and well-being of children. But the turbulent economy and the budget cutting that has come with it threaten to derail efforts to prevent child abuse and neglect at a moment when it is needed most. If the work that has done so much for children is to continue and to grow, it is important to show that it yields benefits on many levels—for children, their families, and their communities. Consistent decisions to support the needs of children are at the heart of a bright future. The information offered in the Prevent Child Abuse America “Why Prevention Matters” series will help those working so hard to improve the lives of our youngest citizens.

Prevention Programs and Strategies: State Legislative Experiences

- Kelly Crane

Author’s note: Approximately 772,000 children were victims of maltreatment in the United States in 2008⁽¹⁾, with child abuse and neglect costing the United States an estimated 103 billion dollars each year in treatment and services to families⁽²⁾. Effective state-level services and supports for children and their families can assist in reducing the human and financial costs of child maltreatment.

State lawmakers play a critical role in state child welfare systems by leading efforts to seek new policies and strategies for families and children affected by abuse and neglect, including the development of prevention programs. It is work that is especially important in tight budget times for states.

What follows is an overview of strategies drawn from the innovative policy work undertaken by state lawmakers across the country that legislators can use to support prevention efforts. A review of recent state legislation reveals a number of approaches that have been implemented by states, including:

- *Home visitation*
- *Safe Haven laws intended to prevent unsafe abandonment of newborns*
- *Shaken Baby Syndrome prevention programs*
- *Creation of prevention focused task forces and councils*

Home visitation programs

Home visitation has become an important part of child welfare family support and family preservation efforts, providing support services in the home and connecting isolated families to resources in the community. Nearly every state has enacted legislation around home visitation programs, including Pennsylvania in which grants were established for home visitation services to at-risk expectant mothers and in Washington where research-based home visitation programs and a study of child abuse prevention efforts were authorized. The increased interest among policymakers in home visiting programs has ignited a number of research efforts which have proven the programs to be an effective method of reaching children and families early. In fact, the National Health Care Reform Act (H.R. 3590) supports efforts by states to invest in home visitation programs by establishing a \$1.5 billion federal grant program for state-based home visiting programs serving families with young children and families expecting children.

Safe Haven Laws

All 50 states have enacted legislation to address the public abandonment of infants and to prevent child maltreatment. Infant Safe Haven laws have been enacted as an option for mothers in crisis to safely relinquish their newborn children to designated locations where the babies are protected and provided with medical care until a permanent home is found. Safe Haven laws allow the parent to remain anonymous and to be shielded from prosecution for abandonment or neglect in exchange for safely surrendering the infant to an approved safe haven.

Shaken Baby Syndrome Prevention Programs

Prevention policies that state lawmakers are examining include Shaken Baby Syndrome prevention programs. Shaken Baby Syndrome covers a variety of symptoms associated with the violent shaking of an infant or young child. Prevention efforts typically include educating new parents on the dangers of Shaken Baby Syndrome and providing them with coping strategies to assist with parental frustration. Approximately 20 states have enacted laws related to Shaken Baby Syndrome prevention education.

Prevention Councils

A number of states have implemented legislation to assist in the creation of prevention councils or task forces. The goals in the establishment of these councils vary by state, with the most common objectives being to create a statewide child abuse prevention strategy, develop a plan for establishing family resource centers, coordinate and encourage a continuum of prevention services for children and families, and/or to assist in the appropriation of funds for prevention programs. New Jersey created a Task Force on Child Abuse and Neglect which has made grants available from their Children's Trust Fund for child abuse and neglect prevention programs; the New Jersey task force has also developed a statewide public education program on child abuse prevention.

Across the nation, a wide variety of approaches are being used to help promote nurturing environments for families and that have generated significant support over time. Child abuse prevention involves parent education and raising public awareness about ways to prevent serious and often life-threatening injuries from occurring in the first place. While states work to identify effective strategies to respond to child abuse and neglect, the overarching goal is to end child maltreatment altogether.

For further reading, what follows are the research references mentioned in this article.

1. Health and Human Services' Administration for Children and Families <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cb/pubs/cm08/chapter3.htm#subjects>
2. http://www.preventchildabuse.org/about_us/media_releases/pcaa_pew_economic_impact_study_final.pdf

About the Author

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Prevention Programs that Work: State Legislative Experiences

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Q. What is the National Health Care Reform Act (H.R. 3590)?

A. This is the major health care reform bill, signed into law by President Obama on March 23, 2010. It would expand health care coverage to 31 million currently uninsured Americans through a combination of cost controls, subsidies and mandates. The Act supports efforts by states to invest in home visitation programs by establishing a \$1.5 billion federal grant program for state-based home visiting programs serving families with young children and families expecting children.

Q. What are Some Examples of State Legislation around Infant Safe Haven Laws?

A. Arizona and Louisiana enacted legislation in 2009 around Safe Haven laws. Arizona established procedures for private adoption agencies to take custody of newborn infants who are left with Safe Haven providers (2009 Ariz. Sess. Laws, SB 1326, Chap. 156). Louisiana enacted legislation that requires that instruction relative to the state's Safe Haven Relinquishment Law be provided to students in public secondary schools and provides guidelines for such instruction. The law provides a mechanism whereby any parent may relinquish the care of an infant who is not more than 30 days old to the state in safety and anonymity and without fear of prosecution (2009 La. Acts, HB 319, Act 284).

Q. Are There Other Examples of State Safe-Haven Legislation?

A. New Jersey required the development of an educational poster on the Safe Haven Program to be distributed to all public schools grades 7–12. Alaska prohibited prosecution of parents who safely surrender their infants younger than 21 days old, under certain conditions, Ohio increased to 30 days the maximum age at which a child may be voluntarily delivered by the parent to a peace officer, hospital employee or emergency medical service worker under the Safe Haven Law.

Q. What are Some Examples of State Legislation Related to Shaken Baby Syndrome Prevention Education?

A. In 2009, Montana passed legislation that created the Shaken Baby Syndrome Education Program and required the preparation and distribution of Shaken Baby Syndrome educational materials (2009 Montana Laws, SB 442, Chap. 365). What follows are other examples of state legislation: South Carolina mandated through legislation Shaken Baby Syndrome Prevention Education. Hawaii authorized hospitals and institutions that provide medical care to newborns to provide information to the parents of all newborns under their care about the dangerous effects of Shaken Baby Syndrome and the methods of preventing the syndrome. Iowa established a statewide Shaken Baby Syndrome Prevention Program to educate parents and persons responsible for the care of a child about the dangers to children three years of age or younger caused by Shaken Baby Syndrome and to discuss ways to reduce the syndrome's risks. Illinois designated the third week of April in 2009 as "Shaken Baby Syndrome Awareness Week."

