



## **THE WHITE HOUSE CONFERENCE SURVEY**

*Last fall, as part of our effort to build an agenda for a White House Conference in 2010, we asked visitors of the CWLA website to take a brief survey and rank what they felt were the top three issues in child welfare. Not surprising, many participants indicated that all the topics were of great concern and were difficult to rank. However, from the nearly one thousand responses received, prevention of child abuse and neglect was ranked as the top priority. Forty-one percent of respondents cited prevention as one of their top three concerns. This paper focuses on the topic with the highest ranking: preventing child abuse and child neglect.*

### **Preventing Child Abuse and Neglect**

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) releases the latest national data on child abuse and neglect every April. For 2007, the numbers tell a familiar story: More than 900,000 children were substantiated as abused and or neglected, out of the more than 3.3 million child abuse reports made. Children from birth to the age of one had the highest rate of victimization at 24.4 per 1,000 children. Of the estimated 1,530 child fatalities in 2006, 41.1% were attributed to neglect with physical abuse a major contributor to child fatalities.<sup>1</sup>

Of child victims, nearly 9% were sexually abused, and 16% were physically abused. A consistent, albeit surprising statistic is that nearly 65% of the 900,000 children are victims of neglect.<sup>2</sup> While the tragedies that catch the attention of the local elected official, policymaker and journalist can sometimes cause dramatic actions, the abuse and neglect and cases that don't make the news are just as serious but may not get the attention or action deserved. The fact that the numbers remain largely consistent (with some changes due to data collection adjustments) also tells us we are not doing enough to prevent these children from coming into care or being brought to the attention of child protective services (CPS).

Another consistent statistic is that of the 900,000 abused and neglected children identified, nearly 40% did not receive follow-up services.<sup>3</sup> Reasons for this include the way in which data is collected, how states provide services, and in some instances the reluctance on the part of some families to access services. The high percentage of children and families going without follow-up assistance, clearly suggests that services

are not being adequately provided at the front end of the child welfare system. For some that may mean they will inevitably return to the system.

Prevention of child abuse and neglect is perhaps the greatest challenge in the continuum of the child welfare system. All too frequently, prevention of abuse and neglect is an add-on service instead of a core component of the range of needed services. The issue of providing or addressing prevention too often is conditioned on whether a child welfare agency or department can free up appropriations or funds by reducing the cost, including what some would describe as back-end services, typically foster care. In fact, what is required is an investment in the range of services.

Part of the challenge with prevention is how we define and measure it. Prevention can encompass some services as basic as access to child care. It can also include a range of other services that can help families reduce the stresses of parenting.

There are a number of critical programs that do have a role in the prevention of abuse and neglect. Examples of such programs include: child care, Head Start, cash assistance-TANF, and several other health related and community service programs. The federal government provides funding intended to provide services that can prevent or remedy potential abuse and neglect. That funding, however, is limited in both quantity and data.

Title IV-B part 1, Child Welfare Services (CWS), and Title IV-B part 2, Promoting Safe and Stable Families (PSSF), are flexible funding streams that are intended to provide a range of services, including support for families to prevent abuse, but oftentimes this funding is used to pay for services to families in which abuse has already taken place. These funding sources can also be used for innovative programs as well as wrap around services for vulnerable families. Other federal funds, such as the Social Services Block Grant (SSBG), may also help the development of community-based initiatives that have shown promise. Still there is no single fund to address “prevention” of child abuse and neglect.

There are a variety of promising approaches nationwide that combine funding sources such as Baltimore’s Family Connections program. This community-based outreach initiative uses a range of funding sources from the public, private, faith-based, foundation, and other community partners to show some significant results. Another promising approach is more specific in its structure: the home visiting model. Home visitation programs refer to different model programs that provide in-home visits to targeted, vulnerable, and new families. Home visitation programs—either stand-alone or center-based—serve at least 400,000 children annually birth to age 5.<sup>4</sup> Currently, home visitation programs are funded using a variety of federal, state, and local funds.

Other programs that hold promise for prevention include the use differential response. This is a form of practice in child protective services that allows for more than one method of response to reports of child abuse and neglect. Also called *dual track*, *multiple track*, or *alternative response*, this approach recognizes the variation in the nature of reports and the value of responding differentially. Another innovation being implemented

in some areas, both in terms of CPS and in placement decisions, is Family Group Decision Making (FGDM) or Family to Family which involves families and communities in decisions on how to assist vulnerable families and children.

The Children's Bureau in a recent publication laid out an approach to prevention that seeks to both reduce risk factors while also promoting protective factors. Protective factors seek to strengthen all families. The most important protective factors are those that promote nurturing and attachments, promote knowledge of child and youth development, promote parental resilience, promote social connections and provide concrete supports for parents<sup>5</sup>. This approach does not single out income-based (poor) families nor does it just target families that have had contact with the child protective services system or the child welfare system. Instead it is a more universal approach that may reach families that may not meet at-risk factors outlined by a particular program or service but may be experiencing certain stress factors that could lead to abuse and neglect—an important consideration in this economic crisis.

CWLA recognizes the value of prevention in human and economic terms as well as the great benefit to our nation and to vulnerable families and children. Policies that prevent the need for placing a child in foster care have a human, economic, and moral impact. The challenge is that there is not a one-size-fits-all model for prevention of child abuse and neglect.

*A White House Conference on Children and Youth would serve as a great opportunity to focus the nation's attention on preventing child abuse and neglect.*

*Help prevent child abuse and neglect by taking our survey:*

[https://www.surveymonkey.com/s.aspx?sm=80SxdzOpqk4MQh4B5btTYw\\_3d\\_3d](https://www.surveymonkey.com/s.aspx?sm=80SxdzOpqk4MQh4B5btTYw_3d_3d)

- 1 Administration on Children, Youth, and Families (ACYF). (2009). *Child Maltreatment 2007*, Summary. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS). Online at <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cb/pubs/cm07/cm07.pdf>
- 2 Ibid
- 3 Ibid.
- 4 Chapin Hall Center for Children at the University of Chicago. (2006). *Challenges to Building and Sustaining Effective Home Visitation Programs: Lessons Learned from States*. Chicago: Author. Online at: [www.about.chapinhall.org/conferences/charting/may2006/presentations.html](http://www.about.chapinhall.org/conferences/charting/may2006/presentations.html).
- 5 Children's Bureau. (2009). *Strengthening Families and Communities: 2009 resource Guide*. Washington DC: U.S. Department of Health and Human services (HHS) Online at: [http://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/res\\_guide\\_2009](http://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/res_guide_2009)