



Grassley Should Help Move Child Welfare Measures Forward

Iowa Press-Citizen Guest Opinion by Michael Petit, 1/5/04

Whether spotlighting cases such as Shelby Duis and Brooklyn Petithory's deaths in Iowa or similar atrocities in other states, it seems that horrific cases of child abuse and neglect are never far from the front pages of the nation's newspapers.

And why not? With nearly 2,000 children killed each year, almost 3 million re-ports of child abuse and neglect, and more than 500,000 kids living in foster care, these young victims deservedly capture public sympathy and political attention.

But not enough.

After more than 30 years of involvement with the nation's child welfare system, I believe our child welfare system has never been less able to assure the safety of children faced with danger in their own homes - even though more is known about how to protect them and how to curb abusive parental behavior.

That is why we are urging all of the presidential candidates to make child abuse a homeland security priority, and why we are asking Sen. Charles Grassley - arguably the senator best positioned to help stop the death and injury of abused children - to conduct public hearings on the child welfare reform legislation that has not moved from his Senate Finance Committee since being introduced three years ago.

Judging from our organization's national review of the way the press covers child abuse, one would never know that the federal government is a major player in the protection of children. But with more than \$10 billion in federal funds spent annually on the child welfare system, and with federal law shaping most state statutes, the Congress' policymaking and the Bush administration's enforcement responsibilities are

central to reducing the death and injury of so many children.

Important measures

Two important reform measures presently before the Senate Finance Committee deserve public hearings, open debate and a vote on the floor of Congress.

If adopted, they would provide tens of millions in new federal support for improving Iowa's child welfare system.

The first measure, Section VIII of the Act to Leave No Child Behind (SB 448), would provide billions to improve the capacity of states and local communities to protect children and improve parenting. The second, The Child Protection/Alcohol and Drug Partnership Act of 2003 (SB 614), would provide timely and proven treatment for parents in the debilitating alcohol and drug abuse situations commonly found in more than half of all child welfare cases, opening the possibility for children to remain safely with their families instead of being placed in foster care.

The alternative to treatment?

Many Iowans will lose their parental rights and many children will continue to suffer.

Adoption of Section VIII of The Leave No Child Behind Act is especially critical because it not only protects the present entitlement for most children in the foster care system, it also gives states vast new flexibility in administering federal dollars while making child protection services a new entitlement.

The bill's underlying principle recognizes that the majority of children reported to child protection agencies, whether or not their case rises to the legal standard of substantiated abuse or neglect, live in distressed families where early help is

needed if the child is to be protected and the parents are to change their behavior. Preventing and treating child abuse is labor intensive, and requires low caseload ratios, highly trained staff, and easy access to substance abuse treatment or other services when a child is found to be mistreated.

New Year's resolution

Unfortunately for abused children, few states, including Iowa, meet these standards. And, as reported last fall in one news account, several hundred public and private child-welfare workers have lost their jobs because of state budget cuts in Iowa over the past three years.

The federal legislation now before the Senate Finance Committee would require that states adhere to high quality standards of practice and would provide funding for reasonable caseloads for social workers.

The national and Iowa polls we've commissioned make it clear that voters are alarmed about the extent of child abuse in our culture, believe that government should play a major role in curbing it and are willing to spend more money to protect kids and to help parents do a better job.

Voters also are acutely aware that stronger political forces routinely elbow the needs of kids off the table.

Sen. Grassley has prided himself on being a powerful friend of children. A commitment to conducting hearings on child welfare reform legislation early in the next session is the best New Year's resolution he could make on their behalf.

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