

OPINION

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The Portland Observer

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Children's Initiative is a Giant Step

New commitment to youth should now grow statewide

BY KAY TORAN

I was very pleased to see the Portland Children's Initiative pass. It's a giant step for the City of Portland and a first step for Oregon overall. So, let's not stop at the city limits in our quest to ensure that all of Oregon's children have a chance to be successful. We continue to need a statewide commitment to youth and every citizen can demonstrate that commitment with his or her actions in becoming an advocate for our children.

By passing Measure 26-33, Portland voters supported the creation of the Portland Children's Investment Fund, which will fund proven programs to address child abuse prevention and early intervention, early childhood development programs and after school and mentoring programs. Probably half of those eligible to vote on this issue did. That doesn't mean that the balance of potential voters are callous to the issue of at-risk kids. Or that the rest of Oregon's 3 million citizens are not aware of the problem of children who are victims of abuse and neglect.

But in my 25 plus years of serving this state and the needs of our children, I have been aware of a general public numbness to this issue. Certainly, most people are stunned to hear about the severity of the problem, and they either don't know what they personally can do about it, or they don't know what needs to be done. A step you can take as part of your role in your community is to take responsibility to become educated, to inform and then to advocate.

We know that far too many children and youth are damaged because of negative and hurtful behaviors. These are the children who come from troubled families. The ones who are victims of abuse and neglect. They have poor options for childcare and inadequate healthcare. They're the children who are exposed to alcohol and drugs. The ones who become teen parents and are harmed by poverty and discriminatory practices.

It continues to be a sad paradox that in one of the richest



countries on earth, we have children going to bed hungry; living in crime-infested neighborhoods; and living with fear in their own homes, their own neighborhoods and in their schools. Did you know that the majority of the victims of child abuse and neglect are between the ages of 0-5, and that infants make up the single largest age group of victims in Oregon? We can no longer tolerate Oregon's children paying the price of our neglectful behaviors. For to not intervene and treat will only ensure higher cost to society later in terms of non or under employment, low wages, mental and physical health treatment, teen pregnan-

We can no longer tolerate Oregon's children paying the price of our neglectful behaviors.

—by Kay Toran, president and chief executive officer of Volunteers of American Oregon

cies, juvenile delinquency and adult incarceration.

Here's what you and I can do to support children's initiatives in our communities: We can be vocal advocates for a strong child welfare system - one that the community accepts as its responsibility to ensure child safety. I am talking about a child welfare system that includes high quality child-care programs, available relief nurseries, a seamless child protective services system and parental support programs to ensure child safety.

We desperately need a childcare system that low and moderate-income parents can afford. Most often, the quality of childcare is directly related to a parent's ability to pay. Did you know the typical charge for infant childcare is \$700 a month? And that for 4-5 year olds it can cost \$400 a month? High quality childcare is expensive and almost cost prohibitive for minimum or low wage employed parents.

The lack of high quality care means that a child's health, safety and developmental needs

may not be met. In all probability, that child will not be school ready when he turns six. Right from the beginning, this child will be disadvantaged. We can combat this situation by advocating for high quality, tuition-assisted programs for children ages six weeks to six years old.

Another area of concern where community members can do their part is to advocate for additional relief nursery services. The relief nursery is an intervention/prevention program for families with children at the most vulnerable age (six weeks to six years old) who are at serious risk of abuse and neglect. We can't solve the issues of child neglect without looking at the state of at-risk families in each of our communities. More and more of our children are born into single parent homes and are being raised in divorced or single parent homes. And today's economy often dictates that two parents are required to work outside of the home. With this as our social and economic realities, there is a growing need to help families struggling to cope.

Family Relief Nurseries are places where high risk/low benefit children can receive nurturing attention while their parents find the education, job training and support they need. The goal is to impact the intergenerational cycle of child abuse and neglect and to assist parents in retaining their children in their own homes in a safe and supportive environment.

The future of our youth is dependent upon initiatives that are supported in local communities, such as the Portland Children's Initiative. You can do something about the safety and care of Oregon's children. First, make it your personal vision that all our children are important, that they deserve a safe, protected, nurtured, well educated and respectful environment in which to grow up. And then work to support initiatives that educate, inform and advocate for our children - in Portland, your city and our state.

Kay Toran is the chief executive officer and president of Volunteers of America Oregon and the former director of Oregon's Office for Services to Children and Families.

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Support for Libraries Appreciated

The Board of Multnomah County Commissioners along with library supporters are pleased after last week's successful passage of Measure 26-36, the five-year renewal of the library levy.

"This vote is an affirmation of the value the community places on our library services. In tough economic times, libraries matter more than ever," said Multnomah County Chair Diane Linn. "The passage of the

library levy restores Monday hours at Central and the four busiest neighborhood libraries, and increase the book budget."

Library Board chair Terry McCall commented, "Multnomah County voters have said "yes" to maintaining library funding and we are looking forward to working with the Board of Commissioners to provide the level of library services our patrons value and most defi-

nitely use."

The Board placed the levy on the ballot after the measure passed but failed in May due to the "double majority rule."

"The passage of the levy was a group effort. I want to thank the library's many supporters and especially library staff, whose good work every day delivers a library people are willing to support in this," said Director of Libraries Ginnee Cooper.