

# WORKING P A P E R

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## Preventing Child Abuse and Neglect in the United States

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RAND CHILD POLICY

**If you had \$5 million to spend each year for the next five years to prevent child abuse and neglect in the United States, how would you spend it?"**

By J. Paige Greene

When Hurricane Katrina struck, I was privileged to live and work in a community that established an emergency response center. As a volunteer “Shepherd” at this site, I, along with others, was provided with a brief training and assigned to a family. In one short day, I had been trained, was assigned to a family in need, and assisted them in completing a food stamp application and Medicaid application, helped them obtain physical examinations and medications, made contact with FEMA and three displaced relatives, and secured food, clothing, transportation and hotel accommodations. By the week’s end, the adult family member secured transportation and steady employment (where he remains employed today!). During this experience, I could not help but reflect on my 20+ years in child welfare and the difficult systems that children and families must navigate their way through to receive services. This experience provides the foundation for my belief in Community Resource Centers (CRC) as an effective means for tackling the national plight of child abuse and neglect. If I had \$5 million to spend each year for the next five years to prevent child abuse and neglect, I would use these funds establish several Community Response Centers.

Community Response Centers (CRC) are community response “homes,” which are geographically situated in the ‘heart’ of a community that is strategically identified as an area having the greatest need for or/ potential to serve the most ‘at-risk’ families. Although administered by a team of professionals, a CRC resembles a home atmosphere rather than the traditional government facilities in place to serve families. With a “one-stop shopping”

approach, CRCs conduct assessments, teach parenting skills, and train volunteers around a kitchen table, creating an inviting, non-threatening environment for all. Families frequently become intimidated by the current model of child serving agencies, in which they must sit across a desk from someone dressed in a suit, often in a very cold, sterile office setting. The ability to ‘transfer’ learned skills of all types is far greater when families feel an immediate sense of comfort in a ‘home-like’ setting where the barriers of inferiority are eliminated.

The Community Response Center model works exactly as the name implies – Communities (people and systems) respond to identified community needs. Families help families – in their community of residence – addressing the needs of the family unit as a “whole.” All services provided through CRCs are designed to preserve the family unit through education and immediate responses to their problems. Preserving the family equates to preserving the community.

When natural or man-made disaster strikes, the American Red Cross responds by going directly into the community and setting up emergency response centers. Basic human needs are assessed and addressed by on-site resource providers, who are accessible to all in need.

A CRC follows the Red Cross model in providing an effective method of healing human crisis. What could be more tragically disastrous and crippling for families and community than child abuse? By establishing a CRC, a community can address, resolve, and eliminate the issues leading up to and perpetuating child abuse and neglect. By educating families at risk, providing immediate responses (services) to their needs, and utilizing the powerful work of volunteers as service providers, family and community restoration begins--resulting in a positive outcome that affects all generations. A community approach is mission critical – due to the immediacy of the family’s need as well as the sustainability of the effort when project funding is exhausted.

CRCs would serve as the 'hub' for community agencies responding to child abuse and neglect (e.g., Department of Social Services / Department of Juvenile Justice / Mental Health / Department Health Environment Control / Guardia Ad Litem / Courts / etc.). Through a collaborative commitment and braiding of resources, community agencies begin to provide optimal services as one organization rather than isolated entities. This multi-systems approach is by far more readily available and capable of addressing a family's needs compared to the current method.

Like the American Red Cross, CRCs would employ key staff to direct the program while the primary service delivery would be provided through a workforce of volunteers. Many of the volunteers would be family members or other significant people in the lives of families in need. Like a three-legged stool, CRC have a three-part focus: in this case, equally involving community ownership, comprehensive assessment & immediate response, and volunteerism.

Community ownership begins with the onset of CRC development in a community. Community leaders are given active voices in the CRC. Through their active participation, community leaders develop a sense of ownership ,while fiscal trust is established in the community through a transparent budgetary process. This important facet of CRC educates community leaders about funding resources, provides them with an on-going cost analysis, and assists them in lobbying for augmented funding and projections. As desired outcomes are accomplished, CRC cost-effectiveness is realized within the community. By the end of the five-year period, community CRCs will be financially autonomous.

Comprehensive assessments and immediate responses to identified families at risk preserve the family unit by focusing on family as a whole rather than the child, parent, or caretaker individually. The comprehensive assessment addresses target issues facing at-risk

families, including physical and mental health, educational, job skills, housing, day care, transportation, substance abuse, food, clothing, etc. Immediate services are available to address immediate needs, while non-crisis influences are addressed through an educational approach in the family home (budgeting / housekeeping skills / parenting).

CRC recruits, trains and supports community volunteers who are culturally competent and actively committed to family preservation. As the community becomes educated about CRCs, volunteers will be recruited to provide direct, in-home services. Of equal significance, many of the volunteer resources will be connected to the identified families, many through family or friends. Through CRC training, volunteers will acquire the skills necessary to coach families towards independence. Upon stabilization, families once identified as families at risk may themselves become volunteers to help other families in need.

With the allocated project funding, several Community Response Centers could be established and become operational and self-sustaining within the five year time frame – but more importantly, thousands of families could be preserved and child abuse and neglect could be significantly reduced.

About the author:

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