

WORKING P A P E R

Preventing Child Abuse and Neglect in the United States

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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 Elba Montalvo

Child Welfare = Family Well-being

The creation of systems of prevention that originate from the perspective that most families are committed to maintaining the safety and well-being of children, rather than from a punitive mind-set that assumes the worst about parents, would fundamentally change the state of child welfare and help prevent the incidence of child abuse and neglect. With 355,000 calls made in New York State last year to report cases of child abuse and neglect (Carrion, 2008), it has never been more important to dedicate funds in meaningful ways toward the protection of our nation's greatest asset. The vast majority of children who are reported to the child welfare system hail from families who want the best for them and truly strive to achieve stability and consistency for their children (New York State Citizen Review Panels for Child Protective Services, 2007)

Language and cultural barriers, complications with immigration status, and misunderstanding of the system by workers and families place immigrant children at greater risk for removal and unnecessary placement in foster care and place families at greater risk of not receiving necessary services toward reunification (CHCF, 2003). Latino citizens also experience barriers to accessing services designed to assist families, because Puerto Rican or Mexican family members who are citizens and have been in this country for generations are also subject to institutionalized marginalization that leaves them out of mainstream support programs. Immigrant status and limited English ability affects the health and well-being of Latino families,

including difficulty obtaining employment, access to adequate and affordable health care, and the likelihood of poverty—all of which predispose families to become involved in the child welfare system.

Immigrant families are significantly less educated and more economically disadvantaged than native born families. Twenty-seven percent of children of immigrants are poor, compared with 19 percent of children of native born parents (Capps et. al., 2004). Despite this poverty, immigrants are less likely to receive Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), food stamps, housing assistance, or subsidized child care (Capps et. al., 2004). As a result of this poverty, they are more likely to live in crowded housing, have food insecurity, and experience high stress levels. These factors contribute to a higher risk for involvement in child welfare systems, which further threaten the security and stability of immigrant families.

At The Committee for Hispanic Children and Families (CHCF), we believe that child welfare encompasses the well-being of children, not just when child protective services become involved with a family, but prior to that crisis. By focusing on the protection of the well-being of children, and by default the well-being of families, child welfare becomes more and more about providing families with the services needed to become self-sufficient to raise healthy, safe, and contented children. With \$5 million every year for the next five years, a comprehensive plan for communities most afflicted by child abuse and neglect can be put in place, consisting of the following elements.

Commitment to Policy and Program

Real change is possible with a two-pronged approach that encompasses a mutual dedication to program and advocacy initiatives (Crutchfield et. al., 2008). Utilizing information from working with families in order to educate policymakers is the most effective way to build

awareness at the top levels of influence and to motivate leaders to reassess policies or legislation that directly affects the well-being of families. Community members would benefit from training programs that develop their ability to communicate trends they observe in their community and to devise recommendations in order to guide policymakers in distributing resources and creating service strategies that draw from familial and cultural strengths.

Educational Supports -

As in any situation, knowledge is power. Especially with young families, knowledge can make a significant difference in the manner in which they raise their children, and whether the choices they make will benefit their well-being as a family. Most successful parents receive support from their extended families even before their children are born. However, in situations in which families are isolated, such as with immigrant families who live far from their relatives or close friends, the community must step in to provide supports to help parents create a nurturing environment for their children. Home visiting programs are vital in helping families succeed in providing the best for their children. Such programs involve professionals and/or trained community members who come to the parents' homes to identify ways to make their environment baby friendly, help parents practice positive parenting techniques that reinforce their child's development through touch and stimulation, teach parents about safety in terms of appropriate feeding and sleeping methods, and connect parents with other young parents to support one another during the difficult first months after a baby's birth and beyond.

Educational supports also consist of other kinds of information sharing, including classes and workshops on such topics as conflict mediation, to reduce unhealthy, negative forms of communication between family members. Workshops that focus on financial literacy, which emphasize the importance of responsible spending choices, how to use coupons and shop

intelligently, use techniques to build savings, the importance of good credit, and how to use a bank are also critical to family well-being. For immigrant parents, education about the child welfare laws which explain the expectations of parents in this country in terms of discipline, education, and care for children—can reduce their potential involvement in child welfare.

Continuum of Services -

The self-sufficiency of families depends also on access to services that can assist them in times of crisis. In communities afflicted by poverty, families typically experience a dearth of services, and immigrant families are particularly affected because of their unique challenges to accessing assistance. A continuum of community-based services is essential, provided by a mix of professionals and trained community leaders who can identify families in need and connect them with services, including housing, legal assistance, counseling or therapy, financial assistance, educational opportunities for professional development, scholarships, and loans to individuals interested in starting small businesses or family day care programs. Seemingly barren neighborhoods with few points of assistance may actually have a myriad of resources under the surface that can be identified by community and peer leaders. Oftentimes, immigrant families come to this country with a skill that is not immediately recognized and that can be cultivated and fostered by a community-based network of support programs.

Connection Between Child Welfare and Immigration -

Children of immigrants, particularly undocumented immigrants, are at a distinct disadvantage because their parents are often marginalized from services that can potentially assist them in obtaining self-sufficiency. Fear of deportation and legal reprisal often prevents undocumented parents from seeking health or mental health care, enrolling in educational or professional development programs, using financial institutions, or simply utilizing social

supports. Compounding these threats to family preservation, the Department of Homeland Security has launched a series of raids resulting in the forcible separation of children from parents accused of violating immigration laws (Capps et. al., 2007). Advocacy that demonstrates the connection between our nation's treatment of undocumented immigrants and the subsequent threats to child well-being, both prior to and after a raid or arrest that separates the family and further traumatizes the child, is crucial.

Connection Between Child Welfare and Domestic Violence -

CHCF was one of the first agencies to bring to light the connection between domestic violence and child welfare with its groundbreaking film, *Dolores*, in 1987. Too often, the victimized parent is further victimized by the removal of their child because the parent is deemed to have failed to protect the child from an abusive parent or partner. The child's trauma after witnessing family violence is compounded when he or she is separated from his parents. Community supports for parents seeking assistance in cases of domestic abuse must be attentive to the need to keep the children with the parent to preserve some consistency if the parent is fit to care for the child. It is vital to educate professionals to sensitively and safely assist the abused parent and child as a unit, so as not to further disrupt the family and traumatize the child.

Involvement of Fathers -

Whether fathers live in the home or not, too often they are not meaningfully involved in the lives of their children, which has implications for the family's financial stability as well as the child's positive development. Involving fathers in children's lives in healthy ways is beneficial because it provides a balance of role models for children, and parents can share responsibilities in maintaining a safe and secure home. Forming groups in the community for fathers is critical for family success. Such groups should address fathers' unique challenges in

raising children today and the particular shame that men are socialized to feel when they struggle to provide for their family. The groups should include suggestions and advice about how to make the time they spend with their children more meaningful through positive play and activities. Programs should create unique opportunities for men to create bonding relationships with their children and make their involvement in the lives of their children a healthy experience for the family, regardless of the status of their relationship with the mother.

Culturally and Linguistically Appropriate Services

None of these programs would succeed without a commitment to attention to culture and language. “The ways in which social services are planned and implemented need to be culturally sensitive to be effective,” states the National Association of Social Workers in its standards for cultural competence (NASW, 2001). Creating incentives for community members to become involved in the provision of services and developing indigenous leadership is important for family preservation, because community members are the most knowledgeable and qualified persons to connect with families in need of assistance. Community members who are trained to identify signs of crisis are able to intervene in a timely fashion because trust and rapport already exists, and they are able to connect their friends and neighbors with supports designed to help them. CHCF’s cutting edge program, Circles of Support, utilizes this ideal: Community members are trained in nontraditional therapeutic techniques to build the capacity of individuals to cope with trauma and pain. Professionals who are not members of the community must be trained in the unique cultural dynamics so that their interventions are effective and lasting (Rios et. al., 2007).

A community-based network of supports that complements and builds on the existing strengths of the community’s families is the most effective tool in the prevention of child abuse

and neglect. A special focus on Latino families, which are among the fastest growing populations in the United States, is imperative in an effort to stem the tide of involvement in child welfare because they are among the most vulnerable families to the effects of poverty and lack of access to services that could help preserve their well-being. With \$5 million over the next five years, progress can be made toward fortifying families and truly protecting our nation's children.

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