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Guest Viewpoint: Measure 30 would help protect children

By Lou Enge and Marilyn Klug

Success by Six, a communitywide children's initiative, is mobilizing Lane County families, organizations and communities to ensure that our children are safe, healthy and cherished, and that they enter school ready to learn. Our foremost goal is to significantly reduce child abuse and neglect in Lane County. To that end, we strongly urge voters to closely study Measure 30 and its ramifications on social services designed to support families at risk of child abuse.

Convened by United Way of Lane County, the Success by Six initiative is a response to a growing problem in our region. In 1999, Lane County's child abuse rates surpassed the state average. Since then, the gap has widened further, with Oregon rates decreasing and Lane County rates increasing. In 2002, the state average was 9.7 cases of abuse per 1,000 children 18 or younger; Lane County's 2002 rate was 13.5. In 2000, there were 1,168 confirmed cases of child abuse and neglect in our county.

While child abuse and neglect occur across all sectors of our society, certain factors increase the risk of child abuse. Among them:

- Drug and alcohol abuse by parents. In 2002, 44.8 percent of substantiated child abuse cases in Oregon involved substance abuse.
- Domestic violence. Research shows an increasing link between spousal abuse or fighting and child abuse and neglect.
- Single teen parents. Children of single teen parents tend to experience poor physical health, low birth weight, stunted physical growth, lower cognitive abilities, decreased school achievement, and increased emotional and behavioral problems. They also are at greater risk for child abuse and neglect and infant mortality.
- Maladaptive parenting practices. If parents provide adequate stimulus through language, visual, auditory and social interaction, the child's brain becomes "hard-wired" for language development and appropriate socialization. Conversely, parents who abuse or neglect their infants cause major damage to the developing brain and neurological

systems.

- Unemployment. In 2002, the head of the household in 36.2 percent of documented child abuse and neglect cases in Oregon was unemployed.
- Parental involvement with law enforcement. In 2002, 41.5 percent of documented child abuse reports in Oregon occurred in families where parents were involved with law enforcement agencies.

Lane County statistics reflect these risk factors. Thirty-two percent of substantiated abuse and neglect cases involve domestic violence, and 37.5 percent involve substance abuse. Further, more than half of the mothers who have children placed in foster care were teens when they gave birth.

What these risk factors demonstrate is that to prevent child abuse, we must provide adequate support for families. Measure 30 would protect key services for families at risk of child abuse, including:

- Oregon Health Plan coverage for 32,200 children (including 1,700 newborns) and 2,000 pregnant women.
- Mental health and addiction services for thousands of very low-income parents.
- Child welfare services that prevent children from entering foster care or reduce their length of stay in foster care.
- Mental health and addiction services for families.
- The regular Emergency Assistance program, which helps families avoid the need for long-term assistance.
- The Student Day Care Block Grant Program (day care assistance to college students), affecting about 325 low-income families each month.
- Temporary Assistance for Needy Families benefits for children living with adults other than their parents, and various support services for such families.
- Healthy Start home visitation program for first-birth families, providing services for some of Oregon's most vulnerable families.
- Funding for crisis relief nurseries.

Besides the health and social consequences of child abuse, there are considerable long-term financial costs. Approximately \$19.5 million of the \$24.3 million spent on child abuse in Lane

County in 1999 was used to deal with the consequences of child abuse, rather than prevention.

Treatment of child abuse costs an estimated 10 times as much as prevention. A single case of shaken baby syndrome can cost up to \$1 million in medical care and other public services in the first few years of the child's life. And the long-term effects of child abuse strain public health systems, since abused and neglected children are at greater risk of depression, alcoholism, drug abuse, and severe obesity. They're also more likely to require special education and become juvenile delinquents and adult criminals.

If we don't emphasize prevention by providing support for families, we'll deal with the problem of child abuse from the most costly and disruptive end. Please spend time with your Voters' Pamphlet and carefully consider Measure 30 and its consequences for our children. They are our future.

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