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Guest Viewpoint: Make child well-being a life pursuit

By Gerry Gaydos

Margaret Nichols, the late superintendent of the Eugene School District, had two favorite questions: First, "Is it good for the children?" and second, "How is your soul today?"

These days, Margaret wouldn't be happy with my answers.

Tax cuts, a faltering economy and monumental budget deficits are not good for the children. And my soul aches when I learn that ours is among the hungriest states in the nation, that more than 70,000 Oregon children have no health insurance, and that one in seven mothers doesn't have adequate prenatal care.

Our children are suffering silently and relatively unnoticed. Children are unable to vote, to lobby, or to organize news conferences. It's high time to speak out loudly and clearly on their behalf. We must make it our life's work to become knowledgeable, vigilant and persistent in our advocacy, and generous in our support for organizations that promote children's well-being. Our legislators must get the message that children's welfare is paramount to their constituents. This must not be merely stopgap crisis management; it must become a continuous life pursuit.

Until we dedicate ourselves to ensuring the safety and health of our children, we fail to live up to our values and jeopardize our future prosperity.

Consider three examples of imminent threats to the health and well-being of Oregon's children:

Effective last March, state subsidies for the basic care of foster children were reduced by 7 percent. Foster parents are now paid a meager monthly stipend of \$352 to \$451, depending on the age of the child.

In addition, and likely far more significant for the long-term ability to attract and retain foster parents, the state eliminated the subsidy for child care expenses that allowed foster parents to make ends meet by working outside the home.

More than 750 kids are currently in foster care in Lane County, and the need continues to grow. In one recent week, 21 children were identified as needing temporary foster care. Who will care for these vulnerable citizens?

Nearly 450 working families in Oregon lost child care assistance this year due to the

state's budget crisis.

The subsidies were intended to partially offset the cost of child care while parents worked. Many families striving for self-sufficiency are hamstrung by low-wage jobs and lack of money for child care. Struggling to match child care schedules with work that often involves nonstandard and inflexible hours can discourage gainful employment and erects barriers to responsible parenting.

The Bush administration's fiscal year 2004 budget would shift oversight of Head Start from federal to state governments, in effect gutting the program.

For 38 years, Head Start has successfully prepared at-risk children to succeed in school and excel later in life by providing preschool training for disadvantaged 3- and 4-year olds and support services for their parents. Since its inception, Head Start has benefited more than 20 million at-risk children and their families. In Lane County, 800 children participate in Head Start preschools.

Cuts like these - combined with poverty, hunger, unemployment and other hallmarks of a beleaguered economy- are creating tremendous stress on families. To complete the grim circle, the safety net of basic services for children and families is in tatters. The sad irony is that it's ultimately far more costly to destroy and rebuild these programs and services than it is to simply maintain them.

Government researchers have found poverty to be a greater risk to children's overall health than living in a single parent family. For every year that children live in poverty, their lifetime contribution to our nation's economy declines dramatically, since poor children become less educated and less productive adults. Do we really believe that we can ignore the needs of our children now without paying for that ignorance in the future?

What we give to the future is hope and possibility. If we can't give that to our children, we're failing miserably and damaging everything we stand for and believe in. I want to live in a community that dedicates itself to making sure every child is healthy, safe and cherished. We must all become champions of children, because in the lives of our most vulnerable citizens, every moment matters.

I urge you to become involved in the lives of children today. Here are a couple of great places to begin: <http://cherisheverychild.org>, and <http://www.connectforkids.org>.

Eugene attorney Gerry Gaydos chairs the leadership team of Success by 6 Initiative of Lane County, a United Way program focused on reducing child abuse and neglect through prevention efforts. He was recently named "Champion of Children" by Birth to Three.