



Everything Michigan

Column: Lawmakers consider putting money where their mouths are

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By Sharon Emery

There's nothing like the topic of children to blow the lid off pontificating at the state Capitol.

Just mention "our youngest, most vulnerable citizens," "the hope for the future," "our greatest natural resource" and you get a lot of tears welling up for those kids -- if not stacks of the state's cash.

So every year for the past 24, the Michigan Coalition for Children and Families, comprising more than 70 education, social service and health groups from across the state, draws up a list of children's issues that lawmakers need to get cracking on. Their "Children's Agenda 2007" was just released.

After all those years and tears, children's advocates essentially are asking lawmakers to get down to basics: Show us the money, they say, pointing to state budget cuts that have slashed programs they consider essential to growing strong citizens.

There are many threats to Michigan's kids -- everything from Internet predators to poverty to bad TV -- but what we really should be worried about, the coalition says, is the state's structural deficit. That's the budget plan whereby Michigan spends about \$900 million more every year than it takes in.

With the state Constitution requiring a balanced budget, the slashing of programs and services to make the numbers work has children's advocates holding their collective breath over what will happen this budget season.

And with good reason. Last year I wrote about a report by the advocacy group Michigan's Children, which found that spending on child abuse and neglect prevention programs was cut some \$15 million between 2000 and 2006, with most programs sliced about 19

percent.

This year funding for two of the programs was increased slightly. And outrage over the high-profile deaths of three children prompted funding for 51 more Child Protective Service workers, although abuse and neglect caseloads remain above recommended levels.

Cuts happen because prevention programs are among the easiest to slice. You know the adage that kids don't vote, so there's no political constituency for their cause.

What's more, an appreciation of prevention programs is both an art and a science, requiring a vision that can project future value even as other state programs cry out for immediate, expensive fixes.

To make the point, Elizabeth Carey, executive director of the Michigan Federation for Children and Families, hauls out a statement by a numbers guy, economic analyst Arthur Rolnick of the Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis:

"If properly funded and managed, investment in early childhood development yields an extraordinary return, far exceeding the return on most investments, private or public."

Then she puts Rolnick's hard numbers in your face: For every one dollar spent on preschool-age children, there's a \$17 gain in terms of what the government doesn't have to spend to repair and rehabilitate those children and what they can contribute to society as whole and healthy people.

In a study, Rolnick pegged the annual return on investment at Ypsilanti's High/Scope Perry Preschool at 16 percent, compared with the 7 percent average annual return on U.S. stocks.

"It's like investing in the stock market," Carey said of putting money into early-childhood programs. Over time, the investment in children grows.

That may be a tough sell in a state that has run through its \$5 billion rainy day fund over the past six years.

But people like Anja Wing, executive director of the Mecosta County Area Chamber of Commerce, get it.

"We want to see children get the best start in life," Wing told me at the launch of the Children's Agenda. She sees the document as a work-force development tool.

As the coalition says in its agenda (see www.MICCF.org): "Public investment is critical to empower families to raise children who are well prepared for school, work and life."

Hmmm, seems like someone could do more with that than just mouth the words.

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