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GUEST COMMENTARY

Good beginnings for children can last them a lifetime

BY BARBARA

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April is Child Abuse Awareness Month and the goal of this year's theme, Good Beginnings Last a Lifetime is to highlight prevention and actions that members of our community can take to keep children safe. Unfortunately, West Virginia has the highest rate of child fatalities from abuse in the country and over 8,000 substantiated cases of child abuse and neglect occur in West Virginia per year. As we conclude our month of activities, I'd like to offer some ideas on how we as a community can turn these numbers around.

Rather than letting the statistics steal the spotlight, community groups have chosen instead to focus on the positive. The message connecting all of the events held in the last month was that together, as a community, we can make a difference in the lives of West Virginia children.

During the rest of this year, the Monongalia County Child Advocacy Center wants to focus on positive ways individuals can decrease child mistreatment in our state. Instead of dealing with this problem after the damage has been done, we want to raise awareness about what can be done to head off the problem altogether.

Prevent Child Abuse West Virginia offers three suggestions for becoming involved in child abuse prevention in your community.

First, get personally involved with children and families in the community. Children thrive on positive relationships with adults. It is a constructive and easy way to make a difference in a child's life. Examples of ways to get involved include baby-sitting for a stressed-out parent, becoming a positive role model, and becoming a mentor for children outside their home.

Second, support local programs that have a positive influence on our children, by volunteering your time or providing financial assistance. You can find youth programming volunteer opportunities through the United Way of Monongalia and Preston Counties. For further information on volunteer opportunities contact the United Way at <http://www.teamunitedway.org> or call 296-7525.

Third, be an advocate for family-friendly public policy. During the past session, the Legislature enacted an Early Parent In-Home Family Education program. Although the bill was signed by the governor, the program is not fully funded. This program provides parenting education and support to families with young children in their homes. Studies have shown that this voluntary educational program improves children's health, reduces child abuse, and increases parenting skills.

The payoff for investments like this in early childhood development may be higher than any other economic development expenditure.

These are just a few suggestions for how you can work in our community to support families and protect children. Further information about ways to prevent child abuse and neglect in West Virginia can be found at the Prevent Child Abuse West Virginia Web site at (www.preventchildabusewv.org) or by calling the MCCAC at 598-0344. Just giving a few hours of your time can mean positive outcomes for children in the future. We urge everyone to participate in making our community healthy and safe for our children.

BARBARA EVANS FLEISCHAUER serves as vice chair of the Monongalia County Child Advocacy Center. She is also a candidate for the House of Delegates. This commentary should be considered another point of view and not necessarily the opinion or editorial policy of The Dominion Post.