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GUEST VIEWPOINT:

**Agencies that aid abused, neglected kids need your help**

By Megan Shultz

April conjures images of showers interspersed with rays of sunshine, promising better days ahead and the hope of new beginnings. April does not remind most of us of child abuse — even though, nationally, April is Child Abuse Prevention Month.

With all the uncertainties we face, it would be justifiable to stop reading now. Who wants to read about more misery? But wait: This is about hope, about new beginnings and about how you can be a part of changing a child's life.

Raising children can be stressful under the best of circumstances. Imagine you're a parent struggling with an addiction, and imagine that the addiction became more powerful than you are.

In Lane County last year, the Department of Human Services' Child Welfare Program intervened on behalf of 572 children because their safety was at risk. The No. 1 stressor that brings children into the "system" is parental drug and alcohol abuse. Like peeling an onion, drug and alcohol abuse is often just the first of many issues that presents itself.

The goal of the DHS Child Welfare Program is to provide services to parents so that their children can be returned to a home that is safe and stable. This is no easy task. It takes time, money, dedication and a village of community service organizations and volunteers to stand alongside children and their families as the onion is peeled and healing work begins.

The community of service providers in Lane County works collaboratively because each plays a vital role in changing lives and saving children.

Three organizations that work closely together are Kids' Forensic Intervention Response and Support Team (Kids' FIRST), Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA) and the Relief Nursery. Each provides services along the continuum as children and their families try to find their way back home.

Laura and her daughter, Alisa, are one of the families that needed the help of these three organizations. Laura started using meth when she was just 17 years old. At age 19, she gave birth to Alisa. Laura believed that her love for her daughter would help her kick her habit, but her addiction proved to be stronger.

By Alisa's third birthday, she was living in foster care and was believed to be a victim of sexual abuse. All three organizations came to Alisa's aid. Kids' FIRST provided Alisa a safe, child-friendly environment in which she could be interviewed and medically examined — helping to avoid the trauma of being shuffled through police stations, doctor's offices and courtrooms.

Laura enrolled in a non-offending parent education and support group. Alisa's case was assigned to a victim advocate to help guide the mother and foster parents through the criminal justice process.

The Relief Nursery provided a parent tracker to support Laura as she waited for an addiction treatment bed to open. Laura later participated in Relief Nursery parenting classes while Alisa attended the organization's therapeutic preschool where she received the one-on-one attention, support and nurturing she desperately needed.

A Court Appointed Special Advocate became a powerful voice for Alisa's best interests throughout the process. The advocate kept in close communication with other service providers, the court, the caseworker and Alisa's foster parents and made recommendations to the judge for the best options for Alisa's future.

It was a long, bumpy road for mother and daughter. Happily the case was closed, and Alisa celebrated her fifth birthday at home with her mom.

Today nearly 1,000 children in Lane County live in foster care, and that number is increasing at an alarming rate. In 2008, the state opened approximately 48 new cases of abuse or neglect each month in Lane County. This number is on track to increase by 35 percent in 2009, with 129 cases opening in the first two months of the year. Economic instability is clearly having an effect not just on adults, but on the children who depend on them.

Child abuse is happening right here in our community. If we ignore the problem because it is overwhelming, the long-term effects will last a lifetime for some children, and may cost other children their lives.

April is Child Abuse Prevention Month. It is also a month of promise, hope and renewal. You can help children such as Alisa by reaching out to help a parent who is struggling. You can give your time as a volunteer or make a donation.

Organizations such as Kids' FIRST, CASA and the Relief Nursery need your help to keep our children safe. Laura and Alisa's story might have had a very different ending if these services were not available.

Many more children like Alisa need our support, and they need it today.

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*She wrote this essay with Irene Alltucker, executive director of the Relief Nursery; Raymond Broderick, executive director of Kids' FIRST; and Sharri da Silva, executive director of programs for the Relief Nursery.*