

Commentary

Inside

Editorials G2

Letters G2

Opinion G3



registerguard.com/opinion

SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 5, 2012

SECTION G

CASA and Relief Nursery are leaders in abuse prevention

BY RANDY HARRINGTON
AND CARMEN VOILLEQUE
For The Register-Guard

For 35 years, Oregon's Legislative Assembly has championed the needs of Oregon's children with a visionary commitment to knitting back together a fractured and fragmented service delivery system. That commitment has evolved over the decades to include myriad agencies and state-funded nonprofit groups dedicated to specific stages of the child development services

continuum — from birth to age 3, to preschool age, to third-grade reading, to secondary and higher education.

In 2011, Gov. John Kitzhaber reorganized these early childhood development and education agencies, appointing an Early Childhood Council designed to reduce inefficiencies and redundancies.

The results of this reorganization remain a mystery — the process is undefined, complex and in flux.

We have come to a collective realization: For all of the amaz-

ing work being done by these organizations, the problem of child abuse and neglect continues to grow in Oregon. Does that mean these programs aren't doing their job? No. They do heroic work every day.

So is it a lack of public funding? Not entirely. Lack of

Randy Harrington of Eugene and Carmen Voilleque of Portland are the authors of "Evolutionaries — Transformational Leadership: The Missing Link in Your Organizational Chart."

funding is certainly part of the problem, but the public pie will never be big enough to give everyone as big a slice as they want or need.

The solution is twofold:

- ◆ Find better ways to scale services without increasing costs.

- ◆ Increase community mobilization around child development and abuse-prevention efforts.

In our recent book, "Evolutionaries: Transformational Leadership," we talk about the kind of leaders that guide or-

ganizations and communities through transformational change. We believe these leaders exist in Oregon's system of child abuse prevention, but we need more like them.

Meet Megan Shultz, executive director of Court Appointed Special Advocates of Lane County. Recently, she has discovered a way to scale CASA's services and save more children by rethinking the model for supervisory capacity. Here's her story:

One of the best things about

Turn to **PREVENTION**, Page G4

Prevention: Leverage strengths and harmonize energies

Continued from Page G1

CASA is that you can do the math — you can calculate the number of kids who are in the legal system at any given time, and you can predict how many court-appointed special advocates will be needed. There is also a corresponding ratio for how many CASA supervisors will be required, based on the demand for new CASAs.

The traditional model has been to hire a full-time employee to supervise each batch of CASAs. But as need grew and funds dwindled, this ratio became impossible to sustain financially. CASA of Lane County just couldn't hire enough supervisors to manage the required number of advocates. The result was that children went without these critical services, and the CASA organization began to slip into decline. The program was no longer sustainable.

Fast-forward to 2012. CASA of Lane County is managing to put more CASAs on the board than ever before, despite a struggling economy. The organization is doing it by recruiting experienced senior CASAs with exemplary performance to function as supervisors in a volunteer capacity and appointing a full-time, employed supervisor to oversee this group of leaders. CASA decided to place more trust in the well-meaning, dedicated people

who had served the organization for years.

CASA of Lane County, led by Shultz, challenged the theory that volunteers are incapable or unwilling to take on greater roles and responsibilities to serve more children. The organization has succeeded in developing an innovative new staffing model that will ensure that every child who needs a CASA volunteer has one by 2016.

Shultz's bold move has created scalability for a struggling model and has drawn the attention of CASA organizations across the state. The incredible organizational transformation has been well-documented and soon will be described in the National CASA Association's publication so that other CASA programs will have a road map for the future.

We can't think of a more evolutionary story than that.

OK, maybe we can. Here's one more:

Meet Jean Phelps, the retired executive director of the Relief Nursery in Eugene. In 1984, Phelps took the lead against child abuse in Lane County, working on a shoestring budget out of the trunk of her car.

Through her warrior-type conviction and determination, over the next 25 years the Relief Nursery model flourished and became what today is often referred to as "the Cadillac

of child services," named by Governor Kitzhaber as one of the four pillars critical for child abuse prevention in Oregon. There are now 15 relief nurseries across the state.

A relief nursery is a nonprofit organization where families can go to address parenting challenges and where children can participate in therapeutic early childhood programs. But for the families that relief nurseries serve, they are much more.

Relief nurseries are built on the concept that the best person to raise a child is that child's parent, not the foster care system. So we have to help people be better parents while also addressing the needs of children.

Every relief nursery has a waiting list of children and families desperate to participate. The reason is because families served by relief nurseries show significant improvements in a variety of measurable ways related to child development and the prevention of child abuse.

After just six months in a relief nursery program, we see the following results:

- ◆ Reduction in foster care placements from 394 to 179 days, and reduction in new placements from 57 to five.

- ◆ A 13 percent decrease in family risk factors.

- ◆ A 30 percent increase in positive parent-child interactions.

- ◆ A 63 percent increase in parents reading to their children at least three times per week.

- ◆ A 22 percent increase in families living above the federal poverty level.

- ◆ A 16 percent reduction in use of costly emergency room services.

- ◆ A 32 percent increase in participants' employment rate.

All these statistics are drawn from the "2008-10 Evaluation of the Oregon Relief Nurseries," produced by Portland State University.

Families that spend longer than six months in a relief nursery program show far greater levels of improvement. For example, after two years in the program, there was a 114 percent increase in the number of participating families living above the federal poverty level. And the numbers just keep getting better.

The Relief Nursery grew out of a systems theory approach — the belief that solving child abuse in Oregon would require addressing a variety of related issues such as drug abuse, poor parenting skills, hunger and poverty, and mental illness. Relief nurseries are able to provide this multi-pronged approach by mobilizing the strengths inherent in every community.

Because relief nurseries emerge from an effort to mobilize communities, they are

able to break free of the strait-jacket of primary dependence on state funding to support high-risk children and families. Now that's evolutionary.

There are dozens of these great organizations in Oregon. Birth To Three, Healthy Start and other programs continue to gain national traction. We are doing a lot of good things for children in Oregon, and in many cases we don't fully appreciate what we have in our own backyard.

The fact that parents, teachers and caregivers often face a fractured, fragmented and incomplete system of social support is not the fault of any one provider. But all providers in the system must begin working together better to tighten the net that catches our troubled children and families across the state. It's time to leverage our strengths and harmonize the energies of the thousands of well-meaning partners who are working for the sake of our kids.

Our dream is that child abuse one day will be as taboo as smoking on an airplane. It's just not something you do.

It's time to step up and take back your community's children. Child abuse is everyone's problem. Join us in volunteering for and supporting the valiant evolutionaries in Oregon who are working every day to keep our kids safe.