

## Save the Children

A seven-month-old baby girl named Sheri was rushed to the emergency room of a New York City hospital, dead on arrival. A thorough examination and autopsy of the child's body showed that the baby had died of internal bleeding and a skull fracture (Landau 2). Her mother claimed the injuries were caused when the child fell out of her crib while reaching for a toy that was on the floor. However, it is impossible for a seven-month-old baby to climb over the side of a crib and equally impossible that Sheri would have suffered such life-threatening injuries if she had really taken that fall (Landau 2). In such cases involving abuse and/or neglect, children like Sheri might live if their parents were offered sufficient support and parenting training.

Recently, La Crosse County government officials have been holding budget meetings. These meetings are designed to decide which programs in La Crosse County are going to get grants from the county and what tax increases it would take to fund them. Healthy Families-La Crosse is one program that is involved that should be funded without question. This non-profit program was developed in 1992 and is run by the Family and Children's Center solely on government grants and public donations (Morehouse 3 & 4-5). The purpose of the program is to help parents of newborns cope with the stress of caring for an infant ("Welcome" para 2). La Crosse county government should not be so quick to cut funding for programs like Healthy Families-La Crosse. Child abuse is rising and will become a greater problem if funding is cut because families must be educated in order to stop abuse. Investing money now will end up saving the county money in the future.

The statistics for the number of children that are abused annually is shocking. Even more awful, the trends show an increase. In 1997, the National Center for Child Abuse and Neglect reported that nearly one million children across the country were victims of some sort of abuse (Child Abuse para 6). The most recent statistics for Wisconsin show that over 40,000 cases of child abuse and neglect were substantiated for the year of 1999 (Spors para 2). Mary Ellen Prinsen, manager of the Family and Children's division of La Crosse County Human Services, told the La Crosse Tribune that referrals by people like police officers, schoolteachers, and family members almost doubled between May of 2000 and May of 2001. In May of 2000, 130 referrals were made to her department for child protective services. The number for May of 2001 rose dramatically to 244 cases countywide (Hollnagel para 2). Even worse, it is estimated by experts that for every single occurrence of child abuse or neglect that is reported to the authorities there are one hundred other unreported cases (Landau 4).

Educating parents is the key to breaking the cycle of abuse. Healthy Families-La Crosse is designed to provide families at risk of becoming abusive with the knowledge and resources to change their future. After an "at risk" family is identified during a prenatal visit or self-referral, the program pairs the family with a staff member from the Family and Children's Center for weekly in home visits. During these visits, parents are able to discuss any questions they have on parenting and the support worker connects the family with the resources that help the parents (Hollnagel para 15).

The result of a study done by Viterbo University proves even further that education is the only way to break the cycle of abuse. The study compared the number of children referred to La Crosse County's Child Protective Services. One group was made of the general population; the other group was comprised of families participating in the Healthy Families-La Crosse program. The result indicated that the people involved in Healthy Families-La Crosse had fewer referrals and problems; a little over seven percent of the general population was referred to La Crosse County Child Protective Services compared to only two percent of families participating in Healthy Families (Morehouse 8).

Not only does the Viterbo study prove the Healthy Families program works, it also shows that education-based programs save taxpayers in the process. The researchers measured the operating costs for the year 2000 "against the estimated costs of services that otherwise might have been spent on child welfare, child abuse investigations, medical care, foster care and legal services" (Hollnagel para 3). During 2000,

Healthy families provided services to 138 families in La Crosse County. The total cost for these services was \$235,000 (Morehouse 6). The "direct cost saving" was found to be almost \$111,000 which included costs for foster care, social workers, and court fees (Morehouse 8). Also, the study found a savings of almost \$434,000 in costs associated with the children's health, such as medical visits (Morehouse 11).

There are many people who have the opinion that taxpayers shouldn't be forced to pay taxes that go toward a program that they wouldn't fund on their own. However, there are thousands of beneficial programs throughout the country that struggle to keep their doors open because citizens don't find that specific issue important enough to fund. The statistics do show that families that experience child abuse and neglect are numerous and the problem is serious. Susan Dreyfus, Administrator for the Department of Family and Children's services, stated that statewide, eleven children died in 1999 and 13 died in 1998 (Spors para 11).

Others argue that people who abuse their children are drug addicts or crazy alcoholics that cannot be helped. However, in reality, almost anybody might find himself or herself guilty of child abuse or neglect. Parents who mistreat their children are "usually found to have little or poor previous preparation for their role" as a parent (Landau 10). The Healthy Families-La Crosse program works with families to educate them about child abuse and neglect. The statistics show abuse prevention methods are successful in reducing the amount of children that require medical care because of abuse or neglect. In the year 2000, La Crosse County had fifty-one children seek medical attention for injuries related to abuse or neglect. However, none of the fifty-one children were part of the Healthy Families-La Crosse program (Morehouse 8).

Child abuse awareness is an issue that is important on federal, state, and local levels and should be funded accordingly. One way to stop innocent children like Sheri Went from dying is to fund programs Healthy Families. Anita Froegel, Chair of the La Crosse Community Foundation, said it best when she referred to the success of Healthy Families. "Anytime you can make a difference in a community, even a family at a time, it makes the community better" (qtd. in Hollnagel 21).

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