

Sunday, January 18, 2004

Letters to the Editor

Foster care reform

In his Jan. 14 column, Eric Mink was right in giving Missouri House Speaker Catherine Hanaway kudos for convening individuals representing the courts, the Department of Social Services, parents and child advocates to provide input on her foster care reform bill.

However, Mink oversimplifies the issue of "discreet" videotaping of interviews with children. They could not be accomplished as easily as he indicates. Discreet videotaping would make timely investigations much more difficult.

Mink cites three egregious cases as examples of justice run amok. However, these cases are not typical. Most interviews and prosecutions are not mishandled. Most cases of abuse are not prosecuted.

Mink is right that the heart of the problem is marginally trained, inexperienced, overzealous or ambitious investigators, therapists and prosecutors. We would also add inadequately trained judges and guardians ad litem (lawyers appointed by the court to represent the child) to that list.

The best approach is to provide adequate training to the individuals in these important roles and supervise them well. Money spent for training is a wiser investment than purchasing tape and video recorders or installing two-way mirrors.

Of course, money for training is a special challenge in Missouri. If we are serious about reforming foster care, it cannot be done without additional resources. Eventually, the Legislature will have to grapple with that tough issue. The federal government could also allow greater flexibility for the state's use of its money.

Hanaway and her staff have put an enormous amount of energy into her foster care reform bill. Let's maximize the impact of that energy by enacting reforms that go to the roots of problems.

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