



THE CURE IS PREVENTION -- BUT THEY WON'T PAY FOR IT

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Mercury News Editorial

Julie Serrano is on the front lines in the war against child abuse in San Jose, but she's lost her most potent weapon because the nation's outdated child welfare system won't pay for it.

Study after study shows that the only cure for child abuse is prevention -- stopping the cycle in which abused children grow up to become abusive adults. When Serrano began teaching parenting classes for new immigrants in East San Jose, child abuse reports in the area dropped in half.

``They didn't understand that in this country, it's against the law to hit a child," Serrano said. ``We'd show them the difference between abuse and correction."

When the county places fewer children in foster care, it saves taxpayers money. So one would think the federal government, which spends \$5 billion a year to keep kids in foster care, would gladly foot the bill for parenting classes and other money-saving preventive programs. Wrong. Under the current law, federal entitlement money doesn't kick in until the kids are in the system. So Santa Clara County had to pay for the parenting classes, and when the statewide budget crunch hit, it canceled them.

The Bush administration is trying to reform the foster care system. It has been pressuring states to shift the focus away from removing kids from their homes and toward strengthening families so they can stay together. Federal officials have been going from state to state, rating each system and demanding improvements.

But until the feds change the way they pay for child welfare, there will never be any real reform. States get most of their child welfare money under Title IV-E of the Social Security Act, which guarantees payments for kids from very low income families who are placed in foster care. The more kids in foster care, the more money the states get.

The president's shortsighted solution is to offer states flexibility in how they spend their Title IV-E money, so they could put it into prevention, but only if they agree to lock in the amount they receive for five years.

That's an offer states should not accept, no matter how tempting. California, for example, gets about \$1.6 billion in Title IV-E money, and that's not nearly enough. Social workers here already juggle twice the recommended number of cases. Too many children are bounced from foster home to foster home. They don't get adequate education or support when they leave foster care. The feds should be offering a substantial increase, not a cap.

California officials say they'd be happy to talk with the administration about a plan that would guarantee flexibility *and* adequate money. If the president's goal is to keep families from being torn apart and provide the best outcomes for the nation's most vulnerable

children, then he should be willing to invest in prevention now. The savings are sure to follow.

PAYING FOR FOSTER CARE The federal government spends about \$5 billion a year to care for abused and neglected children through several programs, including:

- **Title IV-E -- \$4.9 billion:** The largest pot of money is an entitlement that pays expenses for children from low-income families who are placed in foster care.
- **Title IV-B -- \$600 million:** A smaller fund used to support families whose children are considered at risk for abuse or neglect.
- **Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act grants -- \$80 million:** The only federal money exclusively dedicated to prevention and treatment of child abuse and neglect.