

Guest column: No, all the children in our county are not well

Too many children are the victims of sexual, emotional and physical abuse, and the Family Safety Center needs help in protecting them

By Nancy Williams
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If Memphis hosted a contingent of official visitors from the nomadic Masai tribe of northern Africa, we might be in for some uncomfortable moments. That's because they likely would want to know how our children are doing.

It is a tradition among the tall Masai people that upon greeting someone the question is asked, "How are the children?" Even warriors who are not fathers will inquire, or give the traditional answer, "All the children are well."

In other words, life is good, the community is well, peace prevails.

Can we honestly say that is the case in our community? It isn't just the spectacular stories of violence and abuse we see in the newspaper and on TV that suggest a negative answer.

Of course, the abuse and traumatizing of children enter our collective consciousness with a big bang when a high-profile case is headlined on Page 1 and leads the evening newscasts, such as the horrendous domestic murders on Lester Street. But just as quickly, the issue can fade and the community once again will fail to face a certain tip-of-the-iceberg reality.

It's one dirty, deadly iceberg floating in our midst. How do we recognize it? Look around. Read the statistics behind the news stories. Pay attention. Talk to people who work in the fields of child abuse and family violence.

Too many children are the victims of sexual, emotional and recurrent physical abuse. Shelby County reported the most child abuse investigations of any county in Tennessee this past year -- 8,069 cases.

Too many children are cared for by abusers of drugs or alcohol.

Too many live in households where parents are missing or some adult has been incarcerated. Latest data show that more than 5,000 children in our community are affected daily by a caregiver's incarceration.

Too many children witness domestic violence. At least 52 percent of crimes against persons in Shelby County involve domestic violence, and our county holds the dubious distinction of originating 26 percent of such reports in the state.

In short, too many of our children are being victimized.

Memphis has recognized that children can't be helped in a vacuum, and that child abuse often takes place in the midst of family violence. This understanding has led to the founding of the Family Safety Center of Memphis and Shelby County (FSC) -- stemming from a strategy of the crime-fighting initiative called Operation: Safe Community. FSC will provide victims of family violence access to comprehensive services.

The Family Safety Center was designed to be a safe place where governmental and nongovernmental service providers and law enforcement personnel team up to stop domestic violence and help victims. The initiative, planned as a public-private partnership, will cost less than \$700,000 per year. Compare that to the more than \$1 million cost for the prosecution of one individual for a domestic homicide.

But the FSC begins its work in a climate of decreasing dollars available to communities for aid to victims. When drafting the federal government budget for this year, Congress cut funding for the Victims of Crime Act (VOCA), resulting in an 11 percent cut in federal dollars earmarked for Tennessee for direct services for victims. These were not tax dollars that were cut, but money that comes from fines, forfeitures and fees levied by courts against federal criminal offenders.

The Wall Street Journal reported in January the cut was made to give the appearance of fiscal restraint. In other words, politics created a smaller pool of money that would be shared with states and communities for victims of crime.

A cut in aid to victims is one practical problem that can be fixed if the will is there among our legislators to do something about it.

A harder fix is figuring out how to take a community from abrupt awareness and dismay when a terrible crime grabs the whole community's attention for a span of time, to a sense of stubborn steadfastness that we all no longer will allow this problem to consume so many lives.

It very well may be that finding long-term solutions begins with that kind of resoluteness and continuous awareness.

This week the Children's Memorial Flag is flying in front of the Memphis Child Advocacy Center on Poplar Avenue in memory of the two children who died in the Lester Street home. We raise and fly the memorial flag whenever a local child has died as the result of physical abuse, severe neglect or intentional violence. It happened again this week. A small boy died because a loaded gun was left within reach. Once again our flag will go up.

And we will offer answers to the question: How long will it take to reach the point where all our children are safe? Answers such as:

When all of us feel the equal weight of responsibility for protecting the children.

When we stop tolerating the use of broom handles or extension cords as assault weapons.

When we understand the extent to which children are victims of domestic violence.

When those who budget our tax dollars put priority on services for children.

When children come to school ready and able to learn because they are free from chaos at home.

When neighbors who know kids may be in danger tell someone who can do something to protect those children.

When we won't be afraid to face visitors from another country asking how are the children, because adults together have taken action to keep all our children safe.

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