



Muskegon Chronicle

Advocates push for early education as crime prevention tool

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By Lynn Moore

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What do preschool and crime have to do with one another?

Plenty, says a group of law enforcement officers who are lobbying for increased investment in children now to prevent crime later.

The group that includes 400 law enforcement officers who call their mission Fight Crime: Invest in Kids Michigan are lobbying state and national lawmakers to increase funding for early education and other family programs as crime prevention measures. They -- with the help of Muskegon County's Great Start Collaborative -- brought their message to Muskegon Friday, where they met with a group of about 30 people, including representatives from health, education and helping agencies; city and county commissioners and local lawmakers.

"We are advocates for improving programs that help direct children toward opportunity and success before they become delinquents," said K.P. Pelleran, state director of the Fight Crime initiative.

The group called for more investment in preschool programs to prevent child abuse and neglect and after-school programs.

"The longer I'm in office, the more important I realize it is to focus on prevention," said Tony Tague, who's served as Muskegon County's prosecutor for 25 years.

Tague advocated for more parenting education to reduce incidents of child abuse and neglect in the county, which in 2006 totaled 216 cases involving 411 children.

Muskegon County Undersheriff Dean Roesler, also a member of the Invest in Kids group, called for more funding of preschool programs like Head Start, the federally-funded preschool program for low-income 3- and 4-year-olds. He noted that the Head Start program serving Muskegon and Oceana counties typically carries 250 names on a waiting list.

He compared the need to serve those children with his need for a new county jail to serve increasing numbers of criminals.

The state, he said, spends \$1.9 billion on corrections, compared with \$91 million on state-funded preschool.

"We've got it backwards," Roesler said. "We've got to flip that around."

Pelleran cited a study of an Ypsilanti preschool program released in 2004 that found at-risk 3- and 4-year-olds excluded from the preschool program were five times more likely to have five or more arrests by age 27. In addition, she noted it can cost up to \$250,000 per year to incarcerate a juvenile offender.

The Fight Crime group is advocating for the passage of a \$194 million proposal of Gov. Jennifer Granholm's

that addresses unmet needs in early childhood education and child care and calls for universal full-day kindergarten. They also are seeking expansion of the state's \$5 million after-school program, and continued support of the Nurse-Family Partnership program that sends nurses into homes of pregnant women to provide up to two years of parenting advice and support.

The national Fight Crime: Invest in Kids group -- which has more than 2,000 members -- is pushing for passage of \$13.7 million in federal funding for in-home parent coaching programs.

Virtually everyone in the room at the Holiday Inn Muskegon Harbor Friday agreed that more could be done to help children succeed, and that by doing so the crime rate likely would drop.

The sticking point is how to pay for it.

Rep. Mary Valentine, D-Norton Shores, said "she's on board" with the group's prerogatives, noting that channeling resources to children "is an investment up front" that will save money in the long run. She said citizens need to lobby legislators to find the money.

"If we're going to pay for these programs, it may require a tax increase," she said.

Rep. Doug Bennett, D-Muskegon Township, agreed, saying tax rates may need to increase and that "we're not funding the things we need to fund."

Mary Judnich, a representative for Democratic U.S. Sen. Debbie Stabenow, noted Stabenow is a co-sponsor of the federal in-home parent coaching bill and said she believes there could be some funding increases for education coming out of the nation's capital.

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