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Guest Commentary Opinion– Editorial

We Can Do Better

As sheriff and prosecutor, we know too well the toll that crime exacts on communities -- the pain it brings to victims and the financial burden it imposes on the public. We must pursue every possible opportunity to prevent crime and violence.

Child abuse is particularly devastating. Every year, tens of thousands of children throughout the country suffer unspeakable abuse and neglect at the hands of adults. Many of these children carry the emotional and physical scars for life. Some die as a result of severe maltreatment.

According to a recent report from the Every Child Matters Education Fund entitled, "We Can Do Better -- Child Abuse and Neglect Deaths in America," more than 10,000 children died from abuse and neglect in the United States during 2001- 2007. In Washington State, 104 children died during this same time period with the sharpest increase in abuse and neglect evident in the past three years. It happens right here in Kitsap County.

Research shows a clear link between childhood experiences and the likelihood that a person will commit crimes as an adult. Survivors of child abuse and neglect are twice as likely to be arrested for a crime as a juvenile when compared to those who grow up free of abuse. While most children who survive child abuse and neglect never become chronic criminals, their suffering can lead to changed patterns of behavior and even permanent changes in their brains.

Some have trouble learning empathy; others develop a predisposition to misinterpret innocent actions as threatening and then react violently. Abused children often grow up to become perpetrators of abuse.

The good news is that we know what works. Rigorous research on one home visiting program, the Nurse-Family Partnership, showed that children of mothers in the program had 48 percent fewer substantiated reports of abuse or neglect.

This bears repeating: *this home visiting program can prevent nearly half of all cases of abuse or neglect among at-risk children.* The benefit of this program can be seen in lower rates of juvenile crime as the children become adolescents. There were 59 percent fewer arrests by age 15.

Washington State spends hundreds of millions of dollars each year on foster care and victims services as a consequence of failing to invest adequately in proven prevention, such as the Nurse-Family Partnership. While the goal is to improve our society, it makes good business sense, too. According to the Washington State Institute for Public Policy, the Nurse-Family Partnership saves taxpayers and crime victims an average of \$18,000 for every child served because of reduced crime, better school performance such as higher graduation rates, and abuse reductions.

These are difficult economic times. However, the need to protect our children is increasing. It is not the time to backpedal. Our collective experience and considered judgment clearly establishes that investing in these prevention programs will save taxpayer dollars and make our communities safer.

We urge the Governor and legislature to, *at a minimum*, maintain our State's modest investment in intensive home visiting programs.

Signed:

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Sources:

Every Child Matters: <http://www.everychildmatters.org/National/Campaigns/We-Can-Do-Better.html>

Nurse-Family Partnership: <http://www.nursefamilypartnership.org>

Washington State Institute for Public Policy:
<http://www.wsipp.wa.gov/pub.asp?docid=06-10-1201>