

Child Abuse and Neglect

The Problem – Nationally

Child abuse and neglect touches everyone. It has reached epidemic proportions, both in the United States and Nevada, crossing all racial, socioeconomic, geographic and religious lines. Although many states have implemented prevention strategies, rates of child maltreatment and child fatalities attributed to maltreatment continued to increase for many years. Recent trends indicate there has been a decrease in child abuse across the nation. The rate of victimization has decreased from 13.4 children per 1,000 in 1990 to 12.3 children per 1,000 in 2002. While the decrease is a good trend, child maltreatment is still a major concern, with prevention and intervention being major issues for children, families and society.

One-half of all Americans believe child abuse and neglect is the most important public health issue facing this country, compared to such other public health issues as drug and alcohol abuse, heart disease, cancer and HIV/AIDS (*Current trends in child abuse prevention, reporting, and fatalities: The 1999 Fifty State Survey*, August 2001, & *Key Facts on Child Abuse and Neglect*, 2000, Prevent Child Abuse America).

Nationwide, an estimated 4.5 million children were reported to child protective agencies as alleged victims of abuse or neglect in 2002. Approximately 896,000 children, 30% of the cases, were confirmed victims. The most common form of abuse cited was neglect, which was confirmed in 60% of the cases; 20% of the confirmed cases were physical abuse; 10% sexual abuse; and 7% emotional maltreatment.

- Children newborn to three years old suffered the highest rate of victimization at 16.0 per 1,000 children.
- In 2002 approximately 1,400 children, or four each day, died as a result of abuse or neglect. A majority of the cases (76%) involved children under the age of four; 12% were 4 to 7 years of age; and 12% were 8 to 17 years old. Major contributors to child fatalities were neglect, physical and sexual abuse.

- Boys under the age of one year had the highest fatality rate due to child abuse, nearly 19 deaths per 100,000, and infant girls had a rate of 12 deaths per 100,000.
- In 2001 an average of 2,475 children were identified as victims of child abuse each day.

The Problem – Nevada

- Approximately 13,000 reports of child abuse and neglect occur each year in Nevada. In recent years, between 21.5% and 35% of the reports were substantiated.
- Although statewide reports decreased slightly from 14,685 in 1997 to 13,325 in 2001, between 2000 and 2001 Nevada saw an increase of 4% in child abuse and neglect reports. At the same time, the number of substantiated child maltreatment cases decreased by 16.7% (3,441 in 2000 to 2,865 in 2001).
- Natural parents are the perpetrators of approximately 80% of child abuse and neglect.
- Children age 5 and younger are most at risk for child abuse and neglect.

Current Services

Federal, state and local governmental agencies as well as private community-based organizations provide a range of services and programs which protect children and strengthen families. These include child protective service agencies, maintenance and food assistance agencies, maternal and child health care programs, prevention programs, and parent education classes and support groups. In addition, there are family preservation services, crisis programs for parents of infants in need of special services, and child screening and treatment services.

Gaps in Services

- Nevada does not currently have a single agency to coordinate a statewide approach to prevention activities or public awareness of the related issues.

- Insufficient funding is provided for prevention programs and services.
- There is insufficient collaboration and communication among service providers.
- The increase in the Hispanic population in Nevada has not been matched with bilingual staff to meet the needs of this population.
- Lack of transportation is a barrier to access to services throughout the state and is most problematic in rural communities (*Assessment of Nevada's Child Abuse Prevention Services, 2002*, Children's Trust Fund, Committee for Protection of Children).

Since the review was completed, Prevent Child Abuse Nevada has been formed. Staff are working to become an affiliate of the national organization and agencies are meeting quarterly via video conferencing to share resources and to improve communication and collaboration between service providing organizations.

Marie's Story

Marie looks bleakly out the window of her subsidized apartment. It is winter time. The sky is gray, and the day is cold. A wet, slushy snow begins to fall. She can feel cold air coming in under the window. Marie is 18 years old. She has two children aged 2½ and 9 months. Marie did not finish high school. She worked briefly at a fast food restaurant, her only work experience. When her second child was born her parents kicked her out of the house.

The children are in the bedroom, finally asleep. Marie has not been away from her children since they were born. She feels trapped and resentful. She has often thought of walking away from her life and her kids. Sometimes she is so frustrated and angry she wants to take it out on her kids. She has no support, and does not see any way out of her situation.

References

Nevada Kids Count Data Book, The Center for Business and Economic Research.
National Clearinghouse on Child Abuse and Neglect Information, U.S. Department of Health & Human Services.

Nevada Can Do Better

- Support the Nevada KIDS COUNT Project, an initiative to collect and disseminate data about child risk factors in Nevada.
- Support home visitation programs to identify high-risk families early in a child's life.
- Increase funding for parent education beginning before conception and continuing through the first 5 years of a child's life.
- Expand state funding for programs emphasizing respite care services and therapeutic support and intervention for parents.
- Continue funding quality child care initiatives.
- Support a statewide agency or organization to coordinate long-term and ongoing child abuse and neglect prevention efforts, with offices in Washoe and Clark counties, including support for rural communities.
- Provide funding and support for statewide public awareness campaigns for child abuse prevention.
- Provide funding for public transportation and other support systems for rural communities to access prevention and intervention services.

Submitted by the University of Nevada Cooperative Extension, Campus Child Care Connections, the Washoe County Department of Social Services – Child Care Services, and the National Association of Social Workers, Nevada Chapter.

Domestic Violence

The Problem

Domestic violence is a widespread problem with consequences reaching far beyond the family. It affects the abused parties, the children, and the entire community. In addition to its immediate effects, there is increasing evidence that violence within the family has an impact on such other social problems as substance abuse, juvenile delinquency and violent crimes of all types.

To eliminate the abuse and to bring about change, a coordinated community response is required to send a consistent message that domestic violence will not be tolerated or excused. Each part of the community has a role to play; mental/medical health personnel, educators, clergy, the media, advocates, as well as the civil and the criminal justice system. Domestic violence must be reduced and prevented. When it occurs we must intervene effectively to enhance victim safety and hold offenders accountable. To do so requires strong public policy that is supported by appropriate legislation.

Current Efforts

Domestic violence continues to be a significant issue for communities throughout Nevada. In 2003, more than 38,000 individuals contacted domestic violence programs throughout the state. Local domestic violence programs responded to more than 33,000 hotline calls. They provided 61,155 shelter bednights for 4,024 women and children. In addition, programs assisted with 12,378 protection orders, arranged 11,708 court accompaniments, provided 13,817 peer counseling sessions, and held 1,304 support groups. Unfortunately, there are no statewide numbers for arrest, prosecution or disposition of these cases.

Battered women face major obstacles in escaping violence and rebuilding their lives, including lack of employment opportunities, transportation, childcare, health care and affordable and safe housing. Efforts to address these economic justice issues are ongoing and include training, advocacy and resource development.

These women also face distinct obstacles that prevent them from voting. Since stalking is common in domestic violence situations, victims often have extraordinary needs for safety and confidentiality. Victims of domestic violence may hesitate to register to vote or take any other steps that would allow their address to be published in public records. Utilizing Nevada's Confidential Address Program's voter registration process has helped some victims of domestic violence exercise their right to vote *and* protect their safety.

Gaps in Services

Over the last two years a new threat to efforts to provide safety for victims and accountability for perpetrators emerged through use of civil compromise. NRS 178.564 and 178.566 currently allow certain misdemeanor offenses to be compromised and discharged by the criminal court upon the injured party acknowledging in writing that she has received satisfaction for her injury through a civil action. Allowing such a compromise runs contrary to the intent and purpose of domestic violence laws. Domestic violence must be excepted from this statute.

Availability of legal services throughout the state continues to lag behind need. Pilot projects instituted over the last biennium with federal funding through the Violence Against Women Act are now being threatened as federal funding is cut back. Funding is needed to insure that victims of domestic violence have access to legal representation.

Courts continue to struggle with resources to implement laws. Rural areas in particular are looking for innovative ways to implement statutes. Unfortunately some of those innovations may cause more problems than they solve. We need to recognize the barriers facing rural communities by seeking creative solutions that do not sacrifice accountability or safety in the process.

Non-citizen but legal immigrant victims of domestic violence face significant barriers to safety. Fear of law enforcement, threats of deportation and lack of access to resources insure that battered immigrant women stay in violent relationships. Nevada has an opportunity to reach out to this most vulnerable population and provide TANF assistance as a way out of the violence.

Jennifer's Story

Jennifer, a legal immigrant, ended her relationship with Peter because of his controlling behavior. He works for one of the state parks and throughout their relationship he "jokingly" threatened that he could get her deported, if he so desired. Soon after she ended the relationship he began stalking and threatening her. He lives across the state, nearly four hours away, but drives across the state to stalk her at work and at home. He calls her from 3 different pay phones, (not his cell phone).

Jennifer sees Peter's truck everywhere she goes. In addition, he mails letters to her boss, the police, and one of the local television stations saying that she was a sexual predator and a drug dealer. As a result, police went to Jennifer's house and searched it. They found nothing. Jennifer's boss called her in to ask her about it and for a long time she was afraid she would lose her job.

Jennifer is essentially living in terror, wondering what Peter's next move will be.

Nevada Can Do Better

- Exempt domestic violence from coverage under the civil compromise law.
- Provide resources for survivors who are immigrants.
- Provide adequate resources to systems that provide safety for victims and hold perpetrators accountable.

Submitted by the Nevada Network Against Domestic Violence: a private not-for-profit corporation composed of 12 community-based member organizations.

Elder Abuse and Neglect

The Problem

The State of Nevada is now at the point where a great number of older citizens need services. When an elderly person needs help and has no funds, family or friends, they are called “unbefriended.” It is hard for most to imagine, but there are many people in Nevada who fall into this category.

Unbefriended elderly people are most vulnerable to exploitation, abuse, neglect, self-neglect and isolation. They usually have some mental health problems. Often, they are homeless or living with people who mistreat them. Some are literally on the street. Scores are the victims of predatory criminals who use the elderly person’s meager social security check for their own living expenses, leaving the older person with no other support. This makes it necessary for the elderly person to live with the predator and put up with the hardships and possible abuse this creates, without reporting it to anyone. Typically, the elderly do not know what services exist. Many times there are no services available.

Rural areas in Nevada are most in need of additional services for older people. However, there is a lack of mental health care and temporary housing for elderly people statewide. There is also a statewide lack of beds for elderly people whose dementia has caused behavioral problems.

Current Services

In Clark County, as would be expected, many services exist that are not available anywhere else in the state. Clark County residents have more access to geriatric-psychiatric facilities, transportation and temporary beds for patients over the age of 60 who are without a place to live because of self-neglect, neglect, or domestic violence. There are many more long-term facilities in Clark County. The Senior Centers in Clark County also provide many services for their clients, including people who will help elderly pay their bills (called rep-payees), and of course nu-

trition centers where meals are served. The Senior Law Project provides legal services.

In Washoe County there are also more services available than in the rural counties. There is one private geriatric-psychiatric facility, which serves all of Northern Nevada. There is transportation provided by the Regional Transportation Commission. The Washoe County Senior Center offers many services, including nutrition and Meals on Wheels and rep-payee services. The Washoe County Senior Law Project provides legal services.

In the rural counties, grants from the Division for Aging Services provide nutritious meals and other services in the Senior Centers, and some transportation services. However, the best service in many of the rural counties comes from people helping people. While this is wonderful, and without it the elderly who need help would be in great danger, good neighbors can only help so much before the problems get too big, or the voluntary caregivers become overburdened.

Gaps in Service

The most urgent need for the elderly citizens of Nevada is for mental health treatment and facilities. People with behavioral problems caused by dementia are being sent to facilities in other states, because there are so few facilities in Nevada to accommodate them. Also, in Northern Nevada particularly, people with dementia who are homeless, or charged with some type of violent behavior, are often put in jail because there is no place else to put them. As many have said, the best mental health treatment in the State is taking place in the jails and prisons. Is this the best that the State of Nevada can do?

The next most urgent need for Nevada’s senior citizens is for more services, such as transportation, in-home care, and public guardianship, in the rural counties.

Betty's Story

Betty has worked as a secretary for most of her 78 years. She is a self-sufficient woman who prefers living alone. She has never been married and her family lost track of her long ago. Her house is called a shack by the neighbors. Running water is intermittent, and power is a long cord to the nearest house, where the residents are worried about Betty and allow her to use their electricity.

Betty has been failing in recent years. Always strong and healthy, she is able to get around, but her mind is failing. She does not like going to the doctor, and may have some illnesses that contribute to her forgetfulness, or she may have some form of dementia. She has been known to put food on the stove and forget about it. She sometimes eats food that is old and spoiled. Her house is dirty, as are her clothes. Her personal hygiene is not good. She sometimes wanders, as she cannot find her way home.

The senior center in town is helping Betty as much as possible with meals, but she is not comfortable in the company of so many people. Betty needs someone to help with her cognitive problems, medical condition, and housing. She may resist, but like most people, would find the help very comforting in the long run. Unfortunately, there are no public guardianship services in the county, no long-term care facilities, and no mental health care. Betty qualifies for in-home care services (CHIP), but there are no home care providers in his area.

Betty will die soon, possibly from old age, but just as possibly from the lack of care. She is like many people who are elderly residents of rural Nevada.

Nevada Can Do Better

- Increase the funding for mental health, including mental health facilities that treat only elderly people.
- Establish a state-funded public guardianship service for the rural counties. Include a program for tracking guardianships statewide to ensure compliance with the laws requiring yearly accounting.
- Give incentives to developers who are willing to establish long-term care facilities to treat persons with dementia-caused behavioral problems and temporary housing for seniors who are victims of elder abuse, neglect, exploitation or isolation

Information provided by Nevada Division for Aging Services.