

SOCIAL SERVICES

In bed-sharing baby deaths, state action alone can't assure protection of kids

Tom Blatner and Richard Roper *Guest Columnists*

In 2003, Faheem Williams, an 8-year-old boy, died of child abuse and neglect in Newark. Soon thereafter, there were additional heart-wrenching instances of child maltreatment in other communities.

Consequently, the state entered into a consent decree with Children's Rights, a national advocacy group, that committed us to improve the safety and well-being of our children.

Now, after substantial investments in the Department of Children and Families (DCF), we confront the death of an infant that resulted from the mother "bed sharing" with her child. In this instance, the state had failed to respond to a call from a hospital expressing concern about the mother's history. DCF also recently released information about a 2-year-old who perished while being strapped in a car seat. In each instance, the families had significant histories of involvement with the child welfare system. Once again, a harsh spotlight shone on the state agency responsible for protecting our children.

While New Jersey is fortunate to be the perennial first or second wealthiest state in the country in terms of per capita income, there are many families among us who do not share in this good fortune. According to Advocates for Children of New Jersey, of the nearly 9 million people living in New Jersey, 2 million are children and youth under age 18. Over 600,000 of these children and youth live in poverty, with a disproportionate share being African-American and Latino.

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Basic success factors that determine the future of the 100,000 babies born in New Jersey every year include strong family relationships and community connection, physical and psychological safety, financial security, good health, early learning and quality education. When these success factors are missing, the risks to children heighten dramatically.

Fifteen years ago, we offered a series of recommendations in the aftermath of the child tragedies that had occurred. We argued that the safety and well-being of New Jersey's children, especially children whose families are trapped in poverty, cannot be achieved through a single government bureaucracy.

We called for comprehensive state/county/community partnerships and cautioned against leaving the safety and well-being of children to well-meaning bureaucrats and lawyers without strong public engagement and transparency to assure credibility and trust.

Some progress has occurred. The caseloads of protective service workers are down and there are fewer children in out-of-home placement. There have been modest investments in prevention and family support. Some counties and municipalities have begun forward-looking initiatives supported by philanthropy and concerned elected officials. Coalitions such as Pre-K Our Way have been successful in increasing services. However, as the tragic incidents cited above highlight, as well as the thousands of families who struggle without a voice, significant challenges remain. The sounds of silence are deafening.

The task force that urged the creation of the Department of Children and Families also recommended that policy and funding in the new department and across state government shift toward prevention and family support, particularly for at-risk parents with very young children. This simply has not happened.

So, as we approach the dawning of a new administration in Trenton, we call on our next governor to:

- › Conduct a fresh, highly transparent review of the current child welfare reform effort; strengthen what is working well, and eliminate or change what is not.
- › Initiate an honest and open dialogue about the future of our children, and bring the facts, faces and voices of troubling and crippling disparities into the sunlight; identify how much we are spending up and down and across the public sector, what is accomplished, and whether there is a coherent approach.
- › Determine how we can increase our investments in prevention and family support to promote the early, comprehensive and enduring success of all children.
- › Draw upon the talent and commitment of organizations like Advocates for Children of New Jersey to create permanent vehicles for transparency, oversight and credibility.

State government alone cannot assure the protection and well-being of children. The true protectors are their parents, neighbors and community institutions. With the best thinking, good will, cooperation and hard work of us all they can succeed. And succeed they must.

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