

COMMENT

Reflections on the U.S. Advisory Board on Child Abuse and Neglect

—by Howard Davidson

Upon my completion of a four-year term on the U.S. Advisory Board on Child Abuse and Neglect (twenty-one months of which I served as Chair), I thought APSAC members might be interested in what I look upon as our accomplishments, and our failures, to date. I hope that the new Clinton/Shalala Board will build upon the work we began.

In an amendment to the 1974 federal Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (CAPTA) created a new federal body, the U.S. Advisory Board on Child Abuse and Neglect ("the Board"). The law stipulated that, of the Board's 15 members, two were to be federal officials, and the remaining 13 were to come from outside the federal government. These 13 were to be knowledgeable about child abuse policy, prevention, intervention, treatment, and research, and to have specific expertise in law, medicine, mental health, state and local government, or another discipline relating to child maltreatment. The 1988 statute charged the Board with evaluating the nation's progress in achieving the purposes of CAPTA, and with making recommendations to the Secretary of Health and Human Services (HHS), to Congress, and to the Director of the National Center on Child Abuse and Neglect (NCCAN) about how better to achieve those purposes.

Two of the twelve questions for elected officials and candidates are these:

- **Will you help make child abuse and neglect treatment programs available to all children and families that need them, and how will you do this?**
- **Will you work to ensure that family preservation services are made available to all families that merit them?**

When the new Board was first addressed by HHS Secretary Louis Sullivan in 1989, he charged us to be his "working partners." He asked for "not only recommendations and suggestions... but criticism as well." He challenged us to look at how HHS money was being spent, whether Federal inter-departmental gears were "meshing smoothly," and how HHS could help states perform their child protection responsibilities more effectively. He told us that *nothing* was "off limits" to our examination.

Our first action as a Board was a wise one. We elected as our first chair Dr. Richard Krugman, MD, then director of the Kempe Center in Denver. Dr. Krugman's leadership during our formative years of work was a critical factor in the positive recognition we received from the child protection community. While likening the American child protection system to a patient with "chronic and critical multiple organ failure," Dr. Krugman wisely encouraged the Board's "no fault" approach to the crisis, pointing out that there is enough blame to be shared by all. Dr. Krugman is also to be credited with authoring and guiding the Board's single most important recommendation to date: a call for universal, voluntary home visitation.

The Board was also lucky to have, as Executive Director, a seasoned federal civil servant whose dedication to the Board has known no bounds: Byron Metrikin-Gold. In his distinguished career in the federal government, Byron developed an understanding of how advisory boards should function which, coupled with his dedication, has served to put this Board "on the map."

This Board is now completing its fourth major report. The first report, published in 1990, was entitled, *Child Abuse and Neglect: Critical First Steps in Responding to a National Emergency*. This report gained the nation's ear by declaring that child abuse and neglect was actually "a threat to national survival." It highlighted the brutal fact that, each year, hundreds of thousands of American children are "starved and abandoned, burned and severely beaten, raped and sodomized, berated and belittled." The report stressed the economic as well as human costs of this "moral disaster," noting that we annually spend "billions of dollars on programs that deal with the results of the nation's failure to prevent and treat child abuse and neglect." Having sounded this alarm, the report sets forth "31 critical first steps" to avert the collapse of America's child protection system.

Because the Board in 1990 had found "an absence of coherent Federal policy" in national child protection efforts, it decided to address its second (1991) report to that glaring lapse. Entitled *Creating Caring Communities: A Blueprint for An Effective Federal Policy on Child Abuse and Neglect*, the 1991 report called for a National Child Protection Policy that, as part of the U.S. Code, would be a beacon in the Federal law to guide the child protection-related activities of all Federal agencies. Among the specific recommendations were these:

- that there be a flat statutory prohibition on the use of Federal funds for any "activities, programs, institutions, and facilities" that permit the use of corporal punishment of children.
- that Congress commission a study on the costs of an enhanced Federal effort to prevent and treat child abuse and neglect, and on the human and economic consequences of not addressing the problem adequately.
- that the Federal government enhance volunteer involvement in child protection.
- that the nation's religious community become more involved in the prevention of child maltreatment.

In April, 1993, the Board issued its third annual report, entitled *The Continuing Child Protection Emergency: A Challenge to the Nation*. In it, we said that three years after the Board first described the "national emergency," the emergency had clearly deepened in all parts of the nation and that it continued to threaten "to disintegrate the nation's social fabric." The report stated that an effective and adequately funded child maltreatment prevention program must

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be at the heart of all crime prevention programs.

Because, as the report stated, "hundreds of thousands of children are having their childhoods destroyed," it provided a list of things Americans can do about the crisis, as well as a list of child abuse-related questions everyone should ask of elected officials and candidates for public office.

Two of the twelve questions for elected officials and candidates are these:

- Will you help make child abuse and neglect treatment programs available to all children and families that need them, and how will you do this?
- Will you work to ensure that family preservation services are made available to all families that merit them? (p. 73)

Two of the twenty-six steps the Board recommended for all Americans include these:

- Pledge, if you are able to give some of your free time, to become a mentor for a child in a residential group home.
- Be an advocate for better staffing in local child protection services agencies. (p. 74-75)

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- **Be an advocate for better staffing in local child protection services agencies.**

The Board hopes to release its fourth annual report in late October, 1993. Tentatively entitled, *Neighbors Helping Neighbors: A New National Strategy for the Protection of Children*, the 1993 report is grounded in a much-quoted passage in the 1990 report: "It has become far easier to pick up the telephone to report one's neighbor for child abuse than it is for that neighbor to pick up the telephone to request and receive help before the abuse happens." The 1993 report will offer a new strategy for child protection which we hope will be a useful guide for policymakers along the following lines:

- fashioning neighborhood improvement strategies;
- helping change societal values related to violence against children;
- changing the focus of child protection from post hoc investigation and coercive intervention to prevention and family empowerment;
- making government child protection programs more comprehensive, child-centered, neighborhood-based, and family-focused.

The Board is also deep into work on its 1994 report. This report focuses on child maltreatment fatalities, a focus mandated by Congress when it last amended CAPTA. The Board has already held several hearings on this subject, including one at APSAC's First National Colloquium in June. It will convene a number more hearings throughout the

country before it begins drafting the 1994 report.

A constant theme of the Board's reports over four years has been that child protection cannot be addressed within government as solely (or even primarily) a social service agency responsibility. The Board has pointed out that child abuse has been dealt with by Congress' committee structure in an inappropriate manner, under which the subject has been assigned to subcommittees that do not have comprehensive jurisdiction over the mental health, health, education, and justice aspects of child protection, or even over major child welfare services programs. We have consistently argued that CAPTA should be fully funded (it never has been), and that NCCAN must be given an increased level of financial support so it can strengthen professionalism at state and county child protective services agencies. From the beginning, our Board has decried the inadequate Federal investment in research related to child abuse and neglect.

So what has been the outcome of our efforts? Unfortunately, we have yet to see Congress or any administration embrace many of our most important recommendations. No legislative proposal prohibiting the use of federal funds for programs permitting corporal punishment has been introduced in Congress. No study of the costs of addressing vs. not addressing the problem of child maltreatment has been commissioned. Likewise, our recommendation that the President of the United States sign and ask the Senate to ratify the U.N. Convention on the Rights of the Child has not yet been implemented.

Yet I am optimistic. In partial response to the Board's criticism of the low federal investment in research, HHS—through the leadership of David Lloyd and Wade Horn—commissioned the National Research Council of the National Academy of Sciences to identify critical gaps and needs in the field of child maltreatment research. Their report, entitled *Understanding Child Abuse and Neglect*, was published in July, 1993.

Further, as I have traveled the country and spoken of the Board's work, people have expressed appreciation for our insight, candor, toughness, and leadership. With a new administration, a new Board chair—Deanne Tilton Durfee—and a mostly new Advisory Board appointed by that administration, we have new hope for an increased commitment to implementing some of the Board's suggestions. With you, I will eagerly await the new Board's ideas. I hope that APSAC's leadership and members will keep channels of communication with the Advisory Board wide open.

(U.S. Advisory Board Reports can be obtained from either the U.S. Government Printing Office or by writing or calling the Board's office, 200 Independence Ave., S.W., Washington, DC 20201 [Tel. 202/690-8137])

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