

Brattleboro Reformer

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Family Matters: Children in custody

By Chloe Learey

According to recent reports, the number of children in state's custody in our region continues to grow at an alarming rate. Sadly, with over 150, Windham County is among highest in the state, and the highest per capita. Coupled with the difficulty in identifying suitable foster families, these numbers are even more disturbing.

The Family Services Division within the Department of Children and Families, responsible for child protection, should be commended for working hard to address this issue.

Many of us who work closely with children and families in the community are discussing ways that we can collectively make a difference to help stem the tide that cannot be sustained by the system. This type of crisis does not lend itself to easy answers that are quick to implement.

Nonetheless, there are things we can do immediately to offer services along the continuum to help alleviate the need in the short term and long term. The Prouty Center has identified family support as a key area. Our recent name change to "The Winston Prouty Center for Child and Family Development" acknowledges that the development of young children happens in the context of their family. We remain committed to work actively with both children and families in order to fulfill our mission. In fact, family development will be a primary focus of activity for the Prouty Center in 2017.

We believe all parents want to do well by their child, have strengths, and have something critical to share at each stage of development. However, we understand that not all parents have what they need to be successful parents. And, this is where we make a difference. We currently work with many families who are struggling with a variety of issues, from housing to substance abuse to parenting, by offering family support, nursing, early intervention and behavioral supports. We partner with families, help them identify their goals, and then support them to be successful in carrying out those goals. These might be goals related to parenting and child development, or they may be related to housing. Regardless of the goal, success means a positive impact on children. The better a family is able to function, the better a child will be able to develop.

One area we plan on expanding family support is in group work. Facilitated peer learning and support in groups is a model that we think can help build the capacity of families to successfully parent. This in turn makes an impact on the number of children who are able to stay in their homes. Building capacity can range from working on specific parenting skills to identifying resources to help remove barriers to success. For instance, if substance abuse is a primary barrier to a parent being successful in keeping his or her children, support to understand how substance abuse impacts child development, as well as accessing treatment will be a priority.

There are a variety of resources in our community to support parent learning. Indisputably, there is a need for more parent education, especially in a targeted way. By offering opportunities well in advance of the point in which children cannot stay with their families, creates the chance for more success. Failure to find a way for parents to be successful means we will continue to have a crisis of the number of children in custody.

Chloe Learey is the executive director of Winston Prouty Center for Child and Family Development in Brattleboro. You can learn more by visiting <http://winstonprouty.org/>.