

NCPA Awards
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Washington, DC

PHOTOCOPY
PRESERVATION

First Lady Hillary Rodham Clinton
National Committee to Prevent Child Abuse Awards
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Thank you Leland for your hard work and leadership on behalf of children and families. Thank you for that very kind introduction. Maura, thank you for your leadership, Sid, whom I have known for so many years and I have worked with on issues like this many years ago. Thank you for your steadfast concern and leadership. To all of the artists and entertainers that Mickey Shapiro named and honored, thank you for bringing your extraordinary talents and artistry to this important issue.

I am so pleased that we have been joined by Senator Rockefeller, Senator Chaffee and Congressman Camp. Congresswoman Kennelly could not be with us, but they are among the real heroes of the continuing efforts to ensure that abused children, neglected children, foster children, vulnerable children around our country are given the support they deserve to have from all of us, the adults of our country.

I am very honored to be here because this is the issue that I have cared about for more than half my life now, starting back in 1970 when I was fortunate to begin through my law school classes, to work with those who were abused and those who were abusers. I have looked into the eyes of so many children and seen the devastating effects of abuse and neglect. I have looked into the eyes of adults who have abused their children and know they were once abused themselves and they can't find their way out of that vicious cycle.

So many of you who are committed to this issue understand clearly that prevention and education are the most important commitment we can make. My friend Michael Bolton said it well when he said we need to continue to increase our awareness and our resources to understand the needs and drives and compulsions and histories to be the best possible parents.

But we also know that there are some families where that is not possible and we have to do all that we can to give children another chance in a permanent, loving family. So we have to focus as broadly as we can on the entire family and community. That is why it is so important that we put resources into the Healthy Families America program which you started back in 1992. And it is helping mothers everywhere.

I visited, with Leland and others, a program near here in Virginia. Before attending the program event, I stopped in the home of a single mother named Felicia in Alexandria. Once depressed and scared about the responsibility of parenting her child, worried about if she could do what needed to be done to keep her child safe and healthy, she found herself in the Healthy Families America Program.

She was so pleased to have me visit her home with her young son, a smiling, healthy baby, and to meet her home visitor, who was there to meet me to talk about how they had worked together to ensure that Felicia could be the best possible mother she could be.

The home visitor would come into the home and evaluate the child's growth and answer the mother's questions, which every mother I know of has, and to make sure that any signs of difficulty or stress can be dealt with right there.

Felicia told me what she believes, which I happen to believe, that home visiting would help any mother and particularly young mothers and mothers under stress. It is also one of those preventive measures that would save us money as well as heartbreak and tragedy if we would invest more in it.

It can reduce government assistance, it can reduce child abuse, it can even prevent unintended second pregnancies and substance abuse and lower the number of childhood hospitalizations. All of which cost us -- taxpayers and citizens -- money if they are not prevented. It can also reduce juvenile crime.

All parents who need this kind of support, I believe, should have access to it. It would be a very good investment in our future and in the futures of so many children. I appreciate deeply how you are bringing Healthy Families America to so many communities across our country. And you are doing it with the help of corporate sponsors who understand that it is a good community investment and a way to save money and lives,

We know also that preventing child abuse requires strengthening our entire child welfare system -- preserving families where possible and facilitating adoptions when necessary. Thanks to the President and the Members of Congress you are honoring today, among countless others, we have made great progress in meeting those goals.

Children are better off today because we passed the Family and Medical Leave Act which allows parents to take time off to adopt a child without losing their jobs or their health insurance. They are better off because of the Multi-Ethnic Placement Act which ended discrimination in adoptions based on race and ethnicity and put the child's best interest first. They are better off because of increased tax breaks which make families easier to adopt, especially children with special needs.

Children are and will be better off because we were able to come together across party lines to pass the landmark Adoption and Safe Families Act. Too often in the past we have had polarized discussions about how best to protect abused and neglected children. Thankfully the legislation which was passed last year ended, I hope, that false debate.

It says that of course children need loving parents, and we should do everything in our power to keep families intact, but we have to put the health and safety of children as our first concern. No longer will states be required to try and keep children with parents who have tortured, abandoned or chronically abused a child.

Reasonable effort will now truly be reasonable, striking a better balance between family preservation and the well-being of the child. When I talk to children in foster care, which I do as often as I can, I am always saddened by the number of them who feel stigmatized, like they did

something wrong to end up in foster care.

I will never forget a young boy who came to visit Bill and me in the Oval Office a few years ago when we were trying to encourage more adoption and permanent placements for children. This young boy was living in foster care in Virginia. And when Bill asked him where he was living in Virginia, he answered, "all over." That means nowhere.

By moving children more quickly from foster care into permanent families, we have made it clear that foster care is a temporary safe haven, not a place to grow up in. And through this new legislation we have provided states with financial incentives to increase the number of adoptions each year.

Now these are all important accomplishments and certainly a long way from where we were just a few years ago in terms of our priorities and what we want to do for children and for families. But we have a lot yet to be accomplished. If we are going to fulfill the promises of the child welfare and adoption and foster care reforms we have enacted, we have to make sure they are implemented right and that states are held accountable; that the goals are really translated into results.

We have to provide more support and education to judges and others on the front lines who increasingly make critical decisions about children's lives. And if, despite our best efforts, children are abused and neglected, we have to intervene more effectively to help them.

The President has proposed a new \$10 million initiative that brings together Head Start, law enforcement, mental health and social services to help reduce the effects of violence on children between the ages of birth and six. The Senate has already included this initiative in its Appropriations bill. And I hope the House of Representatives will vote as well so that we can try to do more to coordinate what needs to be done to help our youngest children.

This is especially critical because most of our children who are going into foster care are under six. So we have to intervene more quickly. We have to make decisions as to whether they can go home safely or if they should be put up for adoption into a loving family so they can have a chance at a real life ahead of them.

I hope the Congress will also act on a proposal for a \$3 billion Early Learning Fund which provides a variety of services including including home visiting. I just want to emphasize home visiting because we have some very strong evidence that when it is done correctly it really pays off.

We also have to do more to help young people who age out of the foster care system. I met with a group of them a few weeks ago. Sixteen-, 17-, 18-, 19-, 20-year-olds, who had been in foster care for a number of years and then all of a sudden they finish high school or turn 18. Imagine how you would feel if you were told you had to suddenly take care of yourself if you were only 18 years old.

I heard a lot of stories from these young people. I heard about how desperate they were to find places to live, how torn they were about whether to go back to the original family that they were taken from because of drugs or abuse or other chronic problems. It is not a surprise that a number of those young people find trouble because they don't have any continuing support.

But many others somehow make it, but we sure don't make it easy for them. I met one young woman, who in fact introduced me, who had been in foster care since age thirteen. She had aged out the system, but luckily she had done well enough at school to go to college and then worked and saved money and was admitted to my alma mater, Yale Law School. Well, she is a shining example of a success story out of the foster care system. But we need more such stories, for we don't have nearly enough.

Just imagine what we could accomplish for all of these children if we tackled all these issues effect them in a bi-partisan way in the same way we approached the Adoption and Safe Families Act. Unfortunately, even as we speak, there is a bill working its way through Congress that I think would turn the clock back, because it would treat young runaways and truants as adults and put them into adult prisons.

This runs counter to everything we have learned about kids who are often running way from abuse, about kids who are running from abuse need from the rest of us. In fact, it was one of the first things I did when I worked for Sid Johnson and others to find out what happened to young children, some as young as nine or ten, most of them teenagers, who were put into adult prisons.

We documented unspeakable horrors. We found that they were eight times more likely to commit suicide, five times more likely to be sexually assaulted than if they were in some kind of other facility. So in 1974, Congress, acting on a wealth of evidence, acted to separate juveniles from adults in prisons. Now there are some in Congress who would turn the clock back and have made this a part of the Juvenile Justice Bill. It's being rushed through Congress without so much as a debate on the Senate floor.

All of you who know about child abuse and know about the effects of violence, think for a minute of the additional problems we are creating for ourselves by treating these young people in the worst possible way that literally removes any hope of their becoming productive citizens by throwing them in with hardened criminals into adult prisons and jails.

So we have to look at all of the remaining issues. We've made a lot of progress on preventing child abuse, educating people, creating coalitions in the private and public sector. The Committee has been a fabulous leader in making clear what needs to be done to tackle this dreadful problem. But let's keep moving forward and let's not go backwards. Let's make it possible for us to build on the progress that we have made.

I often say that there are no Democratic or Republican children, there are only American children and they have no better friends than all of you, who are part of and support the National Committee to Prevent Child Abuse. You know what is important. You know that children can win when adults choose progress over division and it is because of your leadership that we have

a lot to celebrate in our country today.

But I hope that we will not rest and we will continue to do what we have learned to prevent child abuse and to remedy the terrible effects of it when it has occurred as soon as possible so that every child has the chance to reach his or her God given promise. This is an exciting time for those of us who care about children and their welfare. Because in the last several years we've made some big strides in laying down a foundation that communities can build on.

And I believe that if we continue in a positive, productive way, taking into account both the research and the common human experience that we all share about what makes a child who has been abused break that cycle, what helps prevent that abuse from occurring in the first place then we can continue to save lives, save families, and be worthy as adults in a nation that claims to care about children and needs to translate that claim into reality for every child.