

Replicating a Success

A Register-Guard Editorial

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Round-number anniversaries are invitations to take stock of achievements. The Relief Nursery could count many of them as it celebrated 30 years in Eugene this week with an open house and a luncheon attended by Gov. Ted Kulongoski and other dignitaries. A measure of the organization's vitality, however, is that even on occasions tailored for looking back, people involved with the Relief Nursery couldn't resist looking forward. Big things lie ahead.

Among the guests at Tuesday's luncheon were five members of a delegation from Los Angeles who were visiting Eugene to find out about starting a relief nursery in their community. One of the event's speakers was A. Sidney Johnson III, a former director of Prevent Child Abuse America, the country's largest anti-child-abuse organization. Johnson began work this year as the Relief Nursery's director of national replication, and he said there's interest in duplicating Eugene's program in places ranging from Washington state to Florida.

Such replication can occur; it already has. Eight communities in Oregon, including Cottage Grove, have started relief nurseries based on Eugene's model. In-state replication is easier - the well-established original program is close at hand to offer assistance or advice, while social service agencies are familiar with the concept of a relief nursery and need little persuasion to provide cooperation and support.

National replication presents the additional challenge of adapting the relief nursery model to different political and cultural environments. But the idea can remain the same, regardless of local circumstances. The idea is to protect children from abuse by strengthening entire families.

That simple idea quickly gets complicated, because every family is different. Parents may need treatment for drug or alcohol addiction, help with mental health problems, assistance with employment, housing or transportation, or some combination of all these. Quite a few need little more than a respite from the stresses of parenthood. Children living in chaos and at risk of abuse need various types of counseling, or just a place where they feel safe. The relief nursery provides all these things and more in a comprehensive and coordinated effort to prevent child abuse.

National interest in replication is a result of the Relief Nursery's documented success. Just over half of the families that come to the Relief Nursery have case files with child welfare agencies. After one year, only 5 percent of those families generate reports of abuse or neglect. The 18-month success rate of the Relief Nursery's substance abuse programs is a phenomenal 85 percent. Families receiving Relief Nursery services remain intact - 99 percent of children in the program require no foster care.

Perhaps hardest to replicate is the Relief Nursery's strong leadership and community support. Eugene and Lane County have embraced the program, providing consistently high levels of political and financial backing. It's a self-reinforcing feedback loop - the Relief Nursery is effective because it's well supported, and it's well supported because it's effective. Starting and sustaining that virtuous cycle takes commitment and hard work.

But the benefits of a comprehensive approach to child abuse prevention should be dramatic enough to persuade other communities to get behind programs of their own. Preventing child abuse is far less costly than dealing with its disastrous social and financial consequences.

National interest in replication is a reminder that the program must not be taken for granted locally - Relief Nursery programs have a waiting list, which means opportunities to save money and improve lives are still being lost. At the next big anniversary, the Relief Nursery should not only be able to celebrate having created a national model, but being able to provide services to all who need them.