

Wyoming Children's Agenda



2007

Table of Contents

Participant List.....	3
Promises to Wyoming’s Children.....	4
Preface.....	5
Effects of Domestic Violence on Children.....	7
Funding for Quality Pre-K Programs.....	8
Internet Safety at Home.....	9
Methamphetamine Child Endangerment.....	10
Stricter Limits for Payday.....	11
The Effects of Divorce.....	12
DUI Child Endangerment.....	13
High Quality Childcare.....	14
Permanency Creates Healthy Children and Adults.....	15
Emotional Health and Well-Being.....	16
Head Start: Preventing Neglect One Family at a Time.....	17
Child Major Injury and Fatality Review.....	18
Sex Offenders Laws in Wyoming.....	19

Find the Wyoming Children’s Agenda online at Prevent Child Abuse Wyoming’s website, www.pcawyoming.org or at Wyoming Children’s Action Alliance’s website, www.wykids.org. PCA Wyoming’s website also includes a legislative advocacy section. Simply click on the “Take Action!” button located at the left-hand side of the screen to find information about upcoming bills and legislators’ contact information. For more information about legislative advocacy and a copy of PCA Wyoming’s Advocacy Guide, call 1-800-CHILDREN statewide number of 637-8622 in Cheyenne.

Direct communication to a legislator, their staff or public, expressing a view to formulate legislation or vote for a specific ballot measure, including influencing judicial and executive branch nominees is defined as lobbying. An exception is a non-partisan, advocacy communication by way of analysis, study or research that has a full and fair discussion of an issue and is broadly disseminated. Any questions regarding this information may also be directed to PCA Wyoming at 307-637-8622.

Participants

Cheyenne Meth Initiative

Citizen Review Panel

Department of Family Services

Governor's Council on Impaired Driving

Prevent Child Abuse Wyoming

Safe Kids Wyoming

UPLIFT

Wyoming Association of Elementary School Principals

Wyoming Children's Access Network

Wyoming Children's Action Alliance

Wyoming Head Start Association

The Wyoming Children's Agenda Mission Statement

The Wyoming Children's Agenda is an alliance of organizations dedicated to enhancing the well-being of all children and promoting sufficient resources and sound policies that will ensure high quality services and protection for children in Wyoming.

The Wyoming Children's Agenda exists to share information about public policy issues and decisions among children's advocacy and service organizations and to effectively communicate the needs of children in Wyoming to policy makers and the general public.

THESE ARE THE PROMISES WE MAKE
TO WYOMING'S CHILDREN

1. CHILDREN FIRST

I promise to consider children's needs and well being first and foremost in evaluating health and welfare reforms or any other state policies.

2. HEALTHY CHILDREN

I promise to ensure that all children get the basics they need to grow up healthy.

3. CAPABLE CHILDREN

I promise all children the chance to realize their potential and I expect all parents to join in the promise by becoming active parents in their children's education.

4. SAFE CHILDREN

I promise to reduce the exposure of children to violence – on children, on our streets, in our homes and on the Internet.

5. FAMILIES TOGETHER

I promise to support parents and help them understand their responsibility in parenting.

6. WORKING FAMILIES

I promise to help working families stay out of poverty.

7. FAIR CHANCE

I promise to support a family's efforts to support itself by making sure that continuing education and job training are available to people of all means.

8. VALUE YOUTH

I promise to provide young people with places to go and things to do that will help them become responsible members of our society.

9. COMMUNITY RESPONSIBILITY

I promise to do my part in our communities to support all children's healthy development.

10. LEADERSHIP ACCOUNTABILITY

I promise as an elected leader, child advocate or community leader to be accountable in safeguarding the future of Wyoming's children.

PREFACE

The typical Wyoming family is nothing like the traditional ideal of two married parents, of the same race, with two children, all living together in a three-bedroom home. This archetype usually has the father working a steady full-time job with benefits while the mother stays at home to care for the family.

The US Bureau of Labor Statistics shows us the reality that over 75% of mothers in Wyoming work. Few women now opt to become homemakers partly because few of them have a choice if they want to make ends meet. Divorce is common, as is having children out of wedlock, and single mothers are prevalent. Many single mothers are teenagers; however, encouragingly, the number of teen births in Wyoming is lower than the national average. Single fathers exist as well, although mothers are more common. Single parents, whether divorced or never married, also face poverty more often than two-parent families.

Parents working multiple jobs have also become common. The percentage of people in Wyoming with multiple jobs is significantly above the national percentage. Jobs which offer livable wages are difficult to find in Wyoming for several reasons. Employers for the most part either do not offer affordable health insurance, or they offer no insurance at all. Part-time work is much easier to find than full-time work, so to make ends meet, parents are forced to work multiple part-time jobs.

In addition, wages are generally low; minimum wage is not nearly enough to support a single adult, let alone a single parent. According to the Self-Sufficiency Standard for Wyoming, a single parent with two small children must make a minimum of \$12 an hour, or about \$25,000 annually, just to live. Minimum wage is \$5.15 an hour, or less than \$10,000 annually. These figures are all before taxes. The National Center for Children in Poverty reports that almost 40% of Wyoming children live in low-income families. Because many families cannot afford houses, they live in apartments instead. This certainly does not match the archetype of each family owning their own home.

In order for both parents to work, small children need to be placed in childcare. According to the National Child Care Information Center, in 2001, 61% of children up to age 6 received some form of child care on a regular basis. All families with small children are in need of formal childcare services, though certainly not all of them can afford it. This means that these families are either finding other people to take care of the children, such as the grandparents, or the children are being neglected. As many as 3.3 million 6- to 12-year olds nationwide are regularly left unsupervised.

The Wyoming Family Photo of 2005 reports that Wyoming's divorce rate is 30% higher than the national average. This means that not only are there going to be a lot of single parents, there will also be complicated family arrangements because of remarriages. For example, if a divorced man has a child from a previous marriage and a divorced woman a child of her own, and the man and woman marry each other, these children become step-siblings. They also garner an additional set of grandparents: the parents of their biological parents, and the parents of their step-parent. If this married couple has more children together, these children become half-siblings to the others. Situations like these are commonplace.

Families can be made increasingly complex due to interracial marriages and adoption of children of a different race from the adopting parents. Interracial marriages are rare in Wyoming, however, and less than 2% of the population describe themselves as multiracial, according to the US Census Bureau. Approximately 6% describe themselves as Hispanic. 92% of people in Wyoming are white (not multiracial). Regardless of the paucity of racial and ethnic diversity in Wyoming, interracial families are a reality which is now socially acceptable, and it is highly likely we will see increasing numbers of multiracial families in the future.

The typical Wyoming family consists of one school-age child of once-married parents who have only a high school education or at most an associate's degree. The family owns their own home; however, the parents are likely to be divorced. When divorced, the mother is almost always the person who assumes care of the child, and she has a good chance of being forced to work multiple jobs in order to support the child. She will find it particularly difficult to live due to Wyoming's high gender wage gap. These people are the best representatives of today's Wyoming families.

Following are recommendations that could positively impact these typical Wyoming families. Primary prevention is the most effective tool to creating healthier, more stable families that provide a safe and supportive environment for their children. Children need such an environment to be able to develop into productive citizens who will contribute to society using their full potential. This can be accomplished by addressing the most pressing issues that affect Wyoming families. These issues, addressed here in the Wyoming Children's Agenda, include children's Internet safety, the prevalence of domestic violence, and factors which inhibit a family's financial stability.

Effects of Domestic Violence on Children

Domestic violence is a rampant problem. According to the Family Violence Prevention Fund (FVPPF), at least 3.3 million children witness domestic violence each year. The Crimes Against Children Research Center states that 7% of children ages 10 to 16 have seen adults in their household strike each other. Children comprise at least 10% of domestic violence emergency calls.

Background:

According to the Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) Study, those who have experienced abuse or domestic violence as children are at a greater risk for health problems in adult life. These health problems range from lung disease to hepatitis to obesity. Those with emotionally traumatic experiences in childhood also have a much higher rate of smoking and alcoholism in adulthood. In Wyoming, cigarettes and alcohol often are gateway drugs to more serious substances such as methamphetamine.

The ACE Study also found that rates of serious, chronic disease in adults were directly proportional to the number and severity of traumatic childhood experiences. These experiences include familial sexual abuse, a family member who was an alcoholic or drug addict, and witnessing domestic violence. Those with 3 or more traumatic experiences were at significantly higher risks for disease than those who had none.

In light of this research, greater action must be taken to prevent domestic violence. The FVPPF recommends screening for victims in health care facilities. Health care providers can be trained to recognize the signs of violence, and can aid and encourage the victim to seek help. This is especially useful for those who are reluctant to seek help on their own. It has been shown that these screenings successfully increase the detection of victims.

In addition, FVPPF recommends the use of programs to teach children about domestic violence. Children who can identify unhealthy and violent behaviors are better positioned to seek help to insure their own safety and to make improved choices in their own lives.

Recommendations:

- Educate health care providers about the prevalence of domestic violence and the value of conducting screenings. Ensure they are able to recognize the signs and symptoms of a domestic violence victim, and that they know how to react to and deal with a potential victim.
- Support the development of violence prevention programs taught to grade school and middle school age children.

For more information contact:

Prevent Child Abuse Wyoming
Rose Kor, Executive Director, (307) 637-8622

Funding For Quality Pre-K Programs Statewide

Children come into the world eager to learn. The first five years of life are a time of enormous growth of linguistic, conceptual, social, emotional, and motor competence. Right from birth a healthy child is an active participant in that growth, exploring the environment, learning to communicate, and, in relatively short order, beginning to construct ideas and theories about how things work in the surrounding world. Research has shown high-quality pre-k programs dramatically affect later achievement, high school graduation and college attendance, employment and earnings, crime and delinquency, health behaviors like smoking and drug use, even marriage rates. How we educate the nation's children will have important consequences not only for businesses, but also for the country's ability to compete in a global market.

Background:

Wyoming is one of only 10 states nationally that still does not offer state-funded pre-k programs. The financial windfall that Wyoming has enjoyed has inspired many elaborate new educational budgetary proposals but none includes building children's futures through high-quality pre-k. The cost of such a program would be a fraction of available funds but would pay dividends for decades to come. Wyoming is a partner in a pre-k wilderness where it is estimated 12,600 Wyoming students have been left behind due to neglect. Research has consistently shown that high-quality pre-k reduces the number of special education placements. Such findings serve to underscore the urgent need for pre-k in Wyoming.

Wyoming Governor Dave Freudenthal has discussed pre-k extensively in his state of the state address, noting that early childhood education was "the top priority recommendation" of a two-year study by "citizens, legislative committees, and professionals in the field," and arguing that "if we do nothing, our grandchildren will live in a society of neglected children and struggling families."

With these remarks, the governor continues his long-running efforts to persuade a resistant legislature of the importance of pre-k and to secure support for a modest early education system.

Pre-k is not a luxury. High-quality pre-k significantly improves the ability of children to thrive in school and later in life. The achievement gap will not be closed until all children have the opportunity to come to kindergarten prepared to succeed. The numerous social benefits from pre-k are well documented, and the public supports the effort to ensure that all our children have access to these critical educational services.

Policy Recommendations:

- Fund a state-wide high quality pre-k program that will ensure that all Wyoming children will be prepared for school and life.

For more information contact:

Wyoming Association of Elementary School Principals
Walter Wragge, Executive Director, (307) 674-8821
David Olsen, WAESP Legislative Coordinator, (307) 686-1778

Internet Safety at Home

According to National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, child pornography is one of the fastest-growing Internet businesses. Internet technology makes it easily accessible, even to those who are not searching for it. Some of this material contains graphic sexual violence. The children in these images are sometimes victims of online offenders. Online sexual harassment of minors is common. Research suggests that 1 in 7 children aged 10 to 17 are harassed online within a 1-year time frame.

Background:

In 2005, the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention conducted an Internet safety survey of youth ages 10 to 17. The survey showed that online offenders have harassed 4% of youth with phone calls, gifts in the mail, and/or attempts to meet offline. Almost all of harassments were from strangers. 80% of harassment incidents occurred while at home. Only 5% of all incidents were reported. Most of these reports were made to Internet service providers rather than law enforcement. The survey also showed that a quarter of youth were very or extremely upset by the harassment, some with serious symptoms such as intrusive thoughts and physical discomfort.

Unwanted exposure to sexual material is also a problem. More than a third of youth are exposed to pornography they were not expecting. This occurs in spite of the increased use of blocking or filtering software. About 25% of youth described themselves as very or extremely upset after the exposure to pornography.

In addition, 22% of teenagers have never discussed Internet safety with their parents. Almost half of harassment incidents or instances of unwanted exposure to sexual material were not told to parents. Children whose parents did discuss Internet safety with them were more likely to tell their parents about harassment incidents.

Research from the University of New Hampshire shows that children can learn and benefit from preventive programs that teach Internet safety. Children who have had Internet safety training are less likely to give out personal information or to post pictures of themselves online. They are more likely to tell their parents if they are harassed or exposed to unwanted sexual material.

Recommendations:

- Encourage the use of preventive programs, such as NetSmartz.org, to teach Internet safety to grade school and middle school students.
- Educate parents about helpful resources to report Internet offenses like CyberTipline, as well as the Investigation of Internet Crimes Against Children Task Force at the Division of Criminal Investigation, and the Wyoming Department of Family Services.

For more information contact:

Prevent Child Abuse Wyoming
Rose Kor, Executive Director, (307) 637-8622

Methamphetamine Child Endangerment

Background:

Methamphetamine drug use has risen in Wyoming over the last decade and its effect on families is devastating. The use and production of meth has become Wyoming's "rural scourge". Meth is highly addictive and can be snorted, injected, smoked or swallowed. It can be made at home. Manufacturing meth exposes people to toxic and explosive chemicals with users showing signs of extreme violence, psychosis and a withdrawal period where users may sleep for 24 hours. Parents abusing meth often don't supervise their children, fail to provide them food or care, create dangerous home conditions often accompanied by domestic violence or other abuse.

Not only does meth impact our families, but meth burdens our law enforcement services, healthcare providers, and overwhelms our correctional systems. City officials in Casper have estimated 80% of their arrests are meth related and in the first nine months of 2005, Cheyenne officials have estimated 50% of their drug arrests were meth related. However, we cannot arrest ourselves out of the meth problem. Parents that become incarcerated cause stress on foster care systems and on the children themselves due to absence. Children of parents who are incarcerated as a result of meth often end up in the foster care system, live with their grandparents, or other extended family adding to the strain on other social services.

The drug court system has been proven to be a successful alternative to incarceration with offenders being reunited with their children, paying restitution, and becoming productive members of our communities. Continued use of the drug court system with a co-occurring treatment program has been deemed successful by the Bureau of Justice Assistance. The Bureau of Justice Assistance states that early intervention and access to quality continuum of care based treatment is the most effective way to successfully treat meth addicts and keep them from re-offending. Availability of these services is needed to treat meth addicts successfully and maintain them safely with their families.

Policy Recommendations:

- Support methamphetamine awareness and education programs for all ages, in all socio-economic arenas.
- Support child abuse prevention programs.
- Support increasing number of drug treatment programs which includes sustainable funding.
- Increase funding for environmental quality inspections and safety awareness issues concerning methamphetamine lab sites and methamphetamine exposed homes.

For more information contact:

The Cheyenne Meth Initiative
Sharon Cashman, Treasurer, (307) 634-6667

Stricter Limits for Payday Loans

Payday loans are a major problem in Wyoming and across the country. In Cheyenne alone, at least 12 stores exist which offer such loans. Lenders of payday loans prey on low-income families, as well as those uneducated about finances, who are looking for quick money to pay off bills or sudden expenses. The speed of acquiring the loan is an important selling point, as people in need are attracted to quick cash. It is common for low-income families to be unable to pay back the loan immediately, as they often live from paycheck to paycheck. Families may find themselves in a financial crisis due to the crushing fees of an overdue loan payment, fees which accrue and can eventually surpass the amount of the loan itself.

Background:

It is vital that low-income families are able to receive financial education to prevent financial crises with payday loans. According to the Annie E. Casey Foundation, “If families are not financially stable, with the basic financial knowledge to help in making wise decisions, they may be vulnerable to predatory practices and the long-term consequences of poor choices.” Families need to learn to develop savings funds so they will not have to rely on payday loans if an emergency arises. Emergencies may prompt families to seek quick cash from payday lenders, but if they had savings funds available, they would not resort to this risky option.

Banks and credit unions must be able to compete and offer comparable, reasonably priced alternatives to these loans. The aim of these alternatives should be to help bring the borrower out of debt, and encourage them to gradually build a savings account. Banks in other parts of the country have successfully created profitable alternatives such as stretch plans and other small short-term loans which are relatively easy to obtain, and allow the borrowers enough time to pay back what they owe. Many banks require families to create and adhere to a savings plan to obtain the loan. These mandatory savings plans have proven useful in helping families attain financial security.

Banks can affordably provide these alternatives because they do not rely solely on them for a source of income, unlike payday lenders. Also, since banks and credit unions already have an established customer base, advertising for the alternative loans is easy.

Recommendations:

- Support legislation to set stricter limits on payday loans, including setting the maximum finance charge at 15%, as well as setting a maximum fee and maximum amount of the loan.
- Ensure that financial education programs are available and accessible to low-income families, especially those with severe credit problems. These programs should encourage families to save money to help prevent financial crises.
- Ensure that banks and credit unions offer competitive alternatives which will discourage families from seeking payday loans.

For more information contact:

Wyoming Children’s Action Alliance
Deanna Frey, Executive Director (307) 635-2272

The Effects of Divorce

According to data obtained from the 2000 Wyoming Vital Statistics Report and Wyoming District Courts – 2002 Caseload Statistics, the state of Wyoming’s divorce rate is **50% higher than the national average**; the national average is that close to 50% of all marriages end in divorce. In one year alone 4% of the Wyoming population under the age of 18 is directly impacted by the divorce of their parents.

Background:

Currently the Wyoming statute that discusses education for parents seeking a divorce or annulment states “at any time the court may require parents to attend appropriate parenting classes, including but not limited to, parenting classes to lessen the effects of divorce on children.” (W.S.20-2-201 (f)) This statute lays out a system of statewide **discretionary** attendance, meaning that it is the prerogative of individual judges as to whether they will mandate attendance at a parental education seminar for parents seeking divorce in their district. It is in the best interests of the children of divorce that the language of this statute be strengthened to provide necessary judiciary guidance, develop minimum standards for providers, and make parent education **mandatory** throughout the state.

Many benefits have been correlated with the attendance of parent education seminars. Research supports that parent education leads to a reduction in litigated and re-litigated custody and visitation problems, more regular child support payments, a reduction of situations of abuse or neglect, an increase in access for the non-custodial parent, as well as increased financial self-sufficiency on the part of the parents. Parent education for the divorced and separating population results in children who are significantly more confident, responsible, competent, and emotionally stable.

Policy changes have been attempted in the past. HB 0177 was introduced in 2004, amended in 2005, and passed by the house in 2005 as HB 0196. HB 0196 was then passed to the senate and died in committee as of March 3, 2005. Had HB 0196 become law it would have changed the text of the existing Wyoming statute. Rather than providing for statewide discretionary attendance, HB 0196 would have provided for statewide mandatory attendance. The bill would also provide for a set of minimum standards for parent education. The standards proposed would cover developmental stages of children, adjustment of children to parental separation, negative effects of access, denial, domestic violence, options for dispute resolution and conflict management, financial responsibilities, cooperative parenting strategies when this approach is appropriate and other approaches as substitutes, custody and parenting time, long distance parenting, resources available in the community to obtain additional services, and basic information regarding domestic relations court procedures.

Recommendations:

- Support legislation that would make parent education **mandatory** for all parents seeking a divorce in the state of Wyoming, additionally establishing minimum standards governing parent education service providers.

For more information contact:
Wyoming Children’s Access Network
Cori Erickson, CEO (307) 674-5595

DUI Child Endangerment

In 1994, the US Congress passed the Drunk Driving Child Protection Act, enhancing the penalties, in federal jurisdiction areas, on an impaired driving conviction if a child was present in the vehicle. Most states have penalty enhancements to their impaired driving laws when a child is present, however, Wyoming does not.

Driving impaired with a child in the vehicle is not a clearly recognized form of child endangerment in the state of Wyoming. Wyoming should enhance our DUI statute to include the crime of child endangerment.

Background:

- In the spring of 2000, the Centers for Disease Control completed two 11-year studies of child fatalities involving impaired drivers, concluding that 68 percent of children killed in alcohol-related crashes were in the car with a drinking driver.
- As the alcohol concentration of the drinking driver increased, the use of appropriate child restraints or seat belts declined.
- Wyoming statistics parallel this national trend. In the last 10 years, 15 children died in crashes involving alcohol: 80% of the children were in the vehicle with the driving driver, and only two of the children were properly secured in a child safety seat or seat belt.
- Current Wyoming statutes are fragmented - with child endangerment in one section and impaired driving offenses in another – making DUI Child Endangerment cases difficult to prosecute. The state must prove intent and overcome the defense that the act was accidental. This additional burden frequently causes child endangerment cases to be dismissed during pre-trial negotiations. In addition, enforcement of these two-part laws is inconsistent across the state.

Recommendations:

An enhanced penalty in our DUI statute for driving impaired with a child in the vehicle would remove a problematic separation in our laws. The Governor's Council on Impaired Driving recommends the following:

- Place an enhanced penalty in Wyoming DUI Statutes, adding a separate sentencing section for any person 18 years of age or older who operates a vehicle in violation of these laws with a child present.
- Define a child as a passenger under the age of 16 years old.
- Categorize any second offense for a violation of DUI Child Endangerment as a felony.
- Report any charge of DUI Child Endangerment to the Department of Family Services which must then investigate the charge in the same manner as any other child abuse or neglect case.

For information contact:

Lorrie Pozarik, Governor's Council on Impaired Driving (307) 332-2821
Stephanie Heitsch, Safe Kids Wyoming (307) 633-7525

High-Quality Child Care Programs

High quality child care and educational development programs prepare children for success in school, work and life. A system must be put into place that improves the availability, affordability and accessibility of high quality child care programs for every child and family in Wyoming.

Background:

Wyoming has great interest in the academic success of children in the public school system. We are spending nearly one billion dollars a year to support the success of that system. We are also paying the high costs for the failure of that system in high drop-out rates, special, remedial and alternative education, juvenile crime, and in the inability of too many adults to be successful in their personal and professional lives.

Now is the time to give thoughtful consideration for improving the rate of return on our huge investment in public education. The most logical way to improve the rate of return on this investment in public education is to make certain that children are prepared emotionally, developmentally and socially to succeed when they enter kindergarten.

Research tells us that early childhood is the most cost-effective time to intervene with children by providing high-quality child care programs. High quality child care programs simulate brain architecture to lay a strong foundation for a child's future successes in school, work and life.

For Wyoming's children to reach their full potential, they must have access to a system that provides available, affordable and accessible high-quality child care and development programs. Key components of this system would include:

- Quality Rating System (QRS) to assess the quality of child care programs.
- Quality incentive payments to programs that demonstrate higher levels of quality to ensure their availability to all children.
- Professional development systems for quality child care staff that includes scholarships for higher education and incentive payments to reduce staff turnover and encourage higher educational standards.
- Technical assistance and grants to improve the quality of programs and increase the availability of service for infants and other hard to serve populations.
- Comprehensive parent education on quality child care and the importance of the child's first years.

The future of Wyoming depends upon how we educate our children today. Quality child care programs would give every child the opportunity to succeed in school, work and life.

Policy Recommendations:

- Fund a state-wide high quality child care system that would prepare young children to succeed in school, work, and life

For more information contact:

Wyoming Children's Action Alliance
Deanna Frey, Executive Director, (307) 635-2272

Permanency Creates Healthy Children and Adults

Procedures adopted in 2000 by the U.S. Department of Health & Human Services (DHHS) established new criteria and evaluation procedures to help states, the District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico do a better job caring for and protecting our nation's children. Called Child & Family Services Reviews (CFSR), the first round began in 2001 and was completed in 2004. A second round is due to begin soon.

There are two parts to the review: **Outcomes** and **Systemic Factors**. **Outcomes** indicate how well states are doing in meeting goals of safety, permanency, and well-being. CFSR auditors look at case files and talk to stakeholders, identifying strengths and weaknesses. **Systemic Factors** are the mechanisms in place to support the best outcomes - things like information systems, staff training, quality assurance, and recruitment of foster and adoptive parents.

The goal for a state is to be in "substantial compliance" with standards for each area. "Substantial compliance" means that in 95% of the cases reviewed, these outcomes must be rated "substantially achieved," plus the statewide data indicators must meet the national standards.

Permanency concerns for Wyoming's Child Welfare System follow the Service Review Items:

Permanency Outcome 1: Children have permanency and stability in their living situations.

Performance indicators: Decrease foster care re-entries, stability of foster care placement, length of time to achieve permanency goal of reunification, guardianship, other permanent relationship, length of time to achieve permanency goal of adoption including independent living services, achievement of adoption, permanency goal of other planned permanent living arrangement

Permanency Outcome 2: The continuity of family relationships and connections is preserved for children. Performance indicators: Proximity of foster care placement including placement with siblings, visiting with parents and siblings in foster care, preserving connections, relative placement, relationship of child in care with parents.

When children live in a permanent home they can devote their time and attention to the business of growing, exploring, and building skills and capacities they will need for a successful life. This is important for all Wyoming children and informs our policy.

We urge all Wyoming citizens and especially policymakers to take into consideration the permanency needs of a child when decisions are being made about the care of a child. For children, a day can be a lifetime.

Source: <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cb/publications/procman/appendi.doc>

For information contact:
Marilyn Patton, Protective Services Division (307) 777-7071

Emotional Health and Well-Being

In the recent report from the President's New Freedom Commission on Mental Health, emphasis was given to the promotion of mental health in young children, early screening, assessment, and intervention, along with family driven services (July 2003). This report also indicated that emotional problems in children are as high as 20% in some areas. The consequences of not addressing these problems include poor academic achievement, failure to complete high school, substance abuse, involvement with the correctional system, lack of vocational success, inability to live independently, health problems, and suicide. Children with emotional problems are often involved with more than one service system, including mental health, special education, child welfare, juvenile justice, substance abuse, and health; but no agency or system is responsible or accountable for them.

Background:

Young children who grow up in families with limited income face potential exposure to multiple environmental and biological risk factors, which in turn put them at risk for poor outcomes at home, school, and in the community. Research has shown that children who display risk factors for developing emotional disorders are also at increased risk of developing substance abuse, violent tendencies, and delinquent behavior (Jessor & Jessor, 1977). Risk factors are the influences that increase the probability of onset, digression to a more serious state, or maintenance of a problem condition (Kirby & Fraser, 1997). The greater the number of risk factors present in one's life the less their chances of developing into competent adults. Examples of risk factors include: poverty, neglect, abuse, poor parenting, limited opportunities for education and employment, racial discrimination, biomedical problems, and parental psychopathology.

Families possess a wealth of knowledge about the needs of their children. Some family members also contribute to the severity of these needs, however, many families can be equipped and empowered to participate as change agents for their families through effective parent training, mentoring and support. Research has shown, that services are most effective when they are family driven, youth guided, culturally and linguistically competent, and community-based.

Policy Recommendations:

- Support an integrated system of care that is child-centered, family-focused, strengths-based, and community-based.
- Support community-based family support and education programs for at-risk families.
- Support continuation of early intervention for young children at risk of emotional disorders.

For more information contact:
Peggy Nikkel, Executive Director
UPLIFT, (307) 232-8944

HEAD START: Preventing Neglect One Family at a Time

Neglect is the most common form of child maltreatment reported to Child Protective Services. Over 60% of all reported cases of child abuse are classified as neglect. In addition, over 37% of fatalities related to child maltreatment are attributed to neglect. Neglect can include inadequate clothing, food, or hygiene, abandonment, a reckless regard for child's safety, inadequate supervision, refusal or delaying needed health care, ignoring special education needs, allowing chronic truancy or absenteeism, a failure to meet emotional needs, chronic domestic violence, and permitted drug/alcohol abuse or maladaptive behavior by the child. Although both child abuse and neglect can cause serious physical injury, emotional harm, and even death...neglect is what a parent/guardian does not do, rather than what he or she does.

Background:

Poverty is one of the major risk factors for neglect. Not because a family is poor, but because they are often under chronic stress from life crises, a chaotic home, single parenting, and the lack of social supports. Neglectful families are often isolated from neighbors and the broader community. They tend to participate less in community organizations and make less use of available economic, health, and social services. Head Start is a comprehensive child development program that serves low-income children and families. Mandated to serve the "neediest of the needy", Head Start provides many supports and primary interventions to families at risk for child abuse and neglect, including:

- Increasing parents' understanding of child development
- Enhancing attachment and communication
- Increasing parents' skills in coping with stress, parenting, and life issues
- Reducing the burden of childcare
- Improving access to social and healthcare services for at-risk families
- Providing education and resources on substance and alcohol abuse
- Increasing the connection between families to provide support and friendship
- Enhancing parents job skills

Through these interventions and program supports such as home visits, mental health services, and dynamic family partnership agreements, Head Start helps decrease the likelihood of a reoccurrence of child abuse and neglect.

Policy Recommendations:

- Support full funding of Head Start programs. In the State of Wyoming, programs currently serve 2% of eligible Early Head Start families and 45% of Head Start families.
- Support Head Start funding to keep up with inflation so programs can attract and retain experienced, high quality staff members to provide ongoing services for at-risk children and their families.

Early recognition and intervention during pregnancy and a child's earliest years can prevent escalation or worsening of a neglectful environment, can lead to needed supports and human services, and may prevent the long-term negative outcomes associated with prolonged neglect.

For more information contact:

Kay Gogol, Wyoming Head Start Association President (307) 883-4116
Lauren Nordeen, President-Elect, Wyoming Head Start Association (307) 836-2751

Child Major Injury and Fatality Review

Mountains of data are collected annually about children in Wyoming. We know how many are born, get immunizations, go to school, get driver's licenses and are identified as abuse or neglected. In some areas, despite the fact that we collect information, as a collective community we do not manage it in a useful way.

Background:

Wyoming continues to struggle to do a comprehensive review of the major injuries and deaths in children. Information is being gathered and some is being reviewed but not in a coordinated and comprehensive manner. The Wyoming Department of Transportation has great depth of information on child injuries and deaths in motor vehicles. The Wyoming Department of Health has information on diseases and some injuries which hurt or kill children and all deaths. The Child Major Injury and Fatality Review Committee hosted by the Department of Family Services reviews some major injuries and fatalities when children are in the custody of the department.

There is no broad integration of this information about injuries and deaths of Wyoming children across injury types and agencies including county offices such as coroners. It is truly difficult to have a comprehensive picture of what forces injure and kill children in Wyoming without such an overarching conversation.

The Wyoming Child Major Injury and Fatality Review Team has sought to develop this type of overarching review and conversation for a number of years without success. True work to prevent injuries and deaths cannot be undertaken until the until all state agencies which track data and all local agencies involved in reporting injuries deaths including hospitals, coroners and local DFS offices participate fully.

Wyoming has the unhealthy distinction of ranking seventh in the nation for per capita child abuse deaths. The Child Major Injury and Fatality Review Team can only review the deaths of children in DFS custody. More than half of the children thought to die of child abuse are in state custody at the time of their deaths. What could we be doing to see that the remainder of those children escapes injury or death? What situations lead up to those injuries and death? What could we do to intervene before a child is harmed? Are there other injuries or situations that pose particular threats to the well being of our children?

Recommendations:

- Recognize the need for a comprehensive review of medical, injury and death data to construct a comprehensive picture of why children in Wyoming die before reaching adulthood.
- Empower the Child Major Injury and Fatality Review Committee to review existing data kept by state agencies other than the Department of Family Services.

For more information contact:
Kelly Hamilton, Executive Director
Citizen Review Panel (307) 632-0032

Sex Offender Laws in Wyoming

In Wyoming, a sex offender serves a *minimum* five-year sentence. A person guilty of incest serves only a *maximum* five-year sentence. Those convicted of sexual assault with at least two prior convictions are sentenced to life imprisonment. Although not quite as lax and permissive as that of Arkansas, which states simply, “Habitual offenders may be sentenced to extended terms of imprisonment,” Wyoming law still requires three victimizations to occur before the offender is finally confined safely away from society – three known incidents of a person suffering through sexual assault.

Background:

Victims of sexual violence and abuse experience chronic physical consequences. Frequent migraine headaches, gastrointestinal problems, unwanted pregnancies, and sexually transmitted diseases are a few of the potential physical consequences. These victims are not just sexually or physically assaulted, however; they are also psychologically and emotionally assaulted. They may suffer severe long-term psychological consequences, such as depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, eating disorders, and attempted suicide. They may endure feelings of guilt, worthlessness, fear, distrust of others, and alienation. In order to cope with these difficult emotions, they may turn to alcohol, drugs, or self-mutilation for relief. The trauma of being violated, degraded, and dehumanized remains with them for years, or even the duration of their lives. Many of these individuals were children at the time of the sexual violation.

Incest is a particularly damaging form of sexual assault because it is committed by people whom the victim lives with and trusts. An intense fear of upsetting family function can prevent the victim from disclosing the abuse, and keeping the abuse a secret creates a sense of profound isolation and helplessness. Victims of incest usually have no one they feel they can safely confide in. As adults, victims may have difficulty forming strong intimate relationships, due to their continuing feelings of low self-esteem, betrayal, distrust, and unhealthy attitudes toward sex. Repressed memories of traumatic abuse may return in flashbacks, which can be confusing and distressing. In severe cases where abuse is chronic, they may develop dissociative identity disorder.

The rate of recidivism for sex offenders in Wyoming is only about 5%, one of the lowest rates in the nation, although this is likely not a reliable estimation. It is highly probable that this rate is low because some who re-offend are simply not caught again, especially considering what we know about the underreporting of sex crimes. However, it is also possible that some offenders benefit from their incarceration and/or treatment, and commit no further sex crimes upon release. Assuming this is true, the current law regarding first-time offenders appears appropriate. These offenders should be given the opportunity to reform if they have the potential to do so.

If a sex offender, after receiving treatment, is released but then recidivates, it seems unlikely that further treatment will be efficacious. By their second offense, they have established a pattern of criminal behavior, and proven that treatment has had no effect. Therefore, in order to prevent others from suffering the horrors of a sexual assault, the law should be changed to a life sentence after the second, rather than the third, conviction. These offenses are serious and traumatic to victims; the penalties should be equally serious.

Perpetrators of incest especially need stiffer punishment. A maximum sentence of five years is not severe enough for someone who may have caused a person, or in most cases multiple people, a lifetime of emotional anguish. Such a lenient sentence suggests that this crime is somehow less serious than other sex offenses. Five years, in most instances, does not even allow time for the victim to reach age eighteen, so the abuse could continue when the perpetrator is released. A minimum prison sentence needs to be established that will allow victims time to live out the remainder of their childhoods free of abuse, and to understand and cope with what happened to them. Ten to fifteen years minimum would be a more appropriate sentence for those guilty of incest.

Many factors are taken into consideration to determine an offender's level of risk. Criminal history, personality traits (such as degree of self-control, sense of responsibility for one's actions, and antisocial tendencies), and environmental factors (such as access to victims and amount of negative peer influence) all contribute to the estimation of risk level. Other factors, such as strength of deviant sexual preferences, have been correlated to recidivism. Psychologists weigh all of these factors to determine a risk level.

According to the Association for the Treatment of Sexual Abusers, the general accuracy of predictions is only slightly above the rate of pure chance. Social scientists have been questioning the reliability of risk assessments for decades. Regardless of the predetermined risk factor, these people have all committed an *aggravated* offense.

In Wyoming, all inmates receive testing when they enter the prisons, to determine their education level, mental health, etc. Based on this evaluation, they are recommended for treatment programming. Participation in these programs is entirely the decision of the inmate. Sex offenders receive some treatment from case workers, who work with all the inmates and who are not necessarily specially trained to work with sex offenders. Offenders also receive therapy from licensed counselors from Prison Health Services, who serve the medical and mental health needs of all inmates. Treatment has been shown to slightly reduce recidivism rates, and Wyoming already has one of the lowest rates of sex offender recidivism in the nation. Offenders who complete treatment programs are at a lower risk for re-offending than those who drop out.

One problem with this system is that many offenders do not participate in the programs unless legally mandated to do so. Studies from the Association for the Treatment of Sexual Abusers show that offenders who are more willing to participate benefit the most from treatment programs. If treatment cannot be made mandatory, offenders should be rewarded for participation as encouragement and to make them more receptive to receiving treatment.

Currently, the only incentive for Wyoming inmates is that participation in a treatment program makes them eligible for parole. This is not an effective incentive for those with shorter prison sentences, who often prefer to simply serve out the sentence than go through the hassle of a treatment program. These people are not getting the help they need and may therefore be at a higher risk for recidivism. Stronger incentives and rewards should be considered to ensure that as many offenders as possible receive treatment.

Recommendations:

- Support legislation that increases the penalty for incest to that of other types of rape.
- Support action to provide state-of-art treatment for first-time sex offenders.

- Recognize that a second sex offense is one offense too many.
- Support public information programs like that of Stop It Now to increase the knowledge of parents and families about childhood sexual abuse and what they can do to be proactive in preventing it.

For more information contact:

The Board of Directors, Prevent Child Abuse Wyoming
Rose Kor, Executive Director, (307) 637-8622