Smith introduces Safe Babies Act for foster care children

by Bend_Weekly_News_Sources

In an effort to protect infants and toddlers in foster care, Senator Gordon Smith (R-OR) has introduced the Safe Babies Act of 2007. Specifically, the legislation builds upon the innovative work being conducted in juvenile courts around the country, including Oregon. The bill authorizes funding for juvenile courts to create â€œCourt Teamsâ€• for the integrated handling of infant and toddler abuse and neglect cases in the foster care system.

â€œIn our nation, millions of children are reported abused or neglected each year,â€• said Senator Smith. â€œOf these, more than 900,000 are confirmed maltreated by child protective service organizations and our court systems. These staggering statistics tell us that children who come through our nationâ€™s court systems need more support. While the hardworking judges, attorneys, child welfare workers and volunteers do so much to help stop the child abuse and neglect they see every day, they too often see families returning to the courts generation after generation. The Safe Babies Act will help protect the most vulnerable children. This bill puts into motion a proven model for helping infants and toddlers to recover from their abuse, and for families to stop the cycle of abuse and reunite.â€•

â€œAs a nation we must improve outcomes for infants and toddlers in the child welfare system,â€• said Marion County Circuit Court Judge, Pamela Abernethy. â€œAs a juvenile judge, I see how early trauma and disrupted relationships can put kids on a trajectory of failure for life."

The Court Teams work by bringing together a juvenile court judge with a community based team of child welfare, health and mental health professionals, and child advocates and development specialists. The Court Team works to enhance and coordinate services for these children and their families by screening infants and toddlers for developmental delays and chronic health problems, and by engaging in an intensive approach to parent/child intervention with the goal of allowing children to live safely with their parents and reducing the number of very young children in foster care.

The legislation would support the replication of programs like the "Fostering Attachment Treatment Court" in Marion County. The Fostering Attachment program is a partnership between Salem's Relief Nursery, "Family Building Blocks," Judge Pamela Abernethy's dependency court, Department of Human Services, child welfare, Valley Mental Health and Bridgeway/Cascadia Drug and Alcohol treatment. The program serves infants, toddlers and preschoolers whose parents have been addicted to methamphetamine.

Children between birth and age three are twice as likely as older children to become victims of maltreatment, and are three times more likely to be placed in foster care. Despite high rates of involvement, the current child welfare system does a particularly poor job of serving infants and toddlers. As many as 42 percent of infants and toddlers involved in a maltreatment investigation are developmentally delayed, yet less than one in ten currently receives treatment for developmental problems.

From birth to age five, children develop their social, emotional, cognitive and moral capacities more rapidly than at any other time in life. These early relationships and experiences are pivotal for future development and set the stage for how well individuals learn, think, control their emotions and relate to others.

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