

Kids belong at top of list of priorities

RUTH C. WHITE

Guest columnist

My heart goes out to the dedicated women and men who confront daily the heartbreaking stories of abuse and neglect. They rarely get the respect or support of our community that they deserve.

We live in a society that gives lip service to "family values." There is very little policy and/or program support for families before or after abuse or neglect occurs. Families have limited access to high-quality child care, substance abuse services, parenting classes, respite care or mental health services.

People seem much more willing to intervene if they see someone being cruel to an animal than being cruel to a child because we still have the lingering perception that a child "belongs" to a parent who can do with them as they see fit.

On the same day that the Post-Intelligencer featured Child Protective Services ("Judgment calls: When to remove a child," April 28) on the front page, the Seattle and the Northwest section displayed a story about the legislative move to make animal neglect a felony. Next to that article was a list of resources to report animal neglect and cruelty and yet there was no corresponding list

For the child welfare situation to improve, we must walk the talk of family values by putting our money where our mouth is.

for the neglect or cruelty to children attached to the cover story. What does this say about society's priorities?

A crucial factor implicated in some of our failed attempts to protect children from often well-meaning but ill-equipped parents is the limited training and expertise of the people we ask to do this job. Unlike psychologists and many other mental health professionals, social workers do not have title protection in the state of Washington.

What that means is that people with bachelor's degrees in anthropology or sociology can be hired as "social workers" to do the complex and demanding work that is child welfare. Although they may be smart and compassionate, these uncredentialed social workers who have not graduated from accredited schools of social work do not have the skills and training required to provide the assessment and intervention that troubled children and families need.

A formal education at an accredited un-

dergraduate or graduate-level program in social work requires coursework in child development, human behavior, assessment, addiction, social welfare policy and systems and more than 400 hours of an internship supervised by someone with a master's degree in social work.

The skills and knowledge gained through such an education may not prevent parents from abusing or neglecting their children, but they go a long way to making sound clinical judgments and developing appropriate interventions and prevention strategies at the individual, family, community and policy levels, which reduce the likelihood of continued abuse or neglect.

For the child welfare situation in King County, Washington or the United States to improve, we must walk the talk of family values by putting our money where our mouth is. Supportive policy and services must be expanded. Yet policy-makers and administrators are currently seeking ways to cut social services budgets. As a "civilized" society, we must ask ourselves: What is the value of a child? How does it compare with one more trip to Mars or circumventing Saturn?

Ruth C. White, Ph.D., is director/assistant professor of the social work program in the Department of Society, Justice & Culture at Seattle University.