



*Hundreds of Police Chiefs, Sheriffs,
Prosecutors, other Law Enforcement
Leaders, and Violence Survivors
Preventing Crime and Violence*

Testimony

2014 Joint Legislative Hearing

Human Services Committee

**John Grebert, Chief (Ret.), Colonie Police Department, and
Executive Director, NYS Association of Chiefs of Police**

Melanie Blow, Board Member, Prevent Child Abuse New York

February 4, 2014

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Thank you, Members of the Committee, for giving us the opportunity to testify today.

I am a member of Fight Crime: Invest in Kids, an organization of more than 260 police chiefs, sheriffs, district attorneys and crime survivors across the state who support proven investments in children.

I am here to speak with you about how, as a leader in law enforcement, I know that investing in home visiting can not only reduce child abuse, but prevent crime in New York State.

Nothing can fully prepare a law enforcement officer to walk into a home where child abuse has taken place. The terrible experience of removing children from their homes is one reason we members of Fight Crime: Invest in Kids are so committed to addressing child abuse or neglect *before* children are hurt. Over 77,000 New York children were victims of abuse or neglect in 2010, over 200 children every day, and at least 114 New York children

die as a result of that abuse or neglect. The true numbers are likely much higher because many cases of abuse and neglect are not reported.

In addition to protecting children, law enforcement leaders want to prevent abuse and neglect because it's a powerful crime prevention strategy. Researchers have found that maltreatment contributes to future crime. While most survivors of childhood abuse and neglect never become criminals, research shows that an estimated 3,000 victims of abuse and neglect in 2010 will later become violent criminals who otherwise would have avoided such crimes if not for the abuse and neglect they endured as children.

Evidence-based home visiting programs for families and infants and young children, like Healthy Families New York, can decrease abuse and neglect and reduce future crime. The research tells us this. Home visiting optimizes early development to give kids the right start in life. Investing early in a child's life is also just fiscally smart. You either pay now, or you pay a lot more later. We currently spend \$2.8 billion a year incarcerating about 66,000 people. A strong sustained investment in home visiting programs, like Healthy Families New York, could help.

We know that the most powerful weapons we have against crime, violence and abuse are the proven programs that help kids get a good start in life. Healthy Families New York is one of those high quality programs. If New York invests wisely in what works, fewer of our officers and deputies will find themselves carrying children away from abusive or neglectful homes, and fewer New Yorkers will become the victims of violence in the future.

Fight Crime: Invest in Kids asks that New York State restore funding in the amount \$3.5 million this year, instead of once again flat-funding since 2008.

Melanie Blow, a board member of Prevent Child Abuse NY, will share with you what this flat-funding has meant to this program statewide.

Thank you, John, and thank you, Members of the Committee.

I want to go into a little more detail about why preventing child abuse is so important. You've already heard some numbers and statistics about how expensive child abuse is.

When I was seven years old, the thing I was most grateful for was that my father hadn't yet killed me. When I was fourteen, what I was most grateful for was that neither my father nor my uncle had impregnated me. When I was sixteen, and figured out that my mother was going to let three years of sexual abuse become five years of sexual abuse, I was grateful for very little. At seventeen, I really regretted not following through on all the times I wanted to kill myself two, three, four years ago. And at eighteen, I experienced no joy at being free. I wasn't prepared for it. I knew how to survive child abuse. That was really all I knew, and that's an absolutely useless skill.

I was born the year the first model home visitation programs, the programs upon which Healthy Families New York and Nurse Family Partnership are built, were established. If

New York had been as progressive and compassionate as we claim to be, we would have made these programs available to all qualifying families. We would have poured money into improving these programs and coming up with other primary prevention programs, which is what the Child and Family Trust Fund does. That would mean child abuse survivors younger than me would be very, very rare in this state. They're not. We've had the option of becoming a state where abuse fatalities are unheard of, not one where I have to ask people which headline they're referring to when they say, "Did you hear about the little kid who was killed?"

For the last 36 years, New York has had the option of becoming a state where child abuse, and the mental illness, crime, addiction, premature death and poverty that accompany it, is rare. We choose not to become that state, every year.

Instead we flat-fund the programs. With funds able to pay for less and less each year, it's become harder and harder to help families. Some workers were laid off, others left for better paying - or less stressful - jobs. Workers must build relationships with the parents they serve, so families tend to drop out when their assigned worker quits. New workers become harder and harder to find. Slowly but surely, the program's ability to serve children unravels.

These programs that can spare so many children so much harm - and that can spare the rest of our state so much expense - reach fewer people because of flat-funding, when they desperately need to reach more. We are asking for a \$3.5 million increase to \$26.8 million,

to restore Healthy Families New York to its 2008 functional level. This is a very humble ask indeed.

Prevent Child Abuse New York has tried to convince NY's lawmakers that preventing child abuse is important for years. Perhaps it seems to you that only the advocates are saying it. But I've done some research this year.

I've met the grandmother of a little boy, murdered by his caretaker while CPS was investigating allegations of abuse. She says preventing child abuse is important.

I've gotten to know a mother who kidnapped her daughter, because all the legal means to protect her daughter failed, resulting in the girl living with a registered sex offender. She tells me we need to prevent child abuse.

For two and a half years, I've known a mother whose son is abused on visits with his non-custodial parent, despite her doing everything imaginable to make them stop. I've watched her little boy deteriorate from a child who loves school and is loved by his teachers to a child who struggles, fails classes and has difficulties with his peers. I've listened to this mother gauge his talk of suicide, trying to figure out if she needs to bring him to the hospital. I try to reassure her that an abuse survivor can still live a good life as an adult. I don't tell her there will always be some pain there. She already knows that. You already know that. And this mother tells me we need to prevent child abuse.

These stories show us that none of the systems for stopping child abuse after it starts work as well as we want them to. We need to make them better, but no amount of improvements can be as good as preventing the abuse from starting. This is what all the experts say. This is what all the parents and grandparents I've met say. And this is what every survivor will say. There are lots of things New York must do to prevent child abuse. And growing the funding for Healthy Families New York is one of them.

