

Child abuse rates high in county

Recession, military population and scaled-back resources create 'perfect storm'

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According to local officials, child abuse in Thurston County remains high after the frequency and severity of child abuse soared in 2011.

According to Shelly Willis, executive director of Family Education and Support Services, in 2011, Thurston County saw a spike in child abuse cases. That high rate remained steady through 2012, and looks to be headed for the same rate in 2013, she said.

Willis said the spike was first noticed by service providers in 2012, who said they saw courts filled up with "parents and children hurting each other." It was not just the number of cases, but the severity of them that increased, she said. The number of young children, including infants, being hurt increased.

The rise in child abuse cases was brought to the attention of Thurston County Commissioner Sandra Romero, Willis said. Romero gathered people from different agencies and analyzed some of the available data, and decided it was an issue the county needed to address.

"In 2011, when we saw the rates spike, we began to develop a group of people concerned about it," she said. "That turned into a child abuse prevention task force. Our goal was to better understand why we had the spike and begin to initiate strategies to address the reasons for it."

The task force is still investigating the cause of the increased child abuse, but Willis said they found a few likely factors that resulted in a "perfect storm" of child abuse.

The downturn in the economy placed higher stress on households, she said. At the same time, given Thurston County's high military population with Joint Base Lewis-McChord nearby, soldiers came back from deployment with symptoms of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder.

Meanwhile, resources to help families deal with mental health issues were scaled back, Willis said.

Willis pointed to a study conducted by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention to illustrate the significance of child abuse.

The CDC's Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) study showed that the more adverse childhood experiences one had, the more likely they were to have physical and mental health issues later in life. The study used a set of criteria to establish an individuals' ACE score.

The study found that Thurston County had the third-highest ACE scores in the state, Willis said.

The ACE study measured 10 types of childhood trauma. Five are personal — physical abuse, verbal abuse, sexual abuse, physical neglect and emotional neglect. Five relate to other family members: an alcoholic parent, a parent who's a victim of domestic violence, a family member in jail, a family member diagnosed with a mental illness, and the disappearance of a parent through divorce, death or abandonment.

Each incident counts as one point in the evaluation. The more points, the higher the ACE score.

What the task force is focusing on right now is helping people work on "resilience," Willis said.

While no one can take away the abuse someone receives, they can learn skills to cope with the effects, she said. Many people may not have those skills if they grew up in a household with people suffering from addiction, for example.

"Abuse doesn't need to go from generation to generation," she said.