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Commentary

Alaskans can do much to protect our children, and that's more than a platitude

Donna Walker, Charity Carmody | February 3, 2016

Much attention is being paid to the state's fiscal challenges, as it should be. Although we as community members can play an active role in promoting solutions and communicating with our legislators, the decisions are largely out of our control.

There is, however, a major crisis happening in our state that we as individuals can change. I am speaking of our child welfare crisis.

There are currently more than 2,800 children in foster care and in the custody of the State of Alaska. There are more than 90 children who are legally free for adoption with no adoption plan in place. We do not know exactly what is causing the drastic increase in these numbers, but we do know that it is not simply the fault of the Office of Children's Services. This is a community problem and, just like our budget crisis, we did not get here overnight. It will take significant effort and sacrifice from all of us to change our future.

There is a new, exciting program that is designed to prevent child abuse, neglect and children having to go into foster care. It is called Safe Families for Children Alaska. It is preventative in nature and aspires to keep families together and children out of foster care by supporting families in crisis. Safe Families is a movement of the faith-based community that returns the community to the forefront of caring for the most vulnerable group of people in society, at-risk children and their struggling parents.

Safe Families for Children hosts vulnerable children and creates extended family-like supports for desperate families through a community of devoted volunteers motivated by compassion to keep children safe and ultimately together with their families. It expands the community safety net by providing parents in need -- on their own, or at the recommendation of a case worker -- a loving sanctuary where they can safely place their children in times of crisis. Host families, prompted solely by compassion and hospitality, are screened, trained and serve without compensation.

Beacon Hill is the local nonprofit that operates Safe Families for Children Alaska. They began hosting children on Jan. 1 of this year in Anchorage and the Valley, and have since hosted four children in safe families around the community -- resulting in these children not having to go into foster care. Alaska is the 37th state to operate Safe Families for Children. Since 2003, Safe Families for Children has hosted more than 22,000 children nationwide without one report of harm. It has reduced foster care placements by more than 50 percent in some areas.

Local churches and Beacon Hill operate Safe Families for Children Alaska with no funding from the federal or state government. There are many ways to be involved. You can volunteer to provide transportation for a child to see their parents, provide meals, buy groceries, host a child in your home or be support for someone who does. Gov. Bill Walker and Donna Walker are planning to attend Beacon Hill's benefit concert, "Tribute to Nat King Cole," at Williwaw, 601 F St. in Anchorage on Feb. 12 at 7 p.m. It is a big band extravaganza with food and dancing. Tickets can be purchased for \$25 at <http://williwawsocial.com/concertsandevents-1/>.



OPINION: Beacon Hill program is at work helping to keep Alaska's children safe while keeping families together - and we can all help.

Pixabay

It is often said that our children are our future. This is absolutely true, and if we don't begin to intervene and prevent child abuse before it starts, the burden to our Department of Corrections, Department of Health and Social Services and Department of Education will be more than we can bear. Changing our future happens one child and one family at a time. We can do this. We are compelled to care.

If you are interested in volunteering for Beacon Hill and Safe Families for Children Alaska, please call 907-222-0925 or visit www.beaconhillak.com.

If you are interested in learning more about foster care or adoption, contact Alaska Center for Resource Families at (907) 479-7307 or www.acrf.org.

Donna Walker is Alaska's first lady. She is an attorney and former Office of Children's Services caseworker, and honorary chair of Alaska Children's Trust.

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