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To Protect the Abused

By DOUGLAS J. BESHAROV

President-elect Reagan and many members of the new Congress have promised to cut back Federal social programs that are ineffectual and wasteful. Rhetoric aside, most Americans would agree that many of the social programs that have expanded so rapidly in recent years would benefit from a critical re-examination. However, many existing social programs seek to meet human needs that cannot be ignored - even if the programs themselves are seriously deficient. When the new administration and Congress attempt to reform existing social programs, they will have to make hard decisions among competing social values and fiscal priorities, as is dramatically illustrated in the area of services to protect abused and neglected children.

Largely as the result of Federal initiatives, in the last ten years there has been an enormous expansion of child abuse and neglect programs. For example, the number of reports of child abuse and neglect has increased sixfold, from about 150,000 in 1969 to about one million in 1979. Federal expenditures for child protective services have risen to more than \$300 million a year.

This expansion of services has saved many thousands of children from injury and even death. In New York State, for example, there has been a 50 percent reduction in fatalities among abused or neglected children, from about 200 a year to fewer than 100. More significantly, the number of abused or neglected children who die after their plight has been brought to the attention of the authorities is down 75 percent, from about 150 a year to fewer than 40.

But grave weaknesses still exist. Beyond protecting children from life-threatening dangers, usually by removing them from the home, existing programs are rarely able to provide the treatment services that would help parents to care adequately for their children. ("Treatment" is usually limited to three or four home visits performed by inexperienced caseworkers, after which the case is closed or ignored unless another report is received.)

More disquieting is the undisputed evidence that, because of the inadequacy of treatment services, state intervention is often harmful to the very children it seeks to protect. Most families suffer the trauma of an intrusive home investigation - and then are forgotten. Worse, about 15 percent see their children removed and placed in foster care. The conditions of foster care are a national disgrace: Of the more than 600,000 children in foster care, about 50 percent are in this "temporary" status for more than two years; more than 30 percent are out of their homes for more than six years. During this time, inconsequential efforts are made to rebuild the family. Many

children are shifted through a sequence of ill-suited foster homes -denying them the consistent support and nurturing that they need.

Unfortunately, building the requisite treatment capacity will require enormous amounts of additional money - probably more than one billion dollars. This is more than three times present expenditures, and far more than anything yet contemplated for child protective services. In this period of fiscal restraint, new funding of this magnitude is unlikely.

Recognizing this, some observers have advocated that reporting programs be curtailed sharply. But extreme cases of parental brutality and neglect should convince even fiscal and social conservatives of the need for societal action to protect endangered children. Hence, it seems equally unlikely that many Americans would support the dismantling of the reporting system.

Mr. Reagan has suggested that many Federal social programs should be turned back to the states. There is much to be said for such an approach. But it will work only if states will have the interest and the ability to assume the responsibilities thus thrust upon them. Although the Federal child abuse program is relatively small in comparison to other Federal programs, it exemplifies the problems he will encounter because of the incremental expansion of social programs. Past increases in reporting have whetted funding and service needs that seem unmeetable; cutting back would be difficult if not impossible because it would leave many children unprotected; and yet, doing nothing would exacerbate the harms caused by home investigations unsupported by treatment services and the overuse of foster care. (The inexorable working of reporting laws will soon double and triple the caseloads of already overwhelmed agencies.)

Therefore, if the new administration is to succeed in its promise to reform social programs, it must first acknowledge two things: the reality of the pressing human needs that give rise to social programs such as child abuse and neglect; and the complexity of the political and programmatic issues involved. Only then can it begin the long and difficult job of deciding how to proceed.

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