

N.Y. can't compromise children's futures

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Childhood matters more than you might think. It's the time when the brain and the body are developing most intensely. It's when children learn to trust. It's when they are most in need of nurturing relationships to lay the foundation for healthy behavior and a successful future.

Hard economic times hurt children most. This recession is no exception. In the past year, more children are living in poverty, more lost health insurance because their parents are unemployed, and more are homeless. Reports of child abuse and neglect have risen.

Even before this recession, there were troubling signs that we weren't doing enough for our most vulnerable population.

Almost 50 percent of all children will live in a household that will receive food stamps at some point in their childhood.

Seventy-five percent of young adults wouldn't qualify for military service because they don't have a high school diploma, they have a criminal record or they aren't physically fit.

Eighty percent of youth in juvenile-justice facilities have diagnosed mental health problems.

One-third of children and youth are either obese or at risk of becoming obese, making this generation the first in 200 years that may have a shorter life expectancy than their parents.

New York, like many states, faces a budget deficit for this current year and again next year. Gov. David Paterson proposed that each agency and program sustain the same proportional cut in order to balance the budget.

On its face, this seems like a fair approach to the problem -- share the pain equitably. But think about it. Are all cuts really equal? A look at programs makes it apparent that some cuts will affect children disproportionately:

Cuts to nutrition programs that provide food assistance to children and their families.

Cuts to home visiting programs that help prevent child abuse and neglect.

Cuts to programs that provide services to family members keeping grandchildren, nieces and nephews out of foster care.

Cuts to programs that prevent childhood lead poisoning.

Cuts to after-school initiatives that provide youth programs in a safe environment.

We can't let our children bear the brunt of this economic downturn. State legislators return to Albany today to address the budget deficit, and it's imperative that they value services that help families and improve children's well-being. Across-the-board cuts must not be part of the equation. Service reductions must be based on principles--not convenience. New York should make the following decisions:

Preserve benefits and services for the neediest families. More are seeking help to keep their homes, put food on the table, and access health care.

Protect investments New York has already made in children. Cuts to successful programs will reduce their effectiveness over time.

Invest in cost-effective prevention programs that have the highest economic returns and the greatest effect on success in life.

Consider the cumulative impact of funding cuts on communities. Program cuts can reduce the overall money that reaches a community through foundations and private sources.

Ensure that cuts aren't made to programs that might soon generate new federal money through health reform and other initiatives.

Graham Greene said, "There is always one moment in childhood when the door opens and lets the future in." Don't we want our children to be ready when that door opens?

Children can't wait for the economy to improve. And we can't compromise their

futures by putting their health, development, safety and well-being on hold, hoping to set them on the right track once the recession's over. Our opportunity to do right by them is now.

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