

J. THOMAS MANGER ROCKVILLE

When a home visit makes a difference

A memory from nearly 30 years ago remains fresh and raw: A domestic-disturbance call to a familiar address. The sight of a young child with obvious signs of neglect. A parent who's clearly unprepared for the challenges of raising kids. All amounting to what felt even then inevitable.

That memory from my early days in law enforcement would be bad enough if it had been a single occurrence. Unfortunately it has been replicated again and again. And it's on my mind as I await details of a bill in Congress that could significantly reduce child abuse, neglect and other crimes in the coming years.

Known as the Medicare "doc fix" bill, the legislation was overwhelmingly approved by the House and is expected to be taken up by the Senate when it returns in April. As written, it will extend funding for the Maternal, Infant and Early Childhood Home Visiting (MIECHV) program.

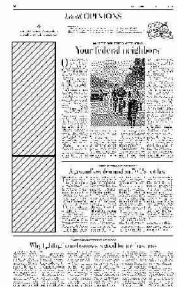
Created with bipartisan support, the program has provided more than \$1.9 billion for voluntary home-visiting services for young women and their children since 2010. Home visitors are typically nurses or other trained mentors who help mothers living in or near poverty understand their children's physical and emotional needs, make their homes safe for children, build early reading and math skills and respond appropriately to stressful parenting situations.

Many programs are funded by MIECHV, which has earned accolades from Republicans and Democrats who recognize the impact of voluntary home visiting on reducing child abuse and neglect. That's important, because every year there are roughly 700,000 confirmed cases of child abuse or neglect nationwide. By the time law enforcement gets involved, it is already a tragedy. Children who survive abuse or neglect continue to deal with the emotional and physical pain long after the incident. They are almost 30 percent more likely to commit a violent crime later in life and are statistically more likely to abuse their own children.

Protecting this federal funding for voluntary home-visiting programs is a priority.

In the District, representatives of an education initiative known as Home Instruction for Parents of Preschool Youngsters (HIPPY) will tell you that 95 percent of the parents they counsel for at least six months report they are more involved in helping their children learn to read and do well in school.

HIPPY studies that were rigorous enough to meet the



evidence-based criteria for the Department of Health and Human Services have also confirmed that the home-instruction program achieved significant improvements in positive parenting practices as well as child development and school-readiness outcomes.

The Nurse Family Partnership (NFP) has been the subject of 37 years of randomized-controlled-trial research. The program has seen a 48 percent reduction in child abuse and neglect, a 56 percent reduction in emergency-room visits for accidents and poisonings and an 82 percent increase in employment among parents.

Results such as these should matter to everyone who cares about vulnerable kids. But you should also pay attention if you care about public safety and saving taxpayer dollars. As noted in a recent report from Fight Crime: Invest in Kids, a nonpartisan organization of 5,000 law enforcement leaders, a randomized controlled trial of an NFP home-visiting program in Elmira, N.Y., found that 15 years after the program began, high-risk mothers who did not receive home visits had more than three times as many crime convictions as those who did participate. And by the time they were 19, daughters who were in the control group who had not participated in the program had nine times more convictions than those who did.

The report also shows voluntary home visiting is a smart investment. An independent study in Washington state found that NFP programs produce a net savings of more than \$17,000 for every family served based on improved children's health, reductions in abuse and neglect, increased readiness for school and reductions in future crime.

The choice is simple: We fund voluntary home-visiting programs that have a proven effect on the health and safety of children and parents and long-term benefits for taxpayers, or we can pay more later for the costs of crime, incarceration and lost human potential.

More than 1,000 police chiefs, sheriffs and prosecutors signed a letter urging Congress to renew MIECHV. I'm counting on senators to make the right choice for kids today and public safety in the years to come.

The writer is Montgomery County chief of police.