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Early childhood investment wise strategy

At this very moment, legislators in Columbus are making difficult choices about what programs will receive the limited dollars available in the State budget. If there ever were a time when we have needed wise leadership, it is now. We must encourage legislators to support programs that are proven to work and save public tax dollars, and we must call upon social services to deliver programs that are accountable.

One of those programs is Help Me Grow and Every Child Succeeds is one of many organizations that helps to implement this program in southwest Ohio.

Help Me Grow is a home visitation program that provides support for at risk, first-time mothers. Home visitation programs like Every Child Succeeds deliver quantifiable outcomes for mothers, babies, and communities to help children develop prenatally through the first years of life. This early investment helps avoid the need for costly services for these children in the future, helps mothers find and keep their jobs, and helps them get the child-care they need so they don't lose their jobs. Unfortunately, funding for Help Me Grow is under attack in Columbus and that puts children and families in Ohio at risk.

During the last 10 years, Every Child Succeeds has made nearly 300,000 visits and helped more than 15,500 families in southwestern Ohio and northern Kentucky. ECS data prove this program works and saves lives. In southwest Ohio, babies born to ECS mothers have a decreased infant mortality rate.

- * ECS - 4.7 deaths per 1000 live births.
- * Cincinnati - 17.0 deaths per 1000 live births
- * Ohio - 7.9 deaths per 1000 live births

Additional positive outcomes include:

- * 91 percent children develop age-expected language skills
- * 94 percent children have a regular pediatrician
- * 65 percent mothers are in school or employed
- * 92 percent of children have a safe home environment
- * Decreased substance abuse, dependence on public assistance, juvenile delinquency, child abuse
- * Improved school readiness, birth outcomes and child development.

ECS serves the highest risk Ohioans. They are fragilely connected to the workforce. They are low-income. Many are either victims of violence or have witnessed violence. One-half are clinically depressed.

If we don't have early intervention programs like HMG, there will be negative short and long-term repercussions. Infant mortality will increase, children will not be ready for school and dependence on more expensive intervention services and programs (like public assistance) will increase in the short term and be compounded over the long term. Through our rigorous data analysis, this is what we know will occur.

I have enough faith in our country to believe that recovery will begin soon, and it will happen because elected officials in Columbus will make the right decisions on behalf of Ohio citizens. Investing in early childhood development is the most efficient economic development strategy available. An improved system for Ohio's children - a system that is evidence-based, effective and targeted to those most at risk is critical to moving our state forward.

Judy Van Ginkel is president of Every Child Succeeds.
