

For greater foresight, put focus on children

Recently unveiled child-impact reporting system will help county make choices promoting healthy and prosperous adult lives.

By Michael Schmidt, Special to Viewpoint

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We've all heard the old axiom, "Teach them well, for today's children are tomorrow's leaders." This is conventional wisdom, inspiration for faculty lounge posters and Graham Nash songs. Everyone agrees that ensuring a prosperous future for our children is a just and worthy cause. But turn this simple adage around -- so we become students of our children's lives -- and suddenly we're confronted with much more to consider than our conventional wisdom can process.

The contexts in which children grow and develop are a complex mesh of interacting forces. Effects do not neatly line up to reveal their causes. Yet these effects do manifest every day in fundamental domains like safety, health, economic stability, developmental and educational experiences, and of course, the home. Each domain is an essential part of the frame that supports a child's life. How well this frame is built and maintained determines a child's overall well-being and impacts her potential.

A strong frame requires that each domain receive a sustained supply of positive resources and opportunities. But of equal importance is protection from negative contributors, such as toxic stress, poverty, crime, environmental hazards and gaps in educational experiences. This order is so tall that arguments between those who blame parents and those who accuse government are about as useful as cliched maxims. Informed and comprehensive action requires resources from all quarters.

For its part, our county government is working to enhance the way it promotes and protects child well-being. I have witnessed this effort firsthand. For the past year, I have served as the lead designer on a county-initiated project to focus local legislation on the well-being of children. As our team's first task, we interviewed 52 of our local officials, administrators and staff. Many of the people we interviewed work for entities jointly operated by Shelby County and Memphis. Respondents, who included almost all of our county's elected leadership, overwhelmingly supported the creation of a system that would consider the needs of and potential consequences for children in legislative initiatives and decisions.

While interviewees provided numerous specifics as to why they wanted such a system, their answers reflected two main realizations. First, they recognized that the

current and near-term development of our children would impact the resources and opportunities available to all county citizens over the long term. Second, they saw how efforts that may not otherwise include child well-being in their objectives could, with further consideration, benefit children. Likewise they were duly concerned that local government should mitigate health and safety threats as well as protect children from the loss of needed resources and services.

The county's unified concern for its children and the consequences posed for the entire community directed the design of our recently unveiled Child Impact Statement Reporting System. This Web-based decision aid provides county officials with tools to review data and expert studies on child well-being from several trusted state and national sources. The primary aim of the system, however, is to facilitate the use of this information in planning and decision-making.

Five sections of prompts and guides help report authors define the connections, or conflicts, between child well-being and the legislation they are considering. The answers they give and the supporting data graphs they attach form the child impact statement and report, which then, along with all required documents, goes before boards, committees and citizens. Note that this is stage one. Feedback from county officials and the public will determine how the system grows in purpose, scope and access.

The intended outcome holds that the CIS Reporting System will further enable county government's decisions to be both responsible for and accountable to children, youth, families and ultimately, our entire community. This goal, which has received wide support, has been particularly championed by County Mayor A C Wharton, Community Services Division Director Dottie Jones, Commissioners Mike Carpenter and George Flinn, and comprises a key mandate of the Shelby County Office of Early Childhood and Youth, directed by Julie Coffey. As the mayor recently acknowledged, this initiative stems from the child well-being research of Dr. Doug Imig, University of Memphis political scientist and director of the Center for Urban Child Policy at The Urban Child Institute.

We can all recognize that critical focus on the lives of our children is imperative. Without it, we simply cannot know, beyond the serious limits of conventional wisdom, what actions will promote healthy and prosperous adult lives for today's children. And without this foresight, we will not have the vision to promote the healthy and prosperous Mid-South of tomorrow.

This is one in a series of monthly guest columns designed to focus public attention on issues that affect children. It is part of a Shelby County initiative to remind everyone, in every aspect of daily life, to "Ask First: Is It Good for the Children?" For more information, call the Shelby County Office of Early Childhood and Youth at 526-1822 ext. 249, or visit shelbycountychildren.org.

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