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proposal he floated last summer

Home visiting programs work to reduce child abuse, neglect

By MAURICE OUELLETTE

Special to the Journal Tribune

The Christmas season in York County was marred by the recent arrest of a mother in Kennebunk who is accused of shaking her 9-month-old daughter to death. This tragedy that ended the life of little Jocelyn Ward-Anderson is a stark reminder of the constant need to be vigilant about preventing child abuse.

This case is particularly alarming when we look at the fact that, in the past two years, the number of shaken baby cases at Maine Medical Center alone has tripled. In 2005, there were 3,349 substantiated victims of child abuse and neglect in Maine. The Third National Incidence Study of Child Abuse and Neglect tells us that a truer number of abused and neglected children nationally is three times higher than documented cases. Given this grim conclusion, we can sadly surmise that more than 10,000 Maine children are subject to abuse and neglect by an adult who is supposed to be caring for them. From 1999 to 2005, 21 children died from abuse or neglect in Maine.

Without question, being a parent is a tough job. It's loaded with stress and doubt. There's so much to know about babies. Unfortunately, some new young parents never received the parenting they needed or don't have responsible adults in their lives to help them safely raise their children.

As a law enforcement leader, I know that in-home parent coaching is a proven way to reduce child abuse and neglect. In-home parent coaching programs help parents by providing them with the skills to

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understand the health and nutrition needs of newborns, identify early warning signs with their child, promote their child's development, make their home safe for kids, and avoid discipline that can, with anger, turn into serious abuse. The voluntary programs offer parents, especially first-time, at-risk parents, weekly visits from nurses or other trained coaches typically beginning during the mother's pregnancy and continue until at least the child's second birthday. Having a trained professional guide these young at-risk parents can have an enormous effect in putting them on the right track to care for their newborns. By helping parents learn the skills to better nurture and care for their children, in-home parent coaching also helps reduce abuse and neglect.

A study of one in-home parent coaching model, the Nurse Family Partnership program, followed children from the program for 15 years. Results showed the program cut child abuse and neglect nearly in half and significantly reduced later crime.

My experience has also taught me that one of the best ways to deter future criminality in adults is to stop them from being abused or neglected as children. Research shows that children who survive abuse and neglect are more likely to struggle throughout their lives. They are more likely to be unemployed, more likely to have marital problems as adults and are two and a half times more likely to attempt suicide. In fact, the Nurse Family Partnership study

tells us that at-risk kids from families left out of a quality in-home visiting program had more than twice as many arrests as the children of mothers who received in-home parent coaching.

In-home parent coaching not only saves lives and numerous hardships, it also saves money. Child abuse and neglect costs Americans more than \$80 billion every year, \$400 million in Maine alone. Yet, research shows that in-home parent coaching can save five dollars for every dollar invested.

Jocelyn Ward-Anderson's death is a reminder we need to do more to support parents, especially those most at-risk, to become better caretakers, learn strategies to control their own anger and emotions, and to stop this cycle of violence.

Both Congress and the Maine Legislature now have an opportunity to reach many more at-risk parents with this proven crime-fighting approach. In Congress, The Education Begins at Home Act would provide \$400 million in grants over three years to states to support in-home parent coaching programs. We are fortunate in Maine that all four members of our congressional delegation are supporting this legislation and hope that Congress moves quickly to adopt it. Here in Maine, our Legislature should work to ensure that we have programs in place to increase in-home parent coaching when new federal and state funding becomes available.

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Maurice Ouellette is the York County Sheriff and member of Fight Crime: Invest In Kids.