

Help for Portland's foster children

by Dan Saltzman, guest opinion

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Recent articles in The Oregonian have detailed how new state legislation will provide a safety net for Oregon's foster children on psychiatric medication or who have been sent to live with out-of-country relations. Help for this vulnerable population is on the way from the city as well.

Beginning this month, scores of Portland foster care children will receive services from programs supported with \$5 million from the Children's Investment Fund.

Helping children in foster care succeed is a new focus of the investment fund under the renewed Children's Levy approved by voters in fall 2008 for an additional five years. Since 2002, the levy has supported thousands of city children and their families with programs in early education, after school, mentoring and child-abuse prevention and intervention.

The investment fund added foster care to its core mission because too many children were receiving too little care, coming too late.

Estimates place the number of foster care children in Multnomah County around 2,400 on any given day. Statewide, physical abuse is the No. 1 reason children are removed from their homes, with parents' drug and alcohol abuse ranking close behind.

Native American and African American children are overrepresented in the foster care system. While the state's population of Native American children is 1.4 percent, they represent nearly 10 percent of all children in foster care. The state's number of African-American children in foster care is just under 7 percent -- three times higher than the African-American youth population.

To counter these trends, the foster care programs supported by the Children's Investment Fund offer a wide-range of assistance to help maintain placement stability for children, move children out of foster care sooner and address over-representation of children of color in foster care.

While some social programs phase out youth when they turn 18, the Children's Investment Fund has extended the age range to 24 for young adults who have aged out of the foster care system but still face challenges transitioning into adulthood.

The obstacles they encounter include poverty, underemployment and education levels lower than their non-foster care peers. A number of them also have mental health needs and physical disabilities.

Through the Children's Investment Fund, caregivers -- both biological families and foster families -- will be eligible for services to support successful reunification where possible and help with problems ranging from attachment issues to judicial advocacy.

Grants will go to the Native American Youth Association Family Center, Self Enhancement Inc., the Children's Relief Nursery, Legacy Emanuel Children's Hospital, Big Brothers Big Sisters of Metro Portland, Impact Northwest, Juvenile Rights Project, Boys and Girls Aid and Janus Youth Programs .

Portland residents deserve credit for making children a priority when they overwhelmingly approved the Children's Levy last fall. Now, they should feel confident as their support is bringing more help -- and less hurt -- to the city's foster children.

Dan Saltzman is a Portland city commissioner and chairman of the Children's Investment Fund Allocation Committee.