

# Patricia Miljanich: Child abuse victims need community help

By PATRICIA MILJANICH |  
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Right under the noses of professionals, foster parents and family members, a 4-year-old foster child was nearly murdered while in the care of her adult half-sister in the city of Santa Clara last year. Why didn't our child protection system protect this little girl from this unspeakable abuse?

While this situation is not common in foster care, the child welfare system fails too many children. I propose two constructive ways for the community to improve it through direct engagement.

The child welfare system is a safety net. It has many responsibilities but three particularly challenging tasks: removing children from unsafe parents and caregivers; helping reunite these parents and children by providing services; and finding permanent homes for children who can never go home.

Trying to administrate a child's life is nearly impossible, and children need caring human beings, not protocols, to thrive.

Child abuse and neglect is as prevalent as ever. According to a child welfare report maintained by UC Berkeley, the number and rate of community reports of child abuse and neglect over the past 15-20 years has risen in California and in the Bay Area.

However, the rate at which child welfare agencies substantiate these referrals has declined significantly. One reason is a growing recognition among child welfare stakeholders that sometimes the treatment (the child welfare system) is more harmful than the disease (the reported abuse or neglect). It's an implicit acknowledgment that for many children and families, the system does more harm than good.

A bureaucracy cannot raise children effectively; that is what parents are for. But our community can support children whose home lives have become so unsafe the government needs to intervene.

The first way is to persuade responsible people to become foster parents.

When a judge decides children are unsafe with their parents, some go to relatives and many end up in foster homes. The need for quality, safe homes will rise in the years ahead, as the state attempts to provide more "family home" settings instead of relying on costly and often ineffective group homes. By offering a reliable and safe home, residents can provide a family setting for a child in need and make our system work better.

The second way we can help abused children is by getting involved with the programs that help children directly — in this case, a local Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA) program. The Santa Clara County child did not have a CASA volunteer who may have prevented this 4-year-old from so much harm. The program in this county, like other local CASA programs, needs many more community volunteers to work one-on-one with all foster children who need them.

A CASA volunteer has weekly contact with the child and access to everyone in the child's life including parents, foster parents, teachers, and the child's social worker and attorney. Volunteers conduct independent investigations, following up on personal observations and the concerns of others, as well as advocating for safe, permanent homes. As officers of the court, they report directly to the judge.

Quality foster parents and CASA volunteers provide critical community support to the child protection system.

With poverty, mental illness and substance abuse so common in our own Bay Area communities, we leave children especially vulnerable to being victimized in ways that develop scars across generations.

More of us need to step up to the challenge of supporting our local children by doing more than paying taxes. We need to become foster or adoptive parents, and we need to become CASA volunteers to help traumatized children and improve the safety net designed to protect them.

Patricia Miljanich is executive director of CASA of San Mateo County. She wrote this for this newspaper.





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