Hartford children among likely victims of wrangling over state deficit

H. Paul Santmire

According to a Swahili proverb, when two elephants fight, the grass suffers. Such a conflict is now under way in the state Legislature. The Democrats and Republicans, no doubt reflecting the will of the most powerful in this affluent state, are contending for the fiscal prize of a balanced budget.

It now appears, however, that a range of poor people are going to be trampled as a result of the melee. Some of the most tender and most vulnerable of these often silent, barely surviving citizens are the children of the poor. They are going to be hurt by the conflict in the ranks of the powerful, probably more than anyone else.

A case in point is the travail of a single day-care center in Hartford's impoverished Asylum Hill neighborhood. In that community 40 percent of the children are born in poverty.

The neighborhood has an infant mortality rate higher than some Third World countries. Two-thirds of the families are headed by single heads of households, most of them women on welfare. Crime is rampant. Affordable housing is the scarcest of commodities. Unemployment is high.

It was a sign of hope, then, when a group of low-income parents got together three years ago, with the encouragement of a community organization and a neighborhood church, to work to establish a desperately needed infant-care center. It wasn't easy for them to find the resources to establish a center that was truly affordable. But, because of their tenacity, the Family Place came into being almost a year ago.

The idea was to free families from the cycle of poverty. With low-cost infant-care, in this case at a price of $67 a week for a service that costs $167-per-child weekly, low-income parents would be able to seek job training and then meaningful employment. The ultimate beneficiaries would be the children themselves. But most low-income parents couldn't even afford that $67 a week, once their costs for rent, food, clothing, medical care and other essential expenses had been met.

Enter the state of Connecticut. The Legislature had put in place a purchase-of-services subsidy, POS, for which families with 70 percent of the median state income would be eligible. Other states had already done likewise, with differing guidelines. California set the figure at up to 114 percent of the median income; New Jersey, Maryland and Illinois at 80 percent.

It was a sound, fiscally responsible investment, apart from the immediate good it was intended to do for the children. National studies had already established that modest investments in prenatal and early childhood programs radically reduce the long-term costs of welfare, educational programs, medical care and crime prevention.

And that subsidy made the critical difference for the Family Place in Asylum Hill. Sixteen of the 20 families who had infants in the center received that subsidy.

Then came the shocking news. In an effort to save some $2 million, Gov. William A. O'Neill has proposed in his 1989-'90 budget that the guideline for the POS day-care subsidy be lowered from 70 percent to 60 percent of median income. Neighborhood parents were told by a legislator that nothing could be done about that reduction, since "people on both sides of the aisle are in a mood to 'cut, cut, cut.' "

Never mind that such a cut is penny-wise and pound-foolish. Never mind that in saving some money here the taxpayers are going to be burdened with many more expenses down the road, merely in terms of welfare costs alone. Consider what this apparently modest cut will mean for the Family Place immediately.

Half of the Family Place parents now receiving the subsidy will lose it. This means that that budgetary cut will in all likelihood force eight of 16 heads of households back on to welfare. That's the only way they will be able to care for their children. Some might even be tempted just to dump the baby with some "caregiver" who might not really care.

Whereas the parents who had wanted to work their way out of the cycle of poverty had found a way to do so, effectively, with the subsidy — now many of them will be recycled right back into poverty. Undoubtedly their children will have to bear much of the pain of that recycling.

As the elephants struggle, who is going to hear the cries of the children who are being trampled at the grass roots? Does anyone care?

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