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## Editorial: Enabling the right help

**A one-stop diagnostic center in metro Milwaukee could stem an increase in the number of children with disabilities, which has serious repercussions for the region.**

From the Journal Sentinel

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There is a longstanding tendency just about everywhere to compartmentalize a community's problems - as in telling ourselves that, yeah, it's serious, but not for me because my kid, family, neighborhood or community isn't ailing as much.

A recent report that shows a disturbing increase in the number of children with disabilities in southeastern Wisconsin is just the latest that reveals how shallow this canard is.

The report by the nonprofit Milwaukee Center for Independence, a rehabilitation center for people with disabilities, says that, while the number of school-age children decreased in the seven-county region, the number of children with disabilities increased slightly more than 3% between 2001 and 2004. The disabilities ranged from autism to "significant developmental delay."

Purely on humanitarian grounds, this should raise all kinds of red flags. But the report estimates that today's special needs kids cost Wisconsin taxpayers \$15 billion in lifetime costs but that a reduction of a mere 2% to 5% in the number of children with disabilities can result in savings between \$300 million and \$650 million annually.

It's not as if there aren't individuals and agencies working hard on disability issues. The problem, the report indicates, is that such efforts need to be coordinated for maximum effect. Creation of a community-based regional "diagnostic center for children" could bring about such coordination. This could become a one-stop center that would diagnose disabilities in children that have them, identify children in danger of developing them and create a plan for these children from diagnosis to treatment, with consistent follow-through.

Howard Garber, president of the Milwaukee Center for Independence, says he and other advocates are looking not just for local buy-in but for state backing that might include seeking waivers from the federal government to set up such a model diagnostic center.

The governor and the Legislature should work to get this done.

The causes for the increase in the number of disabled children likely have much to do with deepening poverty in parts of the region. But whatever the causes, it's clear that the entire region suffers because of it.