

Aug 5, 2008

James Hmurovich
Kathryn Harding
Lisa Schreiber
Prevent Child Abuse America
500 North Michigan Avenue
Suite 200
Chicago, IL 60611

Dear Mr. Hmurovich, Ms. Harding & Ms. Schreiber,

Thank you for your letter regarding our interim report on evidence-based programs to prevent children from entering and remaining in the child welfare system. We appreciate and understand your concerns, and thank you for your feedback. You make a number of points, which we respond to in turn below.

1. Programs differ in ways that may impact our analysis.

We reviewed all of the Healthy Families America evaluations, and included in our meta-analysis those with a) rigorous research designs and b) objective measures of child welfare outcomes (including HFNY). These are the same criteria we apply to all programs. We review the existing research literature on each program, as the programs have been implemented. We do not “cherry-pick” the research for the “best” implementations. We understand that as HFA evolves, program criteria and targeted populations may change. If it became clear that there was a fundamental change in the way HFA was being implemented overall, and that change was represented in research evaluations, we could revisit our findings at that time, and consider re-classifying HFA into two separate, distinct categories.

2. We do not capture all possible costs and benefits of the programs in our analysis.

This is true. There may eventually be research that allows us to estimate the costs of other outcomes (such as child behavior, etc.). However, at this time, those links are not clear in the literature. We also realize that there may be outcomes that we cannot attach a dollar value to (e.g., something ineffable such as a sense of accomplishment for completing a program). We will make this clear at the beginning of our report.

3. We include monetary benefits in our analysis that are not directly related to child welfare involvement.

Our study, as directed by the Washington State Legislature, has two primary components: examining what programs work to reduce involvement in the child welfare system, and using cost-benefit analysis to evaluate what programs make the most sense economically. To give our Legislature a complete picture about what programs have the most benefit economically, we feel it would be unwise to ignore the other impacts measured by some program evaluations. For example, crime is a huge expense to society. If we know a program leads to a reduction in crime rates, we feel it would be unfair to ignore that. As programs mature and the literature grows, we will be able to include other programs in this way as they begin to measure these kinds of outcomes.

4. We do not spell out the fact that differences between program implementations can lead to differences in outcomes.

The purpose of a meta-analysis is to look across all well-evaluated implementations of a program to find an average effect size. We found that, across rigorously evaluated implementations of HFA, families who participated were significantly less likely to experience child abuse or neglect than were comparison families.

5. Programs differ on the research available.

We are very aware that this literature in this area is very “young;” our goal is to investigate the state of the research as it exists now. We cannot make claims about outcomes that have not yet been evaluated.

6. Changes in programs and social factors affect benefits.

Please see our response to number 1 above. You mention that HFNY earned a “proven” ranking from RAND Promising Practices Network recently; however, this system uses different criteria than we do. Whilst we share some criteria for program design in common, the RAND ratings allow measures of self-reported parenting behaviors as an indicator of “*Children not experiencing physical, psychological or emotional abuse.*” We do not include measures of self-reported abusive behavior in our analysis. As specified on the RAND site, the DuMont study found no significant impact on substantiated abuse or neglect, and that is the crucial measure in our view. We look forward to seeing the results of the new evaluations you mention in AZ, HI, IN, MA and NC.

7. We do not acknowledge that ongoing research could produce new results that could change the outcomes of the current study.

In our final report (which will be released later this week), we do address the need for ongoing research into existing and new programs; just because something hasn’t been measured yet does not mean the program is not effective in that regard.

8. Our child welfare measures are not inclusive enough.

You mention that “CAN reports are not a reliable measure of program impacts on child maltreatment;” we would argue that if a program is not shown to reduce CAN reports (arguably the “tip of the iceberg”), why would we expect that the program has actually reduced the underlying abusive behavior? We believe that self-reported parental behavior is not a reliable measure of child abuse and neglect; people who go through a program that teaches them not to abuse their children may be less likely to report their own abusive behavior after the program, even if their actual behavior has not changed.

9. Cost-benefit analysis is useful but limited.

We are careful in our reports to specify that what we are summarizing is the current state of the research. Our responsibility is to our Legislature, who needs information to make policy decisions. We cannot tell our legislators what we do not yet know. We also make a number of cautious assumptions (detailed in the technical appendices of our cost-benefit reports), because we do not want to over-estimate the potential for cost-savings of some of these programs. Overall, our estimates of benefits are conservative. We work very hard to gather accurate estimates of program costs; we realize these may vary site-to-site, but we gather data from multiple sources about what programs actually cost to run.

As the research evolves, our knowledge about costs and benefits of program implementation will undoubtedly improve. At this point, we are using all of the available research evidence to give our state Legislature a summary of the current state of knowledge about what programs are effective in preventing children from entering and/or remaining in the child welfare system, and what we know about how investing in these programs might affect Washington State's fiscal future.

We consider our meta-analyses a work in progress. As new research becomes available, we will update our database. Please feel free to keep us abreast of any new information on Healthy Families America, so that our results will reflect the most current information.

Thank you again for your feedback and recommendations.

Sincerely,

Stephanie Lee
Washington State Institute for Public Policy