

YAKIMA HERALD

## Saturday Soapbox: Abused children need caring voice

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In a typical year, some 500 Yakima County children are removed from their homes and involved in our court system because their caregivers (usually their parents) are alleged to have abused and/or severely neglected them. Sexual abuse of children is also perpetrated overwhelmingly by someone the child knows. Drugs, alcohol and mental illness are common factors affecting their parents' ability to provide for their basic physical, emotional and psychological well-being. More than half of these child victims are under 6 years old, and the overwhelming majority live in poverty.

When, for whatever reason, a family is unable to live up to the obligations of providing a safe, nurturing home, a child is left to a system that is full of wonderful and caring people, but that is ill-equipped and without enough resources to handle both the volume and complexity of the cases. When no one else is available to take in the children, they will usually end up in a foster care placement with kind-hearted and caring people who are, simply put, strangers to them. The children often face changing placements and schools multiple times, sometimes being separated from siblings, seeing their parents for only a few hours each week, all while suffering the pain of separation and loneliness. Interviews with foster care alumni have revealed that they overwhelmingly believed they had no voice, no say in what was happening to them, especially when they were younger.

April brings us not only the renewal of our countryside with new birth and growth but also, as National Child Abuse Prevention Month, a reminder that many of the children in our midst need protection from those closest to them at the most vulnerable and consequential time in their life. They also need help avoiding abuse in a complex and confusing system of laws and policies. Enter a regular citizen volunteer, whose only role is to speak for the child and advocate for their best interest in the various meetings and court hearings. Volunteer Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA) plays a critical part as they are the only way children younger than 12 years old have a voice in court advocating for their best interest. There is irony in the fact that April is also the month the state Legislature finalizes its budgets. The recently passed Senate budget makes sweeping cuts to the Administrative Office of the Courts (AOC), the agency that funds many court activities, including the volunteer CASA statewide network of local programs. At its heart, this is not merely an issue of abuse, or neglect, or a broken system, or overburdened workers, but of the unalienable rights of a child. This is a human rights issue. This is about ensuring that every child has the right to learn, and grow, and be treated with dignity and respect. CASA volunteers are a formidable force that fights for these rights and cutting funding is simply unacceptable.

- *Frank Murray is the Yakima County Court Appointed Special Advocates program manager.*