

Children Need Aid Of Whole Village

By **NANCY JO ARCHER**
New Mexico Voices for Children

This summer we are witnessing a sad trend that has been impossible to miss, even for those who don't pay close attention to the local news. Every other day, it seems, comes the story of another child's death. First it is the discovery of a toddler's body buried at a playground. Then a car is pulled from Cochiti Lake containing the remains of three small children and the father who took their young lives. In Santa Fe, four teens are killed instantly when their car is hit by a suspected drunken driver. Then a newborn dies because its parents call on God instead of a paramedic.

For many of our children, New Mexico is not a safe place.

We all react to these stories in different ways, but disbelief, sorrow and anger seem to be the prevalent emotions. We also want to know who is to blame. Placing blame is really only valuable in two ways — as a means of administering punishment for criminal acts and for figuring out how we can prevent the next tragedy. Often, though, we really only want to place blame because we believe it relieves us of any responsibility.

As a society, we're big on the punishment aspect. As for preventing the next tragedy — that always seems to be someone else's job. Our country's dominant lore about responsibility is that it is up to each individual. But the larger truth is, if we want to live in a society where children do not die due to carelessness, inadequate public policies, violence in the community or

at the hands of their parents or other adults who make bad decisions, we need to take responsibility for each other. We need to remember that it takes a village to raise a child and that each and every one of us is a villager. We don't have to be parents or elected officials or community leaders to embrace the notion that the well-being of our state's children is in our hands. It's also in our best interest.

The statement "it takes a village to raise a child" refers to the fact that children and their families need support systems. Those support systems come in many forms — from extended family members to local congregations, from health care professionals to teachers, from bankers to attorneys. Upper- and middle-income families can afford access to more support systems than can low-

income families. Many of the support systems available to low-income families — food stamps and Medicaid, for example — are looked down upon by much of society as undeserved publicly funded charity. After all, we are keen to lay the blame for poverty on the poor — even when that means ignoring the underlying systemic causes.

We should all be able to agree that poverty is never a child's choice. And even though we want to see every parent have the ability to take complete responsibility for their children, we must acknowledge that some parents need support systems that they are simply unable to access without a little help. That's where the village comes in.

Each of us needs not take the same role as villagers. Some of us work directly within the

support system as teachers or ministers or social workers. Some of us prefer to volunteer in homeless shelters, literacy programs or as mentors for at-risk children. Some of us are more inclined to advocate for public policies that are supportive of children and working families. Some of us run for public office so we can work to make those policies a reality. No matter our individual roles, all of us need to view our contributions as integral to the well-being of the community. We need to recognize that our own well-being is at least partially dependent on everyone else's well-being. And we need to make the kinds of investments in the next generation that our forbearers made in ours. The New Mexico Children's Charter, released in 2007 by New Mexico Voices for Children, lays out what the next generation's future could and should look like. It is a future where struggling families have the resources and supports they need to succeed. It is a future where no child goes without health care or the nutrition needed to grow to their full potential. It is a future where our state's tax and budget policies place children's well-being before welfare for corporations, and fairness for working families before political favors for campaign contributors.

This is not the future toward which our children are headed. But it could be. It's not up to just a few of us — just the parents and politicians. It's up to the whole village.

Nancy Jo Archer is chair of the board of directors for New Mexico Voices for Children.

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