

CHILD ABUSE

Feigning shock while failing our children

When I consider the fate of Oregon's at-risk children and their caretakers, I'm reminded of a line from the classic film "Casablanca." The police chief, Capt. Renault (Claude Rains), is pressured by his Nazi "partners" to confront the cynical Rick (Humphrey Bogart) in his eponymously named cafe, saying: "I am shocked — *shocked* — to find that gambling is going on in here." Everyone in the club as well as the movie audience knows that gambling is occurring. But Renault's delicate situation forces him to feign surprise and ignorance at a reality with which he is all too familiar.

In its latest annual report card on the status of children, the nonprofit Children First gives Oregon a C- grade. (See the report at <http://childrenfirstfororegon.org>.) That's an improvement from last year's D+, but it's still one of its lowest grades in the last decade.

Citizens claim to be shocked when, on an almost daily basis, the media bring them more bad news about the way children in our community are being mistreated. They are *shocked* to find that children are regularly abused in Oregon. They are *shocked* to learn that the need for decent foster families far outstrips the supply. Everywhere there are shocking stories about how we treat our most vulnerable citizens.

But there's an untold story that is directly related to all this bad news about children. That's the story about how the nonprofit organizations that are supposed to help these children and their families are so poorly funded that they can't recruit and retain enough people to do the job properly.

In human services, government contracts represent the largest piece of funding. Yet for the past four years there have been no increases in rates in public contracts at either the state or county level. Can you imagine what would happen if a

private-sector employer failed to give raises for four years? That employer would be out of business. Instead, our business grows as conditions for children worsen. But our resources fail to keep pace.

To whom should we look for a plan to change this equation? Is it our elected officials? They mouth their commitment to children — and then cut the funds to the early childhood programs we know do the most good. What is the role of foundations? They will fund new services but don't want to make grants to upgrade

existing staff compensation. And let's not forget the nonprofit organizations. They wring their hands because they are forced to pay their employees so little. But they still offer to do the work.

Then there's the public at large, a majority of whom are joining in the chorus of "No new taxes!" They may be shocked by abuse and neglect of children, but the shock stops well short of their wallets — and maybe of their hearts as well.

We need to stop pretending that everything is OK. We need to accept that those shocking images on our television or computer screens are everyday occurrences, and that we can't make them stop simply by saying, to paraphrase the compromised Renault, "I am *shocked* that child abuse is going on here!"

We are not going to end child abuse here in Portland or anywhere else in this country by blowing a whistle and sending everyone home for the night. But the people and the organizations that can address such issues are in place. They lack only the resources to get the job done properly.



JAY BLOOM

IN MY OPINION

Jay Bloom is president and chief executive of Morrison Child and Family Services, a Portland-based nonprofit that delivers mental health treatment and social services to children and their families.