

Visiting Nurse Programs: A Good Idea, but Not with Tobacco Loot

Issue Backgrounder

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Synopsis: Senate Bill 132 contains many provisions for what to do with the revenue from the new tobacco settlement (really, a new tobacco tax). The most worthwhile of these is for a visiting nurse program for at-risk new mothers. Such programs have an established record of success. In the long run, visiting nurse programs save the government a great deal of money, including reduced welfare and criminal justice costs. Any Visiting Nurse or similar program should be carefully structured to avoid civil liberties problems.

Discussion: Hawaii's Healthy Start program identifies at-risk parents (alcoholics and victims of child or spouse abuse) and offers them free in-home counseling. The program helps parents learn non-abusive approaches to child care, and also assists the parents' application for Medicaid assistance and job training programs. While at-risk parents who are not contacted by the program have a twenty percent risk of perpetrating child abuse, the abuse rate in homes covered by Healthy Start is only two percent.

Similarly, a visiting nurse program Rochester reduced child abuse rates (four percent for the families served, compared to nineteen percent in the control group), and reduced by about three-quarters the number of poor, unmarried, teenager mothers who had a second child within twenty-two months.¹ The anti-crime benefit of preventing illegitimate births is immense, since illegitimacy is the single largest sociological factor leading to increased violent crime.

A fifteen-year study by the Syracuse University Family Research Development Research Program found that when low-income families were visited weekly by child development trainers to help them improve parenting skills, six percent of children from those families ended up with probation record, compared to twenty-two percent from a control group.²

Early-childhood program evaluations generally look at short-term results. One program, which assisted single mothers until the child was thirty months old, found small benefits in the short term, but significant differences ten years later. Children helped by the program were, ten years after, much better behaved, less aggressive, and better liked by their mother than were peers in a control group. All of these factors are predictors of non-delinquency. One other effect, which could not show up in the short term, was that many single mothers did not have another child, and those who did waited a median of nine years after the first child's birth.³

Parental skills programs for at-risk parents, beneficial as they can be, raise seriously civil liberties questions. Hawaii's Healthy Start program has already been criticized for being excessively intrusive. Given government's record over past decades, there is every reason to fear that expansion of parental skills programs will lead to government case workers telling (and eventually ordering) parents not to smoke, not to own guns, and not to do whatever else is politically incorrect.

Accordingly, the best strategy for parental skills programs might be for them to be offered by non-governmental groups, including churches and child welfare organizations.⁴ The proper state role should be limited to funding private programs, so as not to turn a visit from a nurse into a foot in the door for Big Brother.

The attached report *Prenatal and Early Childhood Nurse Home Visitation*,⁵ from the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, provides further background on the benefits of Visiting Nurse programs.

Not with Tobacco Loot: As detailed in the Independence Institute's Issue Backgrounder on the Tobacco Settlement, the Tobacco Settlement is simply a back-door tax increase. The tax tobacco increase was procured by a lawsuit ostensibly brought on behalf of Colorado tobacco consumers who had allegedly been victimized by the tobacco companies. Accordingly, the tax revenues should be given to the victims (the smokers). The state government of Colorado does not smoke, and was not a victim. Although heavy smoking by pregnant mothers is harmful to babies *in utero*, the babies who would benefit from S.B. 132 were not even conceived when the tobacco companies perpetrated the (alleged) unfair trade practices which were the basis of the Colorado Attorney General's tobacco lawsuit. Thus, the Visiting Nurse program should be funded from general revenues. If necessary, other spending should be cut to pay for the program.

1. Victoria Seitz and Sally Provence, *Caregiver-focused Models of Early Intervention*,⁶ in eds. Samuel J. Meisels and Jack P. Shonkoff, *Handbook of Early Childhood Intervention* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1990), pp. 407-08.

2. Stanley Greenspan and Amy Cunningham, *The Kids Who Will Be Killers*,⁷ *Washington Post*, July 26, 1993, p. C1; Shelley L. Smith, Mary Fairchild, and Scott Groginsky, *Early Childhood Care and Education: An Investment that Works* (Denver: National Conference of State Legislatures, 1995), p. 34.

3. Seitz and Provence, *Caregiver-focused Models*,⁸ pp. 411-12 (Yale Child Welfare Program).

4. For a catalog of numerous family assistance programs, see Karole L. Kumpfer, *Strengthening America's Families: Promising Parenting Strategies for Delinquency Prevention*, NCJ 140781 (Washington: Department of Justice, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, 1993).

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