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United States House of Representatives
Committee on Education and Labor

Hearing on
The Education Begins at Home Act (H.R. 2343)
June 11, 2008

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Chairman Miller, Ranking Member McKeon, and Members of the Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today. My name is Laura Ditka. I am a graduate of the Duquesne University School of Law and a 20-year employee of the Allegheny County District Attorney's Office. I am also a member of FIGHT CRIME: INVEST IN KIDS, an organization of more than 4,000 police chiefs, sheriffs, prosecutors, and victims of violence, who have come together to take a hard-nosed look at the research on what can keep kids from becoming criminals.

As a Deputy District Attorney, my day-to-day job is to prosecute offenders and see that justice is done. However, I know that we can't arrest and prosecute our way out of the crime problem. We must also invest in proven approaches that reach kids and their families *before* they begin offending. When teens are having children, and there's no role model available of good parenting practices, we can't be surprised when some of those kids don't grow up to become successful adults. It is really ironic to me that everyone has to pass a test and get a license to drive, and even to get a license to fish, but there's no opportunity for at-risk new moms and dads to learn about effective parenting practices. Beginning at the beginning means offering services to new parents, even before their kids are born, and preventing child abuse and neglect – that's one of our strongest weapons in the fight against crime.

The Allegheny County Child Abuse Unit that I founded and now direct investigates and prosecutes hundreds of cases of child abuse and neglect each year. For example, on any given day the four attorneys that I supervise are in court with cases of horrific sexual abuse and cases of physical abuse and neglect of children. One particular case comes to mind involving a mentally challenged mother who saw her husband touching her child in a sexual manner. The mother did not have the parenting skills necessary to stop the abuse caused by her husband. This child endured this sexual abuse for over one year until she was seriously harmed and both parents were prosecuted. This is the type of family in need of quality home visiting and help.

In many of the cases I prosecute, the perpetrator didn't set out to be a bad parent and hurt their kids. They just didn't realize they shouldn't leave their child unattended, for example. I have just finished the prosecution of two young mothers who left 7 children, ages 8 and under, home alone while they went out for the night. One of the children was autistic. The 8-year-old "babysitters" were playing with matches and started a fire that destroyed the home and killed the five younger children. On that same street in Allegheny County, a case is pending of a young mother who was so intoxicated while at home with her three young children that when her house caught fire – she could not tell police and fire fighters how many children were in the house. This resulted in her oldest child dying in the fire.

It is important to note that in Pennsylvania many suspected instances of child abuse and neglect do not rise to the level of criminality, so the problem is far greater than the hundreds of cases my office prosecutes. Last year, there were 4,162 instances of confirmed abuse or neglect in Pennsylvania. Even though the majority of children who survive abuse or neglect are able to overcome their maltreatment and become productive adults, too many victims of abuse and neglect cannot. Not only are they more likely to abuse or neglect their own children, they are also more likely to become violent criminals. The best available research indicates that, of the 4,162 children who had confirmed incidents of abuse or neglect in one year in Pennsylvania, 160 will become violent criminals as adults who otherwise would have avoided such crimes if not for the abuse and neglect they endured. Research also shows that, nationally, based on confirmed cases of abuse and neglect in just one year, an additional 35,000 violent criminals and more than 250 murderers

will emerge as adults – people who would never have become violent criminals if not for the abuse or neglect they endured as kids.

Fortunately, voluntary home visiting programs can help stop this cycle. These programs offer frequent, voluntary home visits by trained individuals to help new parents get the information, skills and support they need to raise healthy and safe kids. There are many models of home visiting that help young children get off to a good start in life. They serve slightly different populations and have somewhat different, but complementary goals – improving outcomes in a wide range of areas including health, academic achievement, employment and criminality.

The Nurse-Family Partnership (NFP) model of home visiting has the strongest evidence on crime reduction, and I'd like to note that our former governor's wife, Michelle Ridge, an active member of the NFP national board, testified in support of this legislation in a hearing held by Representative Castle two years ago. NFP provides home visits by nurses to interested at-risk young mothers starting before they give birth and continuing until their first child is age two. Rigorous research, originally published in the Journal of the American Medical Association, shows the program cut abuse and neglect among at-risk children in half. In addition, by the time the children in NFP had reached age 15, mothers in the program had 61 percent fewer arrests than mothers left out of the program, and their children had 59 percent fewer arrests than the kids left out. The Nurse-Family Partnership has been recognized as an evidence-based model by numerous agencies and Administration officials in recent years, including the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, the National Institute of Justice, the Centers for Disease Control, and the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. I'd like to ask if you would enter into the record our recent FIGHT CRIME: INVEST IN KIDS PENNSYLVANIA report, "Breaking the Cycle of Child Abuse and Reducing Crime in Pennsylvania: Coaching Parents Through Intensive Home Visiting."

As of last year, the Nurse-Family Partnership enrolled roughly 274 mothers in Allegheny County, Pennsylvania – specifically in the City of Pittsburgh and communities down the Mon Valley. Upon entering the program, 39% of these women completed high school or received their GED, 98% were unmarried, 79% were unemployed, and 60% were on Medicaid. Outcomes of the Allegheny County Nurse-Family Partnership have mirrored national outcomes and included a 43% reduction in the mothers experiencing violence during pregnancy and a 100% reduction in mothers fearing their partners. Of those who entered the program without a high school diploma, 61% completed their diploma or GED by program completion and 32% were continuing their education beyond high school.

The Nurse-Family Partnership in Allegheny County has many success stories. I'd like to briefly share one of them. In 2005, a woman, let's call her Jane, was referred to the Allegheny County NFP program from another county in Pennsylvania. Jane was a recovering heroin addict who was herself a victim of emotional, physical and sexual abuse from the time she was a toddler. Jane's experience in the program did not start off without some trouble. She would often scream at the nurses and appear very controlling of their home visit time. But soon, Jane and her Nurse Home Visitor developed a close bond. The Nurse Home Visitor helped Jane heal from all of the hurt she had suffered through the years both physically through drug abuse and emotionally. Jane's baby was born healthy and developed into a bright toddler under Jane's nurturing. While in the program, Jane finished her GED and went on to study medical records at the community college where she is expected to graduate this spring. She is also planning to be married this fall. With the help of the Nurse Family Partnership, Jane avoided a prolonged life of drug abuse, child abuse and criminal behavior. And we can bet her child, and society, will reap significant benefits from this transformation of Jane's life.

Research on other models of home visiting has also found numerous positive results. For example, a randomized control trial of the Parents as Teachers model found that treatment for an injury in the prior year – a possible sign of abuse – was 3% among the children served compared to the 13% of children not served (at the time of a second year assessment). A study of Healthy Families New York (HFNY) found that, at Year 1, compared to mothers in the control group, mothers in the HFNY intervention group reported having engaged in significantly fewer acts of very serious physical abuse (e.g., hitting child with fist, kicking child, slapping on face). At Year 2, HFNY parents reported having committed, on average, one-third fewer acts of serious physical abuse in the past year than the control group.

Home visiting's benefits go far beyond child abuse prevention and crime prevention. Home Instruction for Parents of Preschool Youngsters (HIPPY) found that cognitive skills at the end of the program were significantly higher for children in the program compared to those not receiving HIPPY. A randomized control study of the Parent-Child Home Program found that 84% of the children finishing the program graduated from high school compared to 54% of those who did not receive the intervention. Separate studies have concluded that improving graduation rates reduces crime, making this finding of particular interest to me and my law enforcement colleagues.

Preventing child abuse and neglect is not only the right thing to do, it is also the fiscally sound thing to do. In a study commissioned by the United States Justice Department, the Children's Safety Network Economic Insurance Resource Center analyzed the direct and indirect costs of child abuse and neglect to taxpayers and all those individuals impacted by abuse or neglect. It concluded that child abuse and neglects costs Americans \$83 billion a year. Analysts with the Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis concluded that NFP produced an average of five dollars in savings for every dollar invested, and produced more than \$28,000 in net savings for every high-risk family enrolled in the program. New data from a report commissioned by the Pennsylvania Commission on Crime and Delinquency estimates that once the costs of the program are subtracted, Pennsylvania's Nurse Family Partnership sites average \$37,367 in benefits per person served.

By waiting until the problems cannot be avoided, taxpayers are paying huge sums to cover the costs of holding children back in school, providing special education services, paying for welfare, and especially paying for arresting, prosecuting, and imprisoning criminals. The Pennsylvania Commission on Crime and Delinquency report also estimates that it currently costs roughly \$142,000 per year to place a juvenile in a Youth Detention Center. Preventing only 5% of out-of-home youth placements each year in Pennsylvania would produce an annual savings of over \$9 million. Further, Pennsylvania's prisons were already operating at 115% of their inmate capacity by the end of 2006. Even if the General Assembly approves the \$700 million for Fiscal Year 2008-2009 requested by the Pennsylvania Department of Corrections' for prison construction, Pennsylvania prisons will still be overcrowded. In fact, at the projected rate of prison population growth, Pennsylvania's prisons will be even more overcrowded in five years at 118% of capacity. As an investment strategy, this is short-sighted. It ignores the opportunity to act when the interventions are less expensive and more likely to succeed.

I'd like to ask if you would also enter into the record the recent report commissioned by the Pennsylvania Commission on Crime and Delinquency (PCCD), "The Economic Return on PCCD's Investment in Research-based Programs: A Cost-Benefit Assessment of Delinquency Prevention in Pennsylvania."

An evidence-based approach with proven results and significant potential savings like home visiting should be more widely replicated across the nation to ensure that home visiting programs are offered to all at-risk parents of young children. Yet, due to lack of funding, hundreds of thousands of at-risk families receive do not receive quality home visiting. Currently, NFP in Pennsylvania has 134 nurses working in 41 of the Commonwealth's 67 counties. They have slots to serve 3,237 families. Since its inception in Pennsylvania, over 10,000 new mothers have been served. Yet, the Nurse-Family Partnership Program serves only 23% of eligible mothers in Pennsylvania each year. In Allegheny County, that number shrinks to only 17% of eligible mothers. While there are a few federal funding sources that can potentially be used for home visiting, none are specifically designated for this purpose. These funding sources are designed to provide money to a wide variety of programs and home visiting efforts are only able to capture a minimal amount of funding from any single source. The bipartisan Education Begins at Home Act (H.R. 2343), first written and introduced by Senator Bond (a Republican from Missouri), would authorize \$500 million over three years to expand the reach of voluntary, research-based home visiting and authorize a parent and public education campaign about caring for infants and toddlers. The Committee, in moving the bill forward, could even add language to ensure targeting of services to jurisdictions with the greatest unmet need.

My colleagues and I see the fatal consequences every day of failing to invest in quality home visiting programs to get kids off to a good start in life. That is why the law enforcement leaders of FIGHT CRIME: INVEST IN KIDS are eager to work with all of you to achieve enactment of the Education Begins at Home Act. We know that a modest investment now will cut child abuse and neglect, improve children's school readiness and reap dividends down the road by reducing crime and saving lives and money. Thank you for this opportunity to testify, and I would be happy to answer any questions that you may have.