

Executive Director Judith Sandalow spoke on WAMU's NPR Wednesday, February 11, 2009.

Read Judith's comments as heard on NPR:

Are DC's children safe?

It has been a year since the decomposing bodies of four young girls were discovered in a District of Columbia home. The media ran dozens of news stories. There was a shared sense of public tragedy and outrage. Rallies were held. The DC Council sponsored hearings, the federal court issued orders and the mayor promised immediate action.

One year later, are the children of the District safer? This is the question to be addressed at the City Council roundtable today.

Tragically, the answer to this question is no. Why? Because the single greatest risk to children's safety is not a faulty child abuse hotline. It is poverty. And the District's children are poorer than in any state in the union. One third of all DC children live in poverty. Half of those children live in families with an income of less than \$11,000 to support four people.

Poverty robs children of health, educational success and is the greatest risk to their lives. According to the most recent data, almost half of the children who died came from our poorest wards – wards 7 and 8. The statistic is hardly surprising given that poor children are almost twice as likely to be born prematurely or with other health problems, and violent crime is six times more frequent in their neighborhoods.

While stories about the Jacks girls' death focused on failed child abuse investigations, they ignored the bigger story – the pervasive role that poverty played in ending their lives. Fifty percent of DC's substantiated child abuse and neglect cases come from the poorest 20% of DC's neighborhoods.

The risk to poor children begins before they are born. Poor mothers are almost three times less likely to receive prenatal care than middle-class mothers. By the time they are four years old, poor children are developmentally 18 months behind their peers. It is no surprise, then, that poor children are three and a half times more likely to drop out of high school or be expelled.

By the time poor children become adults, poverty becomes more dangerous and more costly. Childhood poverty increases adult crime as much as forty percent. Poor children have much worse health than their peers and grow up to have much worse health as adults, dying earlier than they should and costing our health care system billions. Even those poor children who escape the worst

impact of poverty grow up to earn far less than they would have if they had grown up middle class.

Lifting children out of poverty saves lives and makes good business sense. Child poverty costs the United States \$500 billion a year in reduced earnings, increased health costs and increased crime.

The total cost of childhood poverty – more than \$500 billion – is enough to bail out Fannie Mae, Freddie Mac, AIG, General Motors, Chrysler, and Citigroup. Child poverty takes more out of America's gross domestic product than has the recession thus far – and as we know, it takes lives.

Fixing our local child welfare system is very important – and will save lives. But we should not confuse this with making the District's children safe. To do that, we must end the poverty that put the Jacks children at such risk.

The mayor and the Council will face tough budget decisions in the coming weeks and months. They must protect the District's children. If they don't, thousands of poor children in the District will continue to be one step away from tragedy every day.

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