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## Op-Ed

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### **Help in the Home for New Parents**

*The Benefits of Home Visiting Programs*

Parenthood is one of the most important, rewarding and challenging responsibilities any of us face. The many emotions and demands parents – especially first-time parents – experience can certainly be daunting, even when paired with the joys and rewards.

Recently, our community took steps to offer a helping hand to new parents by initiating a voluntary home visiting program. Such programs are designed to provide the assistance new parents want to respond to their baby's needs – and to maintain their own mental health. While available now to only [demographic], the service ideally would expand to reach any new parent who wanted some advice and support, always on a voluntary basis. [or details on specific program] These kinds of programs fill an obvious need, as one third of parents reported that they felt very unprepared for parenthood according to a recent study commissioned by CIVITAS, ZERO TO THREE and BRIO Corporation. It's clear that new parents can use some support.

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As the [title] at [program – description], and someone familiar with these programs, I'd like to share with you a little about home visiting and the benefits it can provide [community name] parents.

Home visitors provide support to families in homes because we have learned that one of the best ways to reach families with newborns and young children is by bringing services to them. These trained professionals and para-professionals offer positive parenting tips, provide information on how to care for a new baby, assist with stress management and talk with families to identify the information, resources and services that can best match their needs.

We know that programs that begin working with parents right after birth stand the greatest chance of producing positive outcomes for several reasons. First, new parents are eager and excited to learn about caring for their babies and have the opportunity to establish positive parenting practices before other patterns emerge. Additionally, the most critical brain development occurs during the first few years of life, providing a significant window of opportunity for parents to provide appropriate stimulation to encourage such development. Finally, most physical abuse and neglect occurs among children under the age of two and 44 percent of fatalities due to child maltreatment occur before the first birthday – so early guidance and support are crucial.

Studies reveal that these services help to improve parent-child interaction, encourage child health and development and can prevent child abuse and neglect. Evaluations of Healthy Families America™, a home visiting program of Prevent Child Abuse America, reveal promising results in these areas.

For instance, in Oregon the 1997 statewide immunization rate for two-year-olds was 73 percent while the immunization rate for children whose parents were participating in Healthy Families America was 97 percent. In Virginia, 98 percent of

children served by Healthy Families America had a primary health care provider and 95 percent of parents served said that the program had improved their parenting. In addition, some studies suggest that families enrolled in Healthy Families America are two to three times less likely to maltreat their children than comparable families not enrolled.

The public sees the value in home visiting programs too. In its 2000 public awareness survey, Prevent Child Abuse America revealed that over 80% of Americans believe voluntary at-home visitation programs for new parents to be a very effective or effective strategy for preventing child abuse. And, nearly 85% agreed that educating all new parents about their child's developmental needs and stages helps prevent maltreatment.

I would like to hail [community]'s recent addition of home visiting services to new parents and to encourage the expansion of such programs, which address a critical need. I would also like to stress that home visitation is only one program on a continuum of the services that are necessary to support our community's families. We all know that parenting can be hard. Offering support and guidance to those who may feel lost and overwhelmed, or just need a little information, serves to build a foundation on which healthy, happy children and families can thrive.

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