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PREVENTION KEY IN FIGHT AGAINST CHILD ABUSE, HOUSE CHILDREN, YOUTH AND FAMILY SERVICES COMMITTEE TOLD

By Shawn Ashley

Staff Writer

"We can identify the groups of variables that we all believe lead one to child abuse, but we don't know why people with similar backgrounds produce different results."

Dr. Terri Gallmeier

Vice President

*National Committee to
Prevent Child Abuse*

■(GIT) Efforts aimed at preventing child abuse are the key in the fight against what the leader of a national organization told the House's Committee on Children, Youth and Family Services is an ever growing problem in the United States.

"Prevention is the only direction we can go if we are going to deal with this serious problem," Dr. Terri Gallmeier, vice president of the National Committee to Prevent Child Abuse, told the committee members Thursday.

That, Gallmeier explained, differed from early efforts at addressing child abuse and neglect, which focused on intervention with families after the abuse occurred.

Gallmeier said national attention was first seriously focused on the child abuse problem in 1978, when a group of concerned professionals met and produced a comprehensive

child abuse prevention program. Oklahoma, she added, was one of the first states to embrace the group's recommendations and to begin to implement them.

A second conference last year, Gallmeier said, reexamined the problem of child abuse and came to the conclusion that while more is known, the problem is still growing, particularly the more serious forms of abuse and neglect.

Among the other conclusions drawn by the panel, Gallmeier said, were that defining child abuse is a complex problem, particularly when attempting to delineate between positive parenting in different cultural settings; that abuse statistics alone are not an effective way to measure the amount of abuse in a community, state or in the nation; that while enacting laws aimed at preventing child abuse may feel good, there is no certainty the laws impact families and decrease child abuse; that intense intervention, rather than long-term efforts, are more effective; and that it is best to start intervention programs as early as possible, including prenatal efforts.

Additionally, Gallmeier told the committee, recent studies have been able to classify families into three groups and determine what type of prevention efforts are effective for them.

The first group, she said, are the consumers, families who know they have problems and need help and know where to go to get that help.

"It is with these families," Gallmeier said, "that prevention programs have been most effective."

It is in the other two groups — the dependents and the broken families — that the increases in child abuse instances are attributed, Gallmeier said.

According to Gallmeier, "The dependents may know they are struggling, but they don't know why or how to get services or how to access the services that are available for them.

"They are an at-risk group. They are not going to read a pamphlet, go home and change

(Continued)