



Nancy Hardt: Reducing abuse, improving health go hand in hand

By Nancy Hardt / Special to The Sun

Posted Oct 31, 2017 at 2:00 AM

Updated Nov 1, 2017 at 2:28 PM

Our local peace-building efforts were highlighted at the United Nations in September. After using data and maps to identify neighborhoods with health inequities, we brought services that within four years resulted in a reduction in unintended pregnancies, a reduction in premature births, and a stunning 45 percent reduction in cases of child abuse and neglect.

We did this by reducing stress. Stressed people have bad, sad or scary things happening in their lives.

Three interventions included health care; provision of concrete family supports such as food, clothing and shelter; and links to services for victims of domestic violence.

Health professionals staffed a free clinic on wheels that visited identified neighborhoods on a regular schedule. Many women requested pregnancy testing. If their tests were negative, our nurse asked each woman whether she was happy or sad with that result.

We learned that vulnerable women did not always have the luxury of choosing the day or time for sex, or even the partner for sex, so they were relieved to hear they were not pregnant. We offered them long-acting reversible contraception free of charge.

When the sheriff looked at our map for health, she noticed that her hot spot for service requests overlapped with ours. Review of call data showed that the most common call was for domestic violence.

New training for sheriff's deputies included asking questions such as, "Has your partner ever threatened to kill you? Do you think your partner is capable of killing you? Does your partner have a gun? Has your partner ever threatened to commit suicide? Has your partner ever choked you? Has your partner ever harmed your pet?"

Victims who answered yes to three or more of the questions learned they were at risk of being murdered by their partner. Victims were offered a phone to speak to Peaceful Paths, our domestic violence service provider. Further, a team of law enforcement, victim's advocates and child advocates reviewed the high risk cases, providing well-being checks and looking out for victims should they wind up in court.

The third intervention was Partnership for Strong Families' neighborhood resource centers, providing concrete family supports. The bad, sad or scary things that stress families may include not having enough food, having the electricity turned off, being evicted by a landlord, or needing clothing for a job interview or cold weather.

Peace4Gainesville and the River Phoenix Center for Peacebuilding are collaborating. Brain research tells us that resilience to stress can be developed at any stage of life, and these efforts pay big dividends when children and their young parents benefit. No expensive equipment is needed to learn breathing techniques, mindfulness skills and other ways to control our internal emotional state — which, when uncontrolled, leads to violent behavior.

In order to make peace, we must start here, at home. We all have a part to play in sowing seeds of peace.

Dr. Nancy Hardt is a professor emerita in the University of Florida College of Medicine who lives in Gainesville. She was invited to address the United Nations High Level Forum on the Culture of Peace on Sept. 7 to describe practical steps taken to reduce inter-generational violence in Alachua County.



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