

Bonaventura addresses social service trends at Gary breakfast



Department of Child Services Director Mary Beth Bonaventura speaks on challenges to her department at a Indiana Parenting Institute breakfast on Thursday in Gary. (Meredith Colias / Post-Tribune)

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The head of Indiana's Department of Child Services said her agency continues to strengthen and service the needs of struggling families while the need to combat challenges like substance abuse grows.

Director Mary Beth Bonaventura spoke about her agency's role during the annual breakfast Thursday held by the Indiana Parenting Institute at the Centennial in the former Gary State Bank building. April marks Parenting Awareness Month in Indiana.

"Our parents are our first police," Bonaventura said, "our first cheerleaders, our first support system."

Gov. Eric Holcomb announced in December her reappointment to lead Indiana's child protection efforts, a post she had held for nearly four years.

She said then she would focus on providing better services to families dealing with addiction, targeting children with mental health disorders and continuing to hire and retain quality caseworkers.

Bonaventura told the Post-Tribune in 2014, during her three-decade career as a judge and magistrate in Lake Superior Court's Juvenile Division, she handled 50,000 abuse and neglect cases, experience that made her prepared for her current role.

"Her part of the spectrum, they see a parent in need and so through whatever reason, they have to enter the home and intervene," said Rosemarie Grabowski, Indiana Parenting Institute's manager of family education and support. "We are there to help rebuild the family. We are there to help intervene in a way that can teach parents how to parent effectively."

Grabowski said her organization offers a weekly parenting program to clients and connects them with job resources, drug treatment, or basic needs like clothing. Part of the parenting classes is to break clients of abusive behavior, like occasionally hitting a child, they may have experienced as a child.

"I had parents tell me, 'I didn't know any better. That's how I was raised,'" Grabowski said. "Hopefully, with DCS getting involved, that gives us more opportunity of getting involved quicker, because, if DCS gets involved, we can intervene quickly."

On Thursday, Bonaventura spoke to the crowd of the difficult role the agency placed in stepping in child welfare cases.

"We do intervene in families' lives. We do remove children when necessary, and that doesn't feel good," she said. "I'm not trying to be anyone's friend. We are trying to follow the law and do what we are supposed to do."

She also spoke on the importance of immediately reporting suspected child abuse or neglect to authorities.

The percentage of children removed from homes due to substance abuse has nearly doubled, officials said.

"Opiates are a game changer. Heroin is a game changer," she said. "Now, it's all kinds of families, all kinds of education, all socio-economic backgrounds."

"It doesn't discriminate anymore," she said. "It's not just a law enforcement issue anymore."

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