

GUEST COMMENTARY

Developmental screenings are essential for N.H. youth

"The United States can achieve its full economic and social potential as a nation only if every individual has the opportunity to contribute to the full extent of his capabilities and to participate in the workings of our society. It is, therefore, the policy of the United States to eliminate the paradox of poverty in the midst of plenty in this Nation by opening to everyone the opportunity for education and training, the opportunity to work, and the opportunity to live in decency and dignity." Those words from the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964 lay the foundation for the work of Community Action - providing those in need with the opportunity to



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improve their lives and achieve a higher level of self-sufficiency.

It has been two years since I left the mayor's office, and since then, it has been my privilege to serve as executive director of Southern New Hampshire Services, the Community Action Agency for Hillsborough and Rockingham counties. SNHS provides opportunity to low-income residents through more than 60 programs. These include employment and training, financial capability, Head Start, child care, WIC (women, infants and children's nutrition), elderly housing, energy assistance and many others.

SNHS assists more than 36,000 individuals in more than 16,000 households each year. We don't do this alone, we partner with agencies throughout the state to provide unduplicated services. These numbers represent real people in our communities who

are experiencing difficult times.

There is never only one reason why someone is poor, and rarely just a single obstacle that keeps that individual from achieving a better future. Importantly, breaking the "cycle" of poverty is critical and achievable with the right tools and support.

The single best early tool to break generational poverty is education. Education is far more than going to school. It's about being ready to learn, and sadly not all children are.

Developmental screenings, usually performed by a pediatrician, assess the development of basic learning skills and other milestones and can determine whether a child has any undiagnosed health, behavioral or learning challenges. Much like marking the hallway door with how tall a child is growing at different points in time, it is important to evaluate whether chil-

dren are advancing developmentally. Children who are screened early and often can benefit from early intervention and access to programs designed to help their development; such as improving cognitive skills, behavioral concerns and health risks.

Unfortunately, far too many children in New Hampshire do not receive developmental screenings. With limited access to affordable health care, families in some parts of the state rely on community organizations to make these screenings available.

Programs such as Spark NH, the governor-appointed Early Childhood Advisory Council for the state of New Hampshire, promotes coordination and collaboration among federal, state and local early childhood programs and services to include such screenings. Our Head Start and Early Head Start programs

and other Head Starts in Community Action Agencies serving the state provide the enrolled children developmental screenings to make sure that they are growing and making appropriate progress.

New Hampshire's youngest citizens should have every opportunity to succeed. We must ensure that all children have access to developmental screenings. Screenings are essential to our youngest citizens having every opportunity to succeed in school and later in life. The future prosperity of New Hampshire depends on our ability to steward the next generation who will live, work and lead in our state. Together, we can ensure the next generation has every advantage.

Donnalee Lozeau is a former mayor of Nashua and is the executive director of Southern New Hampshire Services.