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OPINION

Investment in early-childhood programs is good for Illinois' future

By Tom Dart, Bob Berlin and Mitchell Davis

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought incalculable grief and encroached on every aspect of our lives. It has exposed inequities, as some populations bear a disproportionate share of the suffering. For those of us in law enforcement, it has brought significant challenges as well, with first responders exposed to the virus every day.

Throughout this period of adversity, the pandemic has also shined a light on the many heroes in our communities, including those providing essential services to families and young children. As members of Fight Crime: Invest in Kids — a nationwide group of law enforcement leaders dedicated to supporting proven crime-prevention strategies — we have always affirmed the value of early education and care.

The current crisis has reinforced our appreciation, as child care centers and homes have reopened with enhanced safety protocols, preschool teachers have engaged their young students with creative on-screen instruction, and home-visiting professionals have — through "virtual visits" and distribution of necessary supplies — been a lifeline for new parents in need.

These programs have benefits that reach far beyond the immediate needs of families. Quality early childhood programs help send kids to a brighter future, improving academic outcomes, school behavior, and — the research shows — making it more likely that they will lead adult lives free from criminal activity. Increased access to preschool is also a powerful tool to achieve greater societal equity, as it reduces achievement gaps by preparing participating children for the school years.

We encourage our state leaders, therefore, to continue the investments in early childhood programs that have earned strong bipartisan support in Illinois. While the pandemic has put a pinch on our state finances, we cannot use our present predicament as an excuse to shrink from our pursuit of a better, safer future. Investments made in children today will bring savings in the long run — as much as $27,000 per child enrolled in high-quality preschool, for instance — as we reduce the myriad costs incurred by crime and violence in our communities.

Home-visiting programs also bring the opportunity to reduce crime and provide a substantial return on investment. As another recent Fight Crime report lays out, quality home visiting can help lower rates of abuse and neglect and reduce parental involvement in crime. The impact of home visits can also help boost the earnings of participating families and trim government spending on public assistance.

Funding these programs today is not enough, however. We must go beyond piecemeal efforts and create a system that can efficiently and equitably deliver early childhood services to all corners of the state. We are highly encouraged, in that regard, by the work of the Illinois Early Childhood Funding Commission. This bipartisan panel, appointed by the governor, is in the process of creating a road map for a fully-funded, stable, equitable and streamlined system to meet the needs of our youngest children and their families.

The commission will present its recommendations in March, and we in law enforcement look forward to working with the governor and policymakers to pursue these plans over the next few years. Expanding public support for quality early childhood programs will help provide kids with a solid foundation, ultimately benefiting all Illinoisans through reduced crime, increased public safety, and a more prosperous future.

Tom Dart has been Cook County sheriff since 2006. Bob Berlin has been DuPage County state's attorney since 2010. Mitchell Davis is police chief for the village of Hazel Crest and is 1st vice president of the Illinois Association of Chiefs of Police. All three serve on the executive committee of Fight Crime: Invest in Kids Illinois.