

Opinion: When government sets new policies, it should first consider children

By Dana Bunnett
Special to the Mercury News

Posted: 07/03/2011 08:00:00 PM PDT

If you're a parent about to make a major decision -- buying a house, switching school districts, changing jobs -- your first question is likely to be: "Is it good for our children?" This is the common approach in every healthy family. So, what if our public officials asked the same question before making important decisions about our community?

It's happening in Santa Clara County, where the board of supervisors has agreed to make children's welfare a top consideration in making budget and policy decisions. Starting July 1, thanks to the leadership of board President Dave Cortese, the board will implement "Child Impact Statements," a systematic approach to evaluating how government decisions will affect children and families.

These statements are an extension of the Bill of Rights for Children and Youth, endorsed by the board of supervisors in 2010, and the Children's Agenda, a countywide initiative led by Kids in Common, a program that focuses on creating a county where every child is safe, healthy, successful in learning and successful in life.

Using this new approach means that policymakers and bureaucrats will be doing more than just paying lip service to the needs of children and families.

Perhaps the most obvious need for Child Impact Statements is when the budget is being developed: How will the elimination of funding for a county program affect children and youths? How many children will lose services? Will losing service lead to more overstressed families entering the child welfare system? Will more high-risk teenagers enter juvenile hall?

Too often, government planning has not taken issues of children's well-being into account, or policies have been more focused on the needs of adults. Take, for example, even a mundane decision such as the location of a bus stop that's used by students attending Yerba Buena High School.

The chosen spot allows the bus to get to its destination most quickly and causes the least impact on street traffic. A reasonable choice, right? The problem is that teenagers taking the bus to school

are being dropped off at a stop where they have to cross in heavy traffic and go into a neighborhood where they are likely to confront gang activity. This location isn't in the best interests of the community. Wouldn't it be great if teen safety were given the same consideration as time efficiency and street traffic?

Child Impact Statements will help the county board look at policy and program choices through a different lens that brings children into focus, making their needs visible and important, not just incidental to the final decision. When consideration of a policy's impact on children is a primary concern and occurs early in the process, the potentially negative effects on kids can be mitigated from the beginning.

In his State of the County address, board President Cortese declared 2011 to be the "Year of the Child." This reflects the county's commitment to protecting children and investing in their care and education. Child Impact Statements will ensure that current and future supervisors will remember that the well-being of children is essential to the well-being of our county.

DANA BUNNETT directs Kids in Common (www.kidsincommon.org), a Planned Parenthood Mar Monte program that focuses on policies to get better results for kids in Santa Clara County. She wrote this for this newspaper.