

'Babies Can't Wait' a group effort

Imagine this is the year 2028. The World Health Organization has just announced that Benton and Franklin counties are the recipient of the Most Distinguished Community Award for contributing in an exceptional way to the lifelong success of its young adults.

To determine the worthiness of this award, the WHO evaluated all the 20-year-olds in the area. These young adults all have excellent physical and mental health, have at least a high school education, have good skills and are gainfully employed, or they are pursuing advanced education.

They are living in an environment free from crime, physical neglect and abuse. More importantly, WHO found that the community has been working

since 2008 to make this a reality.

As a public health nurse who has raised her family and worked in Benton and Franklin counties, this vision is very personal to me. However, there is no magic pill that will make it come true.



Sandy Owen

In Focus

The good news is that we can achieve this vision if we put our minds to it, but it will take parents, caretakers and the entire community all working together.

With determination and commitment, we can make it happen. And we already have a jump start. "Babies Can't Wait," an initiative based on

the Community Solutions Plan, is leading the way.

Facilitated by United Way of Benton and Franklin Counties, more than 200

community leaders, representing all segments of the community, have been working for more than a year on Community Solutions, a regional health and human services planning and implementation effort.

In December, community leaders identified four key focus areas to improve people's lives: education, health, safety and self-sufficiency.

This spring, Babies Can't Wait was launched as a communitywide initiative that addresses all the aspects of a healthy individual.

The vision of Babies Can't Wait is that by the time today's babies are 20, they will be successful in school and in life because of the foundation we built to enable them to make the most of their physical, social-emotional and cognitive potentials.

Babies Can't Wait aims to inform the community about the importance

of supporting our young residents, and to encourage them to invest in our babies today so our community can benefit tomorrow.

With approximately 3,900 babies being born in Benton and Franklin counties every year, we have a lot at stake.

We can't afford to delay getting babies started in the right direction, because the years from birth to age 3 are critical for a child's growth and development.

For example, the brain weighs approximately 25 percent of its adult size at birth, and will grow to be 75 percent of its adult size by age 3. By then, billions of brain cells and trillions of connections, or synapses between those cells, have been formed.

Parents and caretakers need the

See **EFFORT** | Page E3

EFFORT | Initiative aims to improve teamwork, promote efficiency

FROM PAGE E1

knowledge, skills, and community support to help our children get off to a good start by establishing healthy patterns and habits at an early age.

The Babies Can't Wait initiative realizes that quality services for families are important. And one size does not fit all. Screening will be provided to determine the knowledge and skills that parents need, and they will be referred to the appropriate services provided by a wide array of trained individuals, from public health nurses to parent educators or volunteers.

Babies Can't Wait's objective is to improve teamwork between existing programs and create new partnerships to make current programs more

effective and efficient.

The partners involved will include physicians, hospitals, First Steps programs, the Benton-Franklin Health District, schools, local government, businesses, employers and volunteers.

Bechtel, the health district, Catholic Family and Child Service, Columbia Basin College Early Childhood Education Department, Department of Child and Family Services, Department of Early Learning, La Clinica, Lutheran Community Services Northwest, United Way, the Volunteer Center, Washington Closure, Washington State University Extension and Dr. Sara Zirkle are helping plan the initiative.

I am very excited about Babies Can't Wait. If we achieve our vision, the children of this community will have a suc-

cessful future because of our early focus on their education, health, self-sufficiency and safety.

Together as a community we can accomplish what no individual or family can do alone. We can all play a part in Babies Can't Wait.

What, if anything, about this moment in the community's history will we look back on with nostalgia and pride in 2028?

I hope it will be the collective decision to build strong foundations for our children and youths in 2008. For when a young person finds success, our community finds hope and a brighter future.

► *Sandy Owen is the Preventive Health Services Director for Benton-Franklin Health District. She also is the lead for the Babies Can't Wait Initiative.*