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Eagle Forum Book Reviews

Book recommendations

Watch out for "Big Sister" as Well as "Big Brother"

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Are the American people willing to allow government agents to come into their homes to "advise" them how to care for their babies? What if the announced purpose of these home visits is to look for child abuse under the assumption that all parents are suspects?

The plan to place "home visitors" into the homes of all first-time parents is one more example of the pervasive liberal push to monitor law-abiding citizens under the pretext of catching criminals. The model for universal home visitation is Healthy Families America (HFA), a program developed by the National Committee for the Prevention of Child Abuse (NCPCA), now known as Prevent Child Abuse America.

The HFA program calls for 50+ in-home visits annually per family for those considered most "at risk." The home visitors are paraprofessionals and volunteers who are called "trained," but may have only a high school education.

These recruits are supposed to educate parents on "proper parenting practices" and to monitor child development. NCPCA materials make it clear that parents should never spank their children, and state that

"no child needs a spanking, spanking can be dangerous."

The agency's contact with the family may be initiated before the mother gives birth and continues through age five. The home visitor links the families to other health and social services until the child enters school.

HFA claims to be voluntary, but the NCPCA's stated goal is "to provide home visiting services to all new parents." Special attention is given to those deemed to be "at risk."

The Alabama Family Alliance, which is working on an investigative report on home visitation programs, found that a family's level of risk is determined by screening the hospital, and sometimes even clinic, records on 15 risk factors. The long list of risk factors includes the age of the mother, divorce, late prenatal care, previous abortions, and depression, and some of the terms are so nebulous that almost any parent could be labelled "at risk."

It is unlikely that all the women being screened have given "informed consent" to this government monitoring. Some consent forms are part of hospital admission procedures and are easily misunderstood, and most expectant mothers are in labor when they enter the hospital.

The fact that assessment workers (who have reviewed the mother's medical records) possess intimate information about the women they are soliciting makes the "voluntary" nature of the program suspect.

Last October, Rep. Henry Hyde (R-IL) wrote a Dear Colleague letter to other House Members warning that HFA "sets a dangerous precedent" and represents "the village mentality run wild." He described the program as "Big Brother intervention as we have never seen it before," noting that "Americans have never experienced such intrusion in their family lives."

In 1992, NCPCA adopted Hawaii's "Healthy Start" program as the national model for child abuse prevention, and HFA programs are currently operating in 40 states under various names. Nearly 60 percent of all new mothers in Hawaii are screened for potential risk.

Vermont's HFA program plan states that "the purpose of home visits is to assess the family's needs and to evaluate the family for child abuse potential." It is not difficult to imagine that many parents might be

labeled "at risk" due to the home visitor's inexperience, inadequate training, or overzealousness.

Indiana's HFA program has grown from a quarter million dollars five years ago to $40 million today, with 58 sites in 91 counties, and HFA literature makes it clear that the goal is "all families." Indiana's sites use electronic data collection systems that gather an extensive array of client data.

Rep. Hyde's letter notes that all HFA program data will be kept in a nationwide computerized tracking system called the Program Information Management System (PIMS), and could eventually be combined with preschool and public school tracking systems when children enter the education system.

According to Dianna Lightfoot, Director of the Alabama Alliance's medical division and of the HFA study: "while any abuse of a child is abhorrent, the 'crisis' of millions and millions of children being abused and neglected, for which the radical 'cure' of in-home visitation to all new parents is needed, is greatly exaggerated."

HFA is partially funded by the "Safe and Stable Families" program, which was reauthorized in 1997 under the federal Adoption and Safe Families Act. HFA is seeking additional funding sources, including reimbursements from managed care organizations.

Since HFA programs are marketed as prevention and cost-containment measures, based on the claim that they prevent a host of future abuse-related problems, the HMOs are listening.

Another possible source of funding is Medicaid. According to one NCPCA report on funding programs, "The definition of 'at risk' in Medicaid is so broad that it should easily include home visitation."

Americans should examine the grave implications of the NCPCA's social engineering before Healthy Families America is mandated nationwide. HFA seriously threatens the right of parents to direct the upbringing of their own children.