Preventing domestic violence must begin with the children

Domestic violence awareness month officially ended last month and October brought troubling headlines on the issue

By: Rep. John Conyers, Jr. (D-Mich.) and Brian F. Martin

The City Council of Topeka, Kan., voted to repeal its domestic violence law in order to avoid the cost of prosecution due to a budget crisis. We have seen moves like this before. In 2009, the state of California eliminated all funding for domestic violence programs and services because of budget cuts. Only after a great and lengthy debate in the state legislature was partial funding restored.

There are recent examples of positive steps to address the intractable problem of domestic violence. On Oct. 12, the Makers of Memories Foundation participated in a special congressional briefing on Capitol Hill to educate policymakers, leaders and the public about the children affected by domestic violence, which UNICEF has called “one of the most damaging unaddressed human rights violations in the world today.”

Children who are raised in homes with domestic violence are 50 times more likely to abuse alcohol and other drugs and six times more likely to commit suicide. Shockingly, 90 percent of prison inmates report that they experienced domestic violence as children. This epidemic costs the United States more than $600 billion annually in direct and indirect costs, including hospital ER visits, workplace absenteeism, criminal justice expenses, substance abuse treatment, shelter support, mental health services and child-protection costs. But the truly staggering price is the loss of human potential. More than 40 million adults in this country were such children and are still struggling with the self-destructive falsehoods that they learned and internalized from their experience.

While it is common to hear calls for an “end to the cycle of violence,” it cannot logically end without a substantial focus on the children.

Domestic violence programs throughout the country are focused primarily on adults who are involved in violent relationships. A range of services are offered, including temporary housing, crisis counseling, legal assistance, health services, vocational aid, substance abuse programs and anger management and other behavioral modification initiatives for perpetrators. The focus on children comes as a distant second concern. And yet children who are raised in violent homes are at great risk, because more than 75 percent of them will go on to repeat what they learned in adulthood.

Take the story of a man we’ll call Rod, a successful personal and corporate training entrepreneur. Rod witnessed his father abuse his mother regularly during his childhood. As a teen he resolved to become a Navy SEAL to learn to kill his father. Fortunately for Rod, his father died one week before he executed his plan.

His story is not unique — the Department of Justice has reported that 63 percent of convicted murderers between the ages of 11 and 20 who commit homicide killed the man abusing their mothers.

Why does experiencing domestic violence put children at such risk? Using data that have only become available in the last decade, leading researchers have discovered that these children’s nervous systems and brain chemistry are often altered, changing who they are. Scientists have shown that the brains of children who are exposed to violence and trauma are flooded with the stress hormones adrenaline and cortisol, triggering a series of physical and emotional reactions by the body that impairs the brain’s logical response to stimulus. These patterns become hard-wired in the brain, leading children who experience chronic violence to have heightened and unhealthy levels of fear and anger. Their brains change in ways that can fundamentally alter their self-concept and behaviors, with lifelong consequences.

These children and the adults who once were these children desperately need a voice. They need to know that what they went through is an experience shared by millions and that it can be discussed openly. They need an adult to step into their lives to tell them “this is not your fault” and “you can have a compelling future.” They need to know that adult role models exist. People like former President Clinton, Oprah Winfrey, Halle Berry and countless others have overcome a childhood filled with violence. Practical ways to help children living with abuse are to engage teachers, counselors, clergy, mental health providers or other trusted members of the child’s protective network. Best practices vary by situation.

At the congressional briefing, as the ranking member of the House Judiciary Committee, I, John Conyers, called for an oversight hearing to assess where we are in our work on the impact of domestic violence on children, and what more can and should be done. Two congressional colleagues, Reps. Gwen Moore (D-Wis.) and Sheila Jackson Lee (D-Texas), also called for more action from the federal government. Following months of collaboration with colleagues and more than 20 local and national advocacy organizations, I will introduce this month a Violence Against Women Act reauthorization bill that increases focus on addressing the needs of youth affected by domestic violence.

While this is a start, the dialogue needs to continue.

The panelists who participated in the briefing, a cross section of pre-eminent scholars, survivors and nonprofit leaders from across the United States, have pledged their support to begin a national campaign to generate awareness about the problem of childhood exposure to domestic violence.