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Phila. officials urge funding for preschool care

By Jennifer Lin

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Philadelphia's top cop and prosecutor turned their attention to toddlers yesterday, urging Harrisburg lawmakers to support a proposed \$75 million statewide investment in preschool child care as a crime-fighting measure.

At the Children's Village Child Care Center on the edge of Chinatown, Police Commissioner Sylvester Johnson told reporters the state can either invest in children from poverty when they need nurturing the most or pay for them when they are older and lost to lives of crime.

"If we don't invest this money now, we'll pay for it later," Johnson said.

Gov. Rendell has proposed the state invest \$75 million in prekindergarten child care. The matter is before the General Assembly, which must vote on the 2007-08 budget.

Of the funding, the Philadelphia School District, along with 50 community partners, could receive \$28.8 million to care for 3- and 4-year-old children from at-risk communities.

That money could provide pre-K services to an additional 3,700 students, said Bruce Clash, state director of Fight Crime: Invest in Kids Pennsylvania, an anticrime organization of more than 200 police chiefs, sheriffs, district attorneys and other law enforcement leaders.

District Attorney Lynne M. Abraham agreed that quality prekindergarten child care was a deterrent to crime.

"We see kids as young as infants who are beaten, abused and starving, and who live in tumultuous families who are frequently violent with each other," Abraham said. "Their whole life is downward from pre-K."

Philadelphia has 14,000 children who live in poverty - of whom about half receive pre-K child care services, said David Silbermann, director of the early-childhood office of the Philadelphia School District.

Silbermann said he was not confident that lawmakers would allocate all the funding needed for young children in half- and full-day programs in schools, Head Start, child care centers, and nursery schools.

"And that's depressing," he said.

Pennsylvania lags most other states in funding pre-K services. Until three years ago, it was one of only nine states - including Montana and Idaho - that did not supplement federal funding for Head Start programs, Silbermann said.

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