

April 7, 2008

GLEN CASEL and BILL FRYE: Child service cuts move state backward

GUEST OPINION

What have we come to that the Florida Legislature feels forced to cut services for abused children in order to balance the state budget?

Both the House and Senate have produced devastating budget cuts to services for abused children who have already suffered enough. Nearly \$20 million in service cuts to abused children is on the table and the House has proposed another \$7 million cut to children who are aging out of the foster care system.

As if that weren't bad enough, both House and Senate budgets almost unimaginably propose reducing the number of child protective investigators available to search out abused children after a hot line call is made. These investigators literally mean the difference between life and death for vulnerable children. They already have one of the toughest jobs in the state and now it will be even tougher.

It was only a few short years ago that Florida's child welfare system was a national embarrassment. A system under nearly constant fire for poor performance with far too many tragedies played out in the media. Then Florida's legislators (many of the same ones cutting budgets now) retooled the system and invested enough new money to allow local communities to step up and solve their own problems.

Florida's community-based care system is far from overfunded. In fact we spend only 70 cents on the dollar compared to the national average and less than that compared with other large states. Still the system is beginning to perform in ways that prove that the investments made a few years ago are making a positive impact. Do we really want to go back to the bad old days?

The frontline workforce is the key to keeping children safe, rebuilding families, and making a better future for the victims of child abuse. In the past, children were lost amid caseloads of 40, 50, or even higher. Today the state average is closer to 25 for caseworkers and 14 for investigators. While acknowledging this improvement, we must also note that national best practice standards call for 12 and nine children, respectively.

These frontline staff work longer hours for less pay under more demanding conditions than other comparably trained professionals. Caseworkers and investigators are not a luxury. They are a necessity that the state can ill afford to lose.

Secretary Bob Butterworth of the Department of Children and Families has widely acknowledged the importance of the collaboration of state experts with local charitable organizations to form the community-based care system. These community organizations employ the frontline workers, recruit and train foster parents, hire therapists and oversee many activities to keep children safe and give them a better future. These organizations also recruit dedicated volunteers who donate goods, services, time, and money to bridge the gap between state funding and the true cost of caring for abused children. Many Floridians contribute to these local charities so they can continue to meet their obligation to care for every child that is removed from their own home. The heart of the people of Florida is with our children, shouldn't the heart of our legislature be there as well?

We ask our legislative leaders to please follow the example of Gov. Charlie Crist and tap state reserves created for hard times in order to protect Florida's abused children. Like the governor, we believe that our economy will rebound. We also believe that moving abused children from safety to jeopardy is not something that should be negotiated.
