



PRESS RELEASE

For Immediate Release
Thursday, April 3, 2008

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BROWARD'S LEAD AGENCY GRAPPLES WITH PROPOSED BUDGET REDUCTIONS

PLANTATION, FL – Historically, child welfare in Florida has been funded far below national and regional averages. However, impending legislative actions may further paralyze an already underfunded system. House and Senate committees have announced preliminary budgets that include drastic reductions for foster care and related services. Legislators propose a \$19 million reduction to services and a \$4.9 million cut to administrative budgets for Community Based Care lead agencies. The proposals also include cuts in funding of Sheriff's and DCF abuse investigations. In addition, the Senate has proposed a \$7 million reduction in funding of supports to former foster care children.

"While the allocations of these cuts are still up in the air, we could receive up to \$2 million less in the coming year. That's approximately a 4% reduction that will directly impact the services provided to children in our care," said Marty Berkowitz, Chief Financial Officer for ChildNet, Broward's Community Based Care lead agency. ChildNet's network providers may also be impacted by the fiscal cuts, as rates paid to providers for shelter and residential group care for Broward's foster care children could decrease.

The proposed statewide cut of \$7 million to the Independent Living Program could mean a 10 percent reduction in funds available to Broward's youth transitioning out of foster care. Marty Berkowitz explains, "These funds help young people aging out of foster care with managing adult responsibilities such as housing expenses and educational costs." The payments the youth receive are tied to the minimum wage and although the minimum wage will increase later this year, ChildNet will not be able to increase the youth's monthly stipend because of the budgets cuts. ChildNet estimates that as many as 80 to 100 youth may not receive a monthly stipend for some portion of the year to help with living costs if the cuts are implemented.

Over the past five years, ChildNet has made tremendous strides in caring for children involved in the dependency system. Locally and statewide the transition to Community Based Care has meant increased safety of children in foster care, far shorter stays in foster care, expanded and improved services to families and higher rates of timely and successful adoptions. ChildNet CEO, Emilio Benitez fears that proposed cuts could wipe out many of the recent gains, including the substantial reduction in the caseloads of child welfare caseworkers.

Governor Crist has proposed avoiding the cuts by utilizing state reserves created for emergencies. ChildNet Vice President of Network Development, Larry Rein has urged community stakeholders to express to their legislators their support for the Governor's approach. "What could be a direr emergency than this threat to our abused, abandoned and neglected children?" asks Rein. "This has more than just an operational impact for ChildNet, this will impact our entire community," adds Benitez. "It will require a massive community advocacy effort to ensure that funding cuts do not hurt the programs that serve Broward County's most vulnerable citizens."

ChildNet is the private, not for profit organization selected by the state through a competitive process to serve as the local Community Based Care lead agency. As the lead agency, ChildNet manages the local system of services and supports for Broward's abused, abandoned and neglected children and their caregivers. This system of care was developed with extensive input from local stakeholders and its effective implementation depends upon their continued support. For more information on ChildNet, visit the Web site at www.ChildNet.us or call (954) 414-6000.

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