

OPINION: THE DEBATE STARTS HERE

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Child welfare system busier, needs more aid

After a spate of child deaths and the intense criticism that followed, Florida child welfare officials appear to be responding with the right solution: intervening in more troubled households to take children from parents who pose a danger. In the past 12 months, the number of Palm Beach County children removed from their homes by the Department of Children and Families has spiked by 50 percent, to 1,046 from 690.

This will disrupt more families, but it will also save lives. Given DCF's track record — 20 children known to the agency died in a four-month span last year — it's the right move to make. But the attempt to solve one problem creates another: more children entering the foster care system.

When DCF takes children from their parents, it's up to local nonprofits to make sure that they find a good home elsewhere, whether with a relative, in a group home or with foster parents. Doing this the right way costs money.

To help DCF investigate cases of child abuse and neglect, state lawmakers

The state's efforts to solve one problem is creating another: more children entering the foster care system.

this year gave the agency millions of extra dollars for additional investigators and resources. But as the number of Palm Beach County children entering the system has increased, money to pay for their care has not kept up. This risks making a good problem — more children protected from dangerous parents — into a bad one.

ChildNet, the nonprofit organization that oversees the care of roughly 1,800 Palm Beach County children that DCF either has taken from their

homes or keeps with their parents under supervision, says it has seen a spike in the number of children placed in its care. That, says Larry Rein, its executive director, means an extra 300 Palm Beach County children either in foster homes or group homes this year.

Which, in turn, means a considerable increase in costs. ChildNet receives \$39 million a year from the state to ensure that Palm Beach County children under DCF supervision have a safe and nurturing living space. This means compensating foster homes and group homes, paying for counseling services, and recruiting and training future foster parents, who are always in short supply. ChildNet does some of this work directly and much of it through smaller nonprofits that provide critical services throughout the county.

But the amount of money that the state government gives to ChildNet and other community-based care organizations around Florida has not increased with the extra workload. As a result, the organization says it is burning through its cash reserves just to keep pace with the new demand. It plans budget cuts and downsizing, and it has asked DCF for \$3 million in emergency funds, but so far to no avail.

The Legislature did allocate extra money for the state's community-based care agencies this year. But it will be split between the state's 20 lead agencies. Palm Beach County will be lucky if it receives even \$1 million. Considering that ChildNet claims to be \$3 million in the hole, that won't be nearly enough.

Without funds to recruit more foster parents, more children may be sent out of the county or left in group homes, which are costly and often less nurturing. This shortchanges children who have already been shortchanged by unlucky circumstances. As the state intervenes to help more of them, it needs to assure that resources are in place to give them better homes.