

State cuts devastate children

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By Susan Loew

Every day we work our hardest to keep kids safe and help families overcome the challenges that too often lead to children being abused, neglected, and ultimately removed from their homes. Every child deserves to live in a safe home and have a good shot at a bright future.

So when decisions in Sacramento threaten child welfare services and undercut children's chances for a successful future, we must fight to protect our children. And we must hold Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger accountable for reversing his commitment to California's most vulnerable children. Unconscionable cuts that harm abused and neglected children have increased their risks, thanks to the governor's veto of \$80 million for child welfare services. The veto cost the state another \$53 million in federal funding to protect children. That's a \$133 million blow to children who already deal with loss on so many levels.

Across California, funding was eliminated for more than 600 child welfare workers. Here in Riverside County, state reductions have eliminated 46 social worker positions that must be kept vacant. The remaining staff has worked nine hours less per pay period since July because of furloughs. As a result, we have been unable to adequately staff child abuse hot lines, investigate abuse allegations in a timely manner and help families safely keep children in their homes. It also has reduced our ability to work with families to safely reunify children or find permanent, loving homes for those who cannot be reunified.

For the year that begins July 1, the Children's Services Division has reduced and/or cancelled core services that give parents the skills and support systems they need to provide safe and stable homes for their kids. When children must be removed from a home, these are the services we rely upon to ensure we place them with safe and stable foster parents.

Here are some examples of how the cuts have affected us in Riverside County:

- Cancelled two contracts for in-home visitation services, which allow trained professionals to work one-on-one with families to improve parenting skills.

-Eliminated staff positions for the health care program for children in foster care, reducing support for public health nurses.

-Reduced funding for drug testing of parents, temporary shelter for adolescents, and background checks for resource families, which affects our ability to place children with relatives.

The governor proposes to continue his cuts, and as a result, children will remain in foster care longer. Families won't receive counseling, substance abuse treatment and other critical services. Foster families will struggle to provide basic care, and we might have to eliminate transitional services that help foster kids find jobs and housing as they get older and become ineligible for foster care.

Ignoring these problems simply puts them off to tomorrow, when costs will be much higher. It's estimated that child abuse that is not addressed early costs taxpayers \$104 billion annually in greater demand for services, according to Prevent Child Abuse America.

California can and must do better for its abused and neglected children. It's the right thing to do, and caring for them means investing in the safety and security of our communities.

Caring for abused and neglected children is everyone's responsibility, and our county won't abandon our most vulnerable children. We need the governor and Legislature to make the same commitment.

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