

Can Florida's families and businesses survive another legislative session like the last one? *NO!*

In his article appearing in a recent *Time* magazine, Michael Grunwald points out that “quality of life remains the biggest risk to the Florida dream.”

Florida's families are especially at risk as the state continues to grapple with historic budget shortfalls caused by the difficult economic times. Simplistic across-the-board budget cuts are exacting a toll on the state's human infrastructure, placing our most vulnerable children and seniors in jeopardy, threatening our state's current and future economic vitality, and putting undue pressure on families.

During the 2008 session, Florida's legislators considered cutting several services which would have resulted in potentially dangerous consequences for millions of people while simultaneously harming Florida's global competitiveness. Many of these kinds of indiscriminate cuts could actually cost Florida taxpayers more money in the long run by eliminating preventative services that reduce future government liability or by reducing or foregoing Federal grants or other financial assistance tied to state funding. The state's financial picture remains bleak so residents again may face potentially harmful and unwise cuts in 2009.

Floridians must demand alternatives to future indiscriminate and across-the-board cuts to core services.

Proposed Cut: Eliminate Hospice Coverage for the Terminally Ill and Other Health Care Reductions

The Facts: Hospice serves patients with terminal illnesses, providing care and comfort in their final days. Hospice does not speed or delay death, but rather provides pain and symptom management for those with incurable diagnoses.

Potential Outcome: The elimination of Medicaid-financed hospice care for anyone under the age of 65 – including terminally ill patients already relying on hospice for vital pain medication and other therapies. Lawmakers also considered cutting the state Medically Needy program, to which desperately ill people frequently turn for lifesaving medical care – such as cancer treatment.

Another proposal that would have had potentially dangerous consequences was to completely eliminate state standards for the amount of time nursing home staff were expected to spend caring for frail elders.

Proposed Cuts: Decrease Child Abuse Prevention Services by 5 Percent and Cut \$19 Million to Child Welfare Direct Services

The Facts: The paramount function of government is keeping its citizens safe. Eliminating front-line workers whose primary focus is to evaluate whether a child's health and safety is at risk is contrary to this promise. Preventing child abuse saves lives, most importantly, but also millions of dollars that may otherwise be spent in more expensive settings such as foster care and juvenile detention centers. Reducing funding for direct services increases caseloads in dependency case management, which directly impacts a child's ability to find permanency.

Potential Outcome: The Legislature's proposed cuts would drastically reduce numbers of social workers in the field who are responsible for ensuring the safety of vulnerable children, educating families at the greatest risk for abuse and neglect, and identifying loving adoptive homes for children in foster care. Research indicates that children in foster care served by a single case worker find permanency in 74.5 percent of cases. The success rate for children with two case workers plummets to 17.5 percent, and to one-tenth of one percent for six workers.¹

Reductions below the current \$18.9 million in funding to children's services also will result in funding penalties by the Federal Government for failure to meet the required minimum amount of state general revenue for children's services, known as Maintenance of Effort (MOE). Failure to meet the MOE also jeopardizes Florida's unique waiver status.

Proposed Cuts: Eliminate 71 Child Protective Investigator Positions; Reduce Sheriff's Protective Investigators by 5 Percent

The Facts: Not long ago, Florida led national news with stories about missing and abused children. In 1998, Florida launched a program to transfer child protection and foster care to private community-based organizations. Since the advent of Community-Based Care, measurable improvements have been made, including more children adopted, more foster homes recruited and licensed, and reductions in social worker caseloads.

Potential Outcome: Children at risk in unhealthy or dangerous situations. Research shows that financial stress is a key trigger of child abuse and neglect. Since early 2007 with Florida's housing market in decline and foreclosures and bankruptcies skyrocketing, child abuse investigations have risen frighteningly. From January to June 2008, investigations into child abuse or neglect increased 8 percent over the previous six months, July-December 2007. The impact of an 8 percent increase is stunning: 1,405 additional investigations per month for an average total of 18,968 cases of potential abuse or neglect of children and youth.²

¹ Bureau of Milwaukee Child Welfare, 2005

² Florida Department of Children and Families, 2008

Proposed Cuts: Eliminate Medicaid Adult Dental and Hearing Services

The Facts: Nationally, one-third of adults aged 65 years and over have untreated cavities and slightly over 40 percent have periodontal disease, with those in poverty twice as likely as those with higher incomes to have lost all their teeth. A third of older Americans are hearing impaired. About one-quarter of those 70-74 years of age have hearing problems but this increased to half by age 85. Older men at all ages were more likely than women to be hearing impaired.³

Potential Outcome: The consequences of leaving people without proper dental and hearing services are potentially dire. When the elderly find themselves unable to hear or eat solid food, they can avoid coming out in public and become isolated. In addition, there are links to heart disease and an overall decline in health due to poor dental care.

Proposed Cut: No Funding for 3,000 Anticipated Foster Care Adoptions

The Facts: Florida has consistently increased adoptions for children in the child welfare system – in fact was recently recognized for its outstanding efforts by the Federal Government – and yet narrowly avoided significant cuts to adoption funding. On the final day of session, funding was allocated to assist with more than 3,000 adoptions expected for FY 08-09. Currently 4,642 children are available for adoption in Florida. With current funding, 41 percent of children wait up to two years to be adopted, 22 percent wait up to three years and 37 percent wait more than three years.

Potential Outcome: Without the necessary funding to meet their special needs, 3,000 children in foster care will not find permanent homes.

Proposed Cut: \$7 Million Reduction to Independent Living Program

The Facts: Each year, over 700 foster children turn 18 and are forced out of the state dependency system, even if they are still enrolled in high school. New programs that provide extended services through age 19 allow teens time to prepare for a successful transition to self sufficiency.

Potential Outcome: Youth aging out of the foster care system are becoming homeless at disconcerting rates. As many as 36 percent of young people transitioning out of the system experience homelessness at some time, 25 percent during the first year.⁴ Further, a study on children formerly in foster care found that 42 percent had birthed or fathered a child within four years of leaving the system⁵, thus creating the next generation of children at risk, in addition to increasing costs for social services.

³ National Center for Health Statistics, CDC

⁴ Cook, 1991, Child Welfare League of America, 2007

⁵ Westat, 1991