

My Turn: David Caprio: Cuts threaten child welfare in R.I.

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We've all seen the headlines. Rhode Island's children are facing tragic outcomes, including death, as a result of abuse and neglect.

The Department of Children, Youth and Families proposed budget in Fiscal Year 2019 is level-funded, continuing a \$7 million cut from FY 2018. This cut is continued despite the fact that the department is currently spending more than budgeted, and our most vulnerable children are at risk.

Budget cuts along with the settlement from the children's rights lawsuit from 2007 will increase stress on an already fragile child welfare system in Rhode Island. The commitments contained in the settlement agreement alongside a level-funded budget means the department will just be shifting funds from one area to another — creating new winners and losers in our child welfare system.

Over the past two years, the Office of the Child Advocate published three reports documenting 11 fatalities and 6 near-fatalities of children because of abuse and neglect. In 2018, there are already additional cases under review. Child deaths due to abuse and neglect should be unacceptable to all of us.

The ongoing opioid crisis plays a part in the issue, as substance abuse is prevalent in many of the bad outcomes reported by the child advocate's office.

The DCYF funding level, along with years of inconsistent leadership, has led to unmanageable caseloads for child welfare workers and a weakened safety net for our most vulnerable kids. The department has hired a qualified and caring director committed to transforming the agency to protect our most vulnerable children, but this alone is not enough.

Despite budget cuts, there are two new programs proposed in the DCYF's proposed 2019 budget: an extension of care for young people in state custody to 21, and an increase in support payments to foster parents. Both would help move the department in the right direction. However, with a level-funded budget, the cost of these additional policies would be taken from other critical programs that save lives.

The department exists because we have decided that when a family is unable to adequately care for a child, our society shares the responsibility of protecting that child. Based on the number of fatalities and near fatalities of children in Rhode Island due to abuse and neglect, we are all failing in our responsibility to protect our children.

Our budget reflects our priorities as a state, and we must prioritize the safety of our children. We know that Gov. Gina Raimondo and the members of the General Assembly care just as deeply for our most vulnerable kids as we do, and we are confident in the current director's vision for the department. Adequately funding the department is the first step in protecting our children and families — and preventing additional fatalities.

We know that with a responsible budget, the DCYF can make lasting, positive change in the lives of our children. We urge constituents in Rhode Island to speak on behalf of those who cannot speak for themselves, and ask the legislature to restore the \$7 million to the DCYF's budget in fiscal 2019. By contacting your legislators you can ensure that more children don't lose their lives from abuse and neglect in Rhode Island.

David Caprio is the president and CEO of Children's Friend, a child-serving nonprofit agency that has provided services for children and families in need for 184 years.