

# Providers urge R.I. lawmakers to put more money into child services

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PROVIDENCE, R.I. — Private agencies that provide health and support services to children in state care urged some lawmakers on Tuesday to pump more money into Gov. Gina Raimondo’s proposed budget for the state’s child welfare department.

The Department of Children, Youth and Families is budgeted to spend about \$214 million before this fiscal year ends June 30, a revised sum that includes a supplemental appropriation.

However, the department is still running in the red and has proposed cuts in some contracted services as it also sees the number of children in its Family Services units grow to 3,200 — an increase of about 500 over the last fiscal year.

Raimondo has set the department’s proposed budget for fiscal 2019 at \$209 million.

“This is a system in desperate need of an infusion of resources and yet the budget continues to be cut,” said Ben Lessing, chairman of the Rhode Island Coalition for Children and Families, which includes 39 agencies offering a spectrum of treatment for kids in state care.

“To attempt to drive costs down when the need is increasing is just unrealistic and inhumane,” Lessing told members of the House Finance Subcommittee on Human Services. “Rhode Island will not be able to meet its goals to keeping kids safe in the community unless it invests in both its public and private social service workforce.”

David Caprio, the CEO of Children’s Friend, which provides early childhood and preventative family support services, said in a statement given the committee, “We have all seen the too frequent news headlines recently of young vulnerable children in Rhode Island dying and being harmed because of abuse and neglect.”

An investigation by The Providence Journal last year found that at least 12 children died in 2017 and at least another 12 were seriously injured. In 2016, 16 children died and 13 were seriously injured.

“We strongly believe that the inadequate funding for DCYF and the increase in bad outcomes for kids are linked,” said Caprio. “Simply put, the current DCYF funding level is putting kids’ lives at risk in Rhode Island.”

Lisa Guillette, executive director of Foster Forward, said her agency is “deeply concerned” that the governor’s budget is insufficient and that years of budget cuts “have compromised the department’s ability to effectively protect and proactively respond to the needs of our state’s most vulnerable children and families.”

Guillette noted the recent child death reports by the state’s child advocate as well as the January settlement of a lawsuit over how earlier DCYF decisions led to needy children being abused. That settlement will require “additional investments” if its intentions are to be met.

That settlement with Children’s Rights, requires the DCYF to meet a number of child care improvement benchmarks that will be overseen by a monitoring team that includes the state Office of the Child Advocate.

State Child Advocate Jennifer Griffith provided some potential positive budget news, if allowed. She requested lawmakers to allow her to take advantage of some federal grant money to increase her staff by 1.4 full-time equivalent positions to bring her office’s total workforce to 10.

Griffith said the \$400,000 grant would be used to help her office monitor, through data collection, the DCYF’s care of children, as agreed to in the Children’s Rights lawsuit settlement.

Griffith had asked for five new positions this year but the governor included just one half-time position in her proposed budget.

“It seems to me you’re understaffed,” said Rep. Antonio Giarrusso, R-East Greenwich.

“Could I impact more children in a positive way if I had more people,” replied Griffith. “Yes, I could.”

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