

EDITORIAL

Keeping children safe has to be the priority

Now that the budget has passed, it's time for the state Department of Children and Families to put programs in place to keep children safe and help parents make better decisions.

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The budget passed by the Legislature and signed by Gov. Jim Doyle improves the state's ability to respond to instances of child abuse and neglect in Milwaukee County.

But the best way to ensure the safety of children in foster care is to dramatically increase the number of safe and loving foster care homes.

The goal should be to increase the number of safe homes from 690 (at the end of last year) to at least 875 by the end of this year.

This is doable.

It is, in fact, imperative if the state Department of Children and Families' Bureau of Milwaukee Child Welfare is to avoid another tragedy such as the case of Christopher Thomas Jr. Fortunately, the department realizes that increasing the number of safe homes in Milwaukee County has to be part of the conversation.

Had 13-month-old Christopher been placed in a safe home, he would be alive today. Crystal Keith was sentenced to 50 years in prison for fatally beating her nephew and severely abusing his 2-year-old sister.

After baby Christopher's death last year, the department said it would conduct "sweeping changes" to keep children safe.

And, over the past year, the bureau has announced a number of changes contingent upon the passage of the budget.

OK, the budget has passed. It's time to push these changes ahead to keep children safe and to give parents better choices.

The budget approved this month will provide the following:

- \$2.3 million over the biennium for 18 additional, initial-assessment staff positions for the bureau. More staff and caseworkers are needed to reduce individual caseloads and to improve the quality of services.

In May, a study showed that foster-care caseworkers in Milwaukee County said they were overworked, undertrained and insufficiently supported by the community.

We believe them and understand the challenges their particular kind of work imposes. Often, the job seems thankless. The importance of effective, experienced caseworkers cannot be overstated.

In the study released in May, the average number of children per caseworker was 21 in Milwaukee County. The Child Welfare League of America recommends that the number be between 12 and 15 children per foster care worker.

High caseloads mean that some clients or children aren't seen or not seen enough. New caseworkers need to be brought in and trained immediately.

- \$375,000 to expand the Mobile Urgent Treatment Team for Foster Families. The program provides crisis intervention and support services for youth with high needs placed in foster homes by the bureau.

If done right, the expansion should improve the bureau's performance on stabilizing placement while reducing the need for placements in more expensive group homes and residential care centers.

- \$750,000 for nurses to visit homes of children under age 3 in foster care. In the Christopher's case, Keith admitted to authorities that she hid the children's bruises. Nurses are trained to look for patterns of abuse.
- \$1.1 million to establish a career ladder structure to keep caseworkers from leaving the field.

Reggie Bicha, secretary of the Department of Children and Families, told the Editorial Board earlier this year that caseworker turnover was too high, with some experts putting the number at between 30% and 50%.

With turnover that high, DCF is always in the hiring and training mode. This conspires against stable and consistent service. Diminishing the churn will keep children safe because caseworkers who stay on the job are, over time, able to build relationships with families.

Moreover, experienced caseworkers will more readily spot problems than those with less experience.

- \$59,800 to pay state-employed supervisors and regional managers for work performed after hours. They are ineligible for overtime, and these after-hour duties without extra pay contribute to burnout.

This budget undoubtedly makes strides toward building up the year-old agency. But in other areas, such as child care generally, it's just getting a start. We would like to see the state move quicker toward completing its statewide quality rating system for child-care providers.

The state system is in its initial phase, but it is still a ways from being up and running. It can be an effective tool for parents by giving them the power to determine the safest place to send their children.

If used correctly, systems such as this help parents identify which child-care providers offer quality. In other words, parents would be able to recognize those providing higher-quality care as well as those whose idea of child care is parking children in front of the television set.

Child-care providers are too important in early childhood education. Simply, children in quality centers will be better prepared to start school. Too many children in Milwaukee in particular begin the race already too far behind their peers elsewhere in the state.

The department also must step up its scrutiny of the Wisconsin Shares program.

A Journal Sentinel Watchdog report this year revealed that the state overpaid day-care providers nearly \$14 million in recent years, including millions of dollars spent on care that was never delivered.

This not only cheats taxpayers but penalizes children. It's time for the department to make headway.

What would you like to see accomplished over the next several months to keep children in foster care safer? E-mail your opinion to jsedit@journalsentinel.com to be considered for publication as a letter to the editor. Please see letters guidelines.