

## **Child welfare system**

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The Tribune editorializes that Florida's child welfare system is doing quite well ("Floridians show their heart," Our Views, Aug. 29)<http://www2.tbo.com/news/opinion/2011/aug/29/meopino1-floridians-show-their-heart-ar-253423> You say that the current administration's stance is "admirable" and that past secretaries of the Department of Children and Families deserve considerable credit for aggressively seeking to reduce the number of children in foster care.

What have those officials done to correct Florida's dismal record of child protection? A third of these at-risk children will be homeless within three years, more than half will have a child within four years, and a quarter of the males will soon find themselves behind bars.

A decade ago the district health and human services boards that once ensured local advocacy and planning and evaluation of child welfare services were abolished in favor of privatization. Those boards were replaced in the privatized system by local alliances that are not even on Tallahassee's radar screens. In the "Long Range Program Plan Fiscal Years 2009-2010 through 2013-2014," there is no mention at all of community alliances.

To reduce state expenditures, Florida officials put pressure on contractors to "reduce the number of children in foster care." For doing that "aggressively" the Tribune says they "deserve considerable credit."

Beware that reducing the number of children in foster care sometimes means leaving children with their abusing parents. Florida already has a very bad reputation, probably the worst among states, for children suffering death at the hands of caretakers. Among the 50 states, Florida has the highest number of children held in adult custody. Nineteen-thousand dollars are spent annually on each prisoner, while we spend less than \$9,000 per student in school.

We are shamefully close to Texas in leading the nation on having a high percentage of children without health insurance. Nineteen percent of Texas children are uninsured, and 18 percent of Florida children are uninsured, compared with 3 percent of Massachusetts children who are in that high-risk category.

As your editorial concedes, "More work needs to be done." I do not see the evidence to support Department of Children and Families Secretary David Wilkins' statement that Florida "will never give up."

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[More information on Florida's child welfare system is available at the web site of the Florida Health and Human Services Board. <http://FHHSB.org>]

The original Aug 29 Tribune editorial is available at

<http://www2.tbo.com/news/opinion/2011/aug/29/meopino1-floridians-show-their-heart-ar-253423>