

Reporter Marbin Miller put it boldly: **“Florida not only leads the United States in the number of such deaths, but it dominates the nation.”**

To get so far ahead of 49 other states, Florida must be very special, and not just in some momentary burst of pressure, but in application of a steady wrong-headed plodding for the long run.

More than a decade ago, I was serving on the Hillsborough Manatee District Health and Human Services Board when Governor Jeb Bush came in to office declaring that he was going get the government off our backs and empty a lot of those government buildings. The Florida Legislature joined him and began calculating how they could privatize “foster care and related services.” There was a brief pilot project in Sarasota, and some consultations with national experts and a plan was quickly devised and adopted with the catchy label, “community based care.” Let’s run foster care and related services like a business! I remember one consultant from the Child Welfare League of America who said, almost off-the-cuff, that it could work, but “If they do it the way they are planning, it won’t work.”

They were in a hurry to do something dramatic, so they did it anyway. In 2000 they privatized foster care and related services. They identified private not-for-profit corporations all over the state, and contracted with them to do the work that state-trained counselors had been doing for years.

That legislation also dissolved the health and human services boards that had been the voice of citizens in each of the fifteen service districts. Calling the new privatized system “Community Based Care,” they decreed in Florida Statutes 20.19(6) that each county or district should create a community alliance that should do for its community what the official Health and Human Services Board had done in the past. The governor and the legislature claimed they could save a million dollars that way. Those community alliances would use no state funds.

Reporter Marbin Miller did not mention privatization as a factor in giving Florida its record position, “dominating the nation” in child deaths. She did, however identify a controversial decision by child welfare administrators to halve the number of children taken into state care. Then, “though Florida was the first state in the United States to obtain special permission from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services to spend federal dollars earmarked for foster care on in-home services, records show the number of Florida children under state supervision did not come close to keeping pace with the number of children who were diverted from foster care.”

“Florida narrowed its child-welfare front door as well, ramping up a program in which counselors at the state hotline were encouraged to “screen” out calls that appeared to fall short of the definition of abuse or neglect.”

In 2009, the federal Children and Family Services Review, which assessed Florida's child welfare performance from October 2006 through January 2008, reported that “children were unsafe, or at risk of harm, in their own homes either because no services were provided to address safety issues or the services provided were insufficient to ensure children's safety.” In

some cases, the reviewers found, caseworkers failed to implement a "safety plan" for at-risk kids; in other cases, they closed their investigations prematurely. Records maintained by the state Department of Health, which houses the Statewide Child Abuse Death Review Committee, show that the number of children with a prior DCF history who later died rose from a low of 29 in 2002 to a peak of 79 in 2008 — a 172 percent increase.

Reporter Marbin is to be applauded for citing and tracking these immediate problems – tight funding, administrative decisions to downsize and to shift costs both downward to the counties and upward to the federal government. However, the broader and deeper problems – privatization of the child welfare system, and dissolution of the citizens' health and human services boards that prior to 2001 gave the whole system valuable public input and advocacy that is lacking now.

Prior to 2000, District Health and Human Services Boards were the official mechanism through which citizens of local communities had meaningful input into the planning and evaluation of state services for children and families. As mentioned earlier, Governor Bush and the Legislature privatized child welfare, and replaced the District Health and Human Services Boards with "community alliances." The legislation that accomplished that replacement, Florida Statutes 20.19(6)), provided no mechanism for articulation between the alliances and the Department of Children and Families, so that the ability of the alliances to perform those planning and evaluation functions was seriously impaired. Whereas the District Boards and the Statewide Health and Human Services Board reported annually to the Department, there is now no requirement of periodic reporting by the alliances, no requirement that the Department seek their advice on a continuing basis.

Governor Bush and his Legislature certainly got rid of a chunk of government in that process, but it happened to be the chunk that served as the eyes and ears and voice of the citizens.

In the course of the past decade we have seen no advancement of the community alliance concept, no increase in the amount of participation by citizens of local communities. In fact, during the brief tenure of five or six different secretaries of the Department of Children and Families the role of concerned citizens has diminished. At this point, in 2011, there seems almost no Departmental communication with anybody except parties with financial interest in state contracts. In the "*Long Range Program Plan Fiscal Years 2009-2010 through 2013-2014*," there is no mention at all of community alliances. When the word "community" appears, it is undefined, as in "building community partnerships," or it refers specifically to "community-based care lead agencies," the corporations that hold major state contracts.

Having learned from reporter Harbin Miller's reporting how bad Florida's child protection system is, what can Florida's citizens do? There is virtually no official mechanism for us to let our will be known. The district Health and Human Services Boards are gone, gone for more than a decade.

Parenthetically, here, I should note that some of the "alumni" of those now discarded district health and human services boards, concerned at what we saw as weak community involvement,

joined together to form a new voluntary association incorporated as a not-for-profit [Florida Health and Human Services Board, Inc.](#), in order to advocate for a more meaningful role for public community stakeholders in this new system that was not living up to its label of “community based care.” We have been trying to follow these developments carefully all over the state.

Sadly, in the course of the past decade we have seen no advancement of the community alliance concept, no increase in the amount of participation by citizens of local communities. In fact, during the brief tenure of five or six different secretaries of the Department of Children and Families the role of concerned citizens has diminished. At this point, in 2011, there seems almost no Departmental communication with anybody except parties with financial interest in state contracts. In the “*Long Range Program Plan Fiscal Years 2009-2010 through 2013-2014*,” there is no mention at all of community alliances. When the word “community” appears, it is undefined, as in “building community partnerships,” or it refers specifically to “community-based care lead agencies,” the corporations that hold major state contracts.

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