

Who will speak up? Who will *pay up* for children at risk?

Every politician seems to favor child welfare – you’ve heard it, I know, “It’s for the children!” – but all those politicians also seem to believe that Florida is without resources to do much about the current worrisome situation.

In recent months, in my several roles as a volunteer in child welfare – as chair of the Florida Health and Human Services Board, as a citizen member of the Hillsborough County Children’s Services Advisory Board, as a community member of the Central Florida Behavioral Health Network, etc. -- I have participated in a number of public meetings concerning child welfare and similar health and human services issues. Everyone is concerned about the shortage of resources for serving the needs of children and families who are admittedly in need. What really concerns me is the fact that nobody at these public meetings asks about whether the shortage of resources is real, or is it perhaps just a problem of proper allocation.

In Florida, state and county tax rates have been decreasing for several decades. Even though the needs for services, especially those many needs that relate to poverty, have been increasing, the tax rate on those who still have wealth has been lowered. Remember, even those who most fervently wanted to reduce the costs of government, and have succeeded in doing so in some ways, have always agreed that it is the duty of government to protect children – our most vulnerable, our future citizens!

Nowadays, especially with Florida’s unemployment rate hovering for several years at the 12% rate, and unemployment benefits expiring for many of those unfortunates, one hears executives, experts and scholars at community meetings explaining that all the factors of which poor children are at risk are increasing and that we know what must be done to achieve “risk factor mitigation.” We hear planning committee after planning committee – even these community alliances we spoke of earlier -- reporting findings that the financial status of households is highly associated with all the other problems these families have.

Remember, Florida Statutes declare that the duties of the community alliance in each community shall include, but not necessarily be limited to:

1. Joint planning for resource utilization in the community, including resources appropriated to the department and any funds that local funding sources choose to provide.
2. Needs assessment and establishment of community priorities for service delivery.
3. Determining community outcome goals to supplement state-required outcomes.
4. Serving as a catalyst for community resource development.
5. Providing for community education and advocacy on issues related to delivery of services.
6. Promoting prevention and early intervention services.

If these community alliances were really doing what they are supposed to do, Reporter Marbin Miller would not say: **“Florida not only leads the United States in the number of such deaths, but it dominates the nation.”** < <http://www.tampabay.com/blogs/the-buzz-florida-politics/content/floridas-leads-nation-deaths-children-state-started-failed-protect>>

For those Floridians who care, it is now time for some strong advocacy promoting the improvement of Florida’s efforts for protecting children at risk of abuse and neglect.

Instead of believing those who say that there is a shortage of resources, perhaps we should say, seriously, “Let’s do something about it!” With Florida unemployment hovering at 12 %, we might have to “throw money at this problem!”

It takes money to study the risk factors. It takes money to analyze the findings. It takes money to educate decision makers that it takes money to mitigate some of those risk factors. It takes money to train child and family counselors. It takes money to create jobs. Regarding the latter, creating jobs rather than laying off staff wouldn’t be a bad way to start.

Even though we may understand the problem better than we did some years ago, we have not made progress. Many of these bright people at these meetings seem to be accepting a false premise: The money just isn’t there to do the things we know must be done.

Although one often hears “They’re killing us with taxes,” the fact is nobody in Florida is being taxed to death.

In Florida, the only residents who have reason to complain about taxes are the poor, especially the jobless poor, who are charged sales taxes on everything they buy except raw food.

Floridians who rent living quarters pay their landlord’s property tax through their monthly rent. There are no homeowners’ exemptions on rental property. On the other hand, Floridians who own their own homes get a \$50,000 homestead exemption if their property is assessed at more than \$75,000.

While the basic homestead exemption may save the homeowner only a few hundred dollars per year, other rights that come with a homestead exemption can be valuable. That’s why I say it is the poor, those without property, who have a right to complain. Florida’s tax rates are quite regressive.

I appreciate the fact that I digress. These kinds of questions are never raised at the meetings that I have been attending. The participants in these meetings know that the children who are most in need of these services are children in households that are poor and, in Florida, those households pay the highest taxes relative to their income.

At none of these child-oriented public meetings did I hear any mention of raising taxes in Florida. The only mention of raising money had to do with trying to squeeze more funds out of the federal government through its matching grants programs.

In Florida, tax rates have been declining, especially for the wealthy. There is no tax on income in Florida. Nor is there an estate tax or a tax on inheritance. Years ago there was a small tax on intangible wealth, such that a household that had shares of stocks, bonds, bank accounts, etc. over a certain amount, were taxed at a low rate. Over the past fifteen years those rates have been gradually reduced, so that now, since 2007, there is no tax at all no matter how many millions of dollars a household has in investments.

Contrary to popular opinion, there is no shortage of millionaires in Florida. Millionaires abound, and beyond that Florida is home to 3,526 “ultra-wealthy” residents (folks worth \$30 million or more) according to Robert Trigaux of the St. Petersburg Times.

< <http://www.tampabay.com/blogs/venturebiz/content/millionaires-schmillionaires-floridas-home-3526-ultra-wealthy-residents>>

We don’t need to be reminded that our new governor reputedly spent \$70 million on getting himself elected, but he pays no Florida income tax and no tax on his intangible property.

There is another tax in Florida that is relevant to our concern. The Florida Documentary Stamp Tax applies to large business transactions such as real estate deals, financial notes, etc. Since this tax applies to documents executed or delivered in Florida, the very wealthiest can avoid those taxes through signing the papers on a yacht a few miles offshore. The purchase of a yacht is tax-free as well, because the legislature exempts yachts from the sales tax, just as it exempts stadium sky boxes. Buyers of small boats, however, and sports fans who buy regular stadium tickets pay sales tax.

It is utterly astounding how regressive Florida’s tax system is. It is also astounding how many Floridians don’t even question why the services to children who are at risk of abuse or neglect must be cut in 2011 when wealthy Floridians could easily afford to pay more in taxes to support services for children.

Whenever we are discussing protecting the children of Florida from abuse and neglect and planning to provide them the necessary educational, health, and social services these children deserve, we should question whether the vast resources of Florida are being allocated appropriately to do what needs to be done.

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