

Show How Money's Spent; Lives Depend On It

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Over the summer, the Georgia Department of Human Resources board and DHR employees are making decisions about the agency's funding request for next fiscal year. The board should demand accountability from DHR. Funding for child protection services in Georgia is higher than it has been in decades and the board should be looking for a return on this investment.

Govs. Sonny Perdue and Roy Barnes committed to protecting abused children. Their budget recommendations included:

- * higher pay for DFCS case managers with additional pay for masters in social work degrees.
- * higher daily expense payments for foster parents.
- * 290 additional case manager positions (to reduce case loads).
- * additional and more appropriate placements for children with special needs and mental illnesses.

The Georgia General Assembly endorsed these recommendations so today the Department of Family and Children Services budget is more than \$70 million larger than it was in fiscal year 2001.

Despite financial inroads made toward improving Georgia's child welfare system, DHR Commissioner B.J. Walker recently said DFCS is a "system in crisis." As if to punctuate this statement, the next week two women received life sentences for the murder of Rita Moody, a DeKalb County child who was repeatedly brought to the attention of DFCS. The case manager to whom the case was assigned had too many cases to investigate what was happening to Rita.

Four years ago, Georgia's child welfare system needed an influx of resources to stop the hemorrhaging of case managers exiting the system and to provide appropriate tools for its work force. Today, with a record 14,500 children in state custody, DFCS is still not funded at levels equivalent to child welfare agencies in states that are similar to Georgia or at levels that allow the system to meet national standards. Additional resources are needed, but first there must be an examination of why the dollar increases have not translated into better outcomes for children.

Budget appropriations over the last three years provided for 290 additional child protection case managers. If there are 290 additional people investigating and

monitoring cases, why did the case worker assigned to Rita have too many cases to permit her time to visit Rita's house? If there aren't 290 more workers out in the field, then how was the money spent?

Maximizing federal dollars is another way to increase resources and the board should ask why DHR is receiving less federal Title IV-E money for children in foster care than comparable states. In 1999, about 50 percent of Georgia's foster children were eligible for this funding. Today that figure has dropped to 30 percent. Eligibility for federal funding is based on many factors, most of which are within the control of DFCS and the juvenile courts. With hundreds of millions of dollars per year on the line, DFCS and the courts first need to identify and then correct all problems that are preventing Georgia from maximizing our share of federal funds for our foster children.

While concerns about numbers of case managers and reduced federal funding raise questions about the stewardship of resources, the true measure of how the money is being used is the safety of children. Are abused children better protected by our child welfare system today than they were four years ago? The answer is a resounding no.

Georgia scores worse today on indicators of child safety such as repeat maltreatment and foster care re-entry than it did during the 2001 Federal Child and Family Services Review. With such a dismal return on investment, DHR board members should be demanding that DFCS work with community partners to produce detailed plans to improve these indicators of child safety using tried and true techniques.

This summer the DHR board decides what future resources are needed for Georgia's most vulnerable residents. This year's budget cycle activities must also include an analysis of past spending and return on investments, as well as a research-based assessment of current and anticipated needs, challenges and opportunities. The resulting budget request should specifically target limited resources to address identified needs.

The DHR board and General Assembly must continue to ask hard questions about how money is spent to ensure that accountability goes hand in hand with increased funding.

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