



Editor's Page

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Dynamics

First, a success story. A little over four years ago, Florida did a smart thing. The state struck a deal with the federal government involving money that flows down from Washington as part of the Social Security Act. The funds — under what's called Title IV-E — pay for protective care for children whom the state has removed from out-of-control families.

As is typical with federal programs, Title IV-E money comes with thick strings attached: It can be used only for state services to kids in out-of-home care — either in foster homes or state-run group facilities. The people who actually deal with troubled families, however, know that if children aren't being abused or severely neglected, they're often better off in their homes than in foster care. Casey Family Programs, a foundation based in Seattle, found that children living in foster care “suffer rates of post-traumatic stress disorder similar to U.S. veterans of the Vietnam and Iraq wars.” A Casey report says that foster children are more likely to end up poor, homeless, sick or in prison.

In 2006, a group of child services officials developed an innovative proposal to the feds that has given the state some flexibility. A key leader in the group was Don Winstead, a quiet, modest man who's an expert on federal funding issues and possibly the most effective public servant in Tallahassee. (Winstead, a Republican, is a deputy secretary at the Florida Department of Children and Families; he also served in Washington at the federal Health and Human Services agency.) Winstead applied successfully for a waiver from the feds that lets the DCF use the Title IV-E money for a broader range of services than just out-of-home care. Florida is still the only state that has such a statewide waiver.

That bureaucratic permission slip has changed thousands of lives by enabling DCF — which contracts with locally based groups like the Children's Home Society to provide services to children and families — to focus on what the children need rather than where care is provided.

Consider, for example, the young child whose troubled mother was having a hard time staying on her medication and whose angry father was fighting frequently with the mother. The struggling parents didn't want to break up the family; the child wasn't being overtly abused but was clearly at risk of being neglected. Without discretion in how Title IV-E money could be used, the caseworker's only choices would have been to either leave the child in that turbulent environment or remove him from the home and put him in foster care. With the waiver, a little money went for some counseling for dad and some additional mental health services for mom, who didn't meet other state criteria for help. Ultimately, the family re-formed and has stayed together.

Multiply that case by thousands. In just four years, the state has reduced the number of children under state supervision by 24%, from 49,000 to 37,000. The number of children in foster care is down by a third. Caseloads for children's services workers have fallen from 40-plus to a more manageable 26. Workers now average a monthly visit in almost 100% of the cases, up from 85% prewaiver. Kids get help more quickly. Adoptions have doubled. The number of older kids getting help living

independently has risen from 800 to 2,000. And kids are safer — in the first year of the waiver, re-abuse rates fell by half in just six months, according to the Children's Home Society. The waiver's impact, says Children's Home Society President David Bundy, is definitive — “one of the most-researched, well-documented outcomes” in terms of the benefits it has produced for Florida's children and families.

In exchange for the flexibility in how it can use the Title IV-E money, the state promised it would accept a 3% annual increase from the feds instead of the usual matching funds arrangement. It also promised to maintain its own contribution to the program at a certain minimum level.

Therein is the rub — and the second half of this story. Amid the state's budget pinch during the past several years, lawmakers have treated that base-level funding as just another line item to be considered for cuts along with how many cars are in the state's motor pool. The difference, as Bundy points out, is that cutting the base-level funding is dynamic rather than just belt-tightening: If Florida doesn't maintain its funding level, it could lose the waiver. And “if the state loses the IV-E waiver, things start to move quickly back in the other direction” as far as the gains the state has made in the quality of care provided for at-risk children.

As of this writing, it appears that the money will be there, and that the state will keep the waiver. Meanwhile, however, the Legislature annually considers a host of other cuts whose consequences are similarly dynamic, including the kind of cuts to university budgets in the past several years that have driven away faculty who took with them millions in grants from the National Institutes of Health and other organizations.

And, meanwhile, the Legislature resolutely resists even the most common-sense ways to take some of the pressure off the budget by adding a few dollars of revenue: By dumping a few sales tax exemptions, for example, or moving to resolve the question of taxing internet sales.

And, meanwhile, Republican lawmakers quick to claim the mantle of fiscal responsibility and preach the “no new taxes” gospel make themselves hypocrites, using federal stimulus plan money — the worst kind of tax money since it's pure deficit spending — to fill in ongoing holes in the state budget rather than truly putting the state's house in order.

The whole thing has left each year's budget-making process look more like a frantic search for loose change in the sofa cushions than any kind of well-considered effort to decide how best to spend the people's money at a time when resources are tight. “There really needs to be a better way of making these decisions like you would in a business on a cost-benefit analysis,” says Bundy. “There's not enough rigor in the question of this cut vs. that cut.”

A bill supported by Florida TaxWatch would let the Senate president or House speaker request a “dynamic analysis” of legislation and budget cuts. It may not pass this year, but it could become a baby step toward a better approach.

We need one.