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Hard times put kids at risk, as well as programs to serve them

BY CAROL MARBIN MILLER

Florida child-welfare administrators are being asked to cut tens of millions of dollars from safety-net programs for vulnerable children at a time kids may be at greater risk.

Reports of child abuse and neglect rise during periods of economic hardship, studies show. With Florida's economy widely believed to be in recession, calls to the state's child-abuse hot line were up 17 percent in March over the previous year.

But lawmakers are considering deep cuts to the very programs in the Department of Children & Families and other agencies that support struggling families or enable the state to determine which children are most endangered.

The cuts, which would total more than \$100 million, have already had an effect: They have convinced a Miami-Dade foster mom that she won't be able to afford to adopt the severely disabled 7-year-old she has cared for over the past six years.

"We don't have money -- that's all you hear. We don't have money," said Kim Rowe, 48, a legal secretary who took Courtney in six years ago when her parents' chronic drug abuse led to serious neglect. Rowe has been struggling ever since to provide for the girl, who has severe cerebral palsy and mental retardation and cannot eat without a feeding tube.

"These cuts are going to be absolutely devastating," said Broward Circuit Judge John A. Frusciante, who has presided over child welfare cases for a decade. "We are sacrificing the future for what is perceived to be an emergency at the moment. It will come back to haunt us."

DCF Secretary Bob Butterworth has called the cuts the equivalent of "a contract on kids," and suggested some children may die as a result of them.

"How can any legislator go home after making these cuts?," Butterworth said. "Don't you think their mothers would say: 'I didn't raise you this way?'"

Lawmakers have proposed about 5 percent in reductions to DCF's \$2.9 billion total spending plan -- about \$126 million in cuts in a House bill, or \$108 million in a Senate package.

DCF already has trimmed \$30 million from the current year's budget.

Other departments, such as the Agency for Workforce Innovation, which pays for child care, the Department of Juvenile Justice and the Agency for Persons with Disabilities also are facing deep cuts.

Leaders of both the House and Senate say they have been backed into a corner by dire economic times and have shown leadership when forced to make tough choices over the budget.

"The main principle we have put behind this budget is we can't spend money we don't have," said

House Majority Leader Adam Hasner, a Delray Beach Republican.

Florida's economic woes have driven more families onto the economic margins, analysts say. Requests for food stamps statewide in March increased by almost 19 percent from the previous year, with 229,785 additional families seeking help, according to DCF records.

A host of academic studies have shown children to be at greater risk of harm when their parents are unemployed or struggling, and that the risks lessen when parents are better off.

During the economic boom of the mid-1990s, for example, the number of children living in poverty declined dramatically nationwide, said Fred Wulczyn, director of the Center for State Foster Care and Adoption Data at the Chapin Hall Center for Children at the University of Chicago. At the same time, reports of child abuse and neglect declined.

"There is no doubt that when the economy takes a significant downturn, we see neglect go up," said Paul Vincent, a child-welfare expert who is credited with turning Alabama's foster care program into a national model.

Proposed cuts to Florida's child-welfare programs, part of an effort to reduce the state budget by as much as \$5 billion for the fiscal year that begins July 1, include the following:

- Save \$4 million by cutting 71 child-abuse investigators statewide. DCF administrators say the layoffs will increase the time it takes for an investigator to visit children who may have been abused or neglected, increase caseloads and possibly result in a backlog.
- Cut about \$13 million from a statewide program that pays child-care bills for thousands of Florida parents so they can continue to work. Without the subsidies, advocates say, thousands of working poor families face difficult choices, including leaving their young children home alone.

The trims could leave as many as 6,500 children across the state without reliable child-care options, said Tabatha Cullen, spokeswoman for the Early Learning Coalition of Miami-Dade and Monroe counties.

"Working families without care for their children have few options: Either stop working and apply for public assistance, or leave their children in potentially risky situations," said Evelio Torres, the learning coalition's president.

- Trim \$7 million -- rather than adding \$16.8 million, as Gov. Charlie Crist has requested -- from a program to support foster kids who turn 18 and "age out" of state care with no family. Many of the kids, a recent study found, end up homeless or in jail, and most of the girls already have children of their own. The cuts could affect 600 young adults.
- Reduce the budgets of Florida's 19 community foster care agencies by nearly \$19 million. The community-based care agencies, or CBCs, provide child welfare, foster care and adoption services to about 37,000 children throughout the state. In recent years, three of the agencies have failed.
- Trim \$16.6 million from a program that helps support former foster children who are adopted. Many of the kids are disabled or have psychiatric impairments and require such services as speech and physical therapy, mental health treatment, tutoring, after-school care and medication.

Without the subsidies, said Fran Allegra, who heads the Our Kids private foster care agency in Miami, some CBCs will find it difficult, if not impossible, to persuade families to adopt children, especially kids with special needs.

"A lot of people really depend on that for help," said Alvin Patterson, a Richmond Heights man who adopted a disabled child from foster care five years ago when the girl was 11. Patterson and his wife, Mable, also foster other children with special needs who were abused or neglected.

A cut in his state subsidy, Patterson said, would almost certainly mean less food on the family's table and fewer clothes for the kids to wear. The children probably will not be able to have birthday parties or occasional trips ice skating or to Chuck E. Cheese for pizza.

"We'll have to make sacrifices," said Patterson, who stays at home to care for the foster children, some of whom have disabilities or psychiatric impairments. "There are going to be some cutbacks."

For Kim Rowe and Courtney, sacrifice and scraping by have become standard operating procedure.

When Rowe needed a van with wheelchair access for her severely disabled foster child, her colleagues at a Miami law firm hosted a Hawaiian-themed fundraiser to help pay for it.

And when Rowe needed a special chair to bathe Courtney, and a lift to hoist the girl into it, a Miami judge who oversaw the girl's foster care case convinced her uncle to pay for it.

In recent months, the state has decreased the number of hours Courtney receives nursing care, and Rowe still is fighting with the state for specialized equipment that would help the little girl develop, both physically and mentally.

"Never have I grown to resent [Courtney] but I get very upset with the state, with Medicaid and with the Legislature," she said. "They don't know what it's like until they're walking in our shoes. I'm just one parent of one kid, and there are so many of us in the same boat. It's scary."

Miami Herald staff writers Gary Fineout and Mary Ellen Klas contributed to this report.