

Drug use linked to increased foster care caseload in Volusia

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DAYTONA BEACH -- The number of area children removed from their homes for abuse or neglect jumped more than 80 percent from January to February at a time when the local foster care agency is expecting a cut of more than \$200,000 from the state.

The reason for the rise -- more parents abusing prescription drugs, child welfare officials said.

Mark Jones, CEO of Community Partnership for Children, which serves foster children in Volusia, Flagler and Putnam counties, said prescription drug abuse continues to cause more children to be neglected while waiting lists for drug treatment services continue to grow.

In February, 69 children in the three counties, the majority from Volusia, were removed from their homes by state child protective investigators compared to 37 in January, Jones said.

Volusia County alone went from 23 to 48, more than a 100 percent increase, state officials said.

In February 2011, 46 children were removed from the three counties, Jones said.

Statewide, the number of removals from January to February increased 7.8 percent, according to the state Department of Children & Families.

February is generally a slow month for the foster agency, Jones said, with the summer seeing higher numbers while children are out of school.

"We are already seeing higher numbers before going into the busy times, which is really a scary thought," Jones said.

The total number of children being served either in foster homes, group homes, with relatives or in their homes with their parents is also the highest it has been in four years -- a total of 1,489 children in the three-county area.

Jones said he's concerned recently approved cuts in the state's budget could make things worse. He said community-based care agencies are expecting a \$7.5 million reduction, with his agency seeing a drop of about \$200,000 on July 1 if approved by the governor. He said the cuts will have to come through efficiencies such as getting children reunified with their families more quickly. His agency, which receives about \$27.5 million from the state, has already reduced its staff from 190 last year to 175 this year.

"We can't cut services. We can't cut staff -- we are as (low) as we can go," Jones said. "We are facing a whole new problem with this prescription substance abuse. It may not go away as quickly as we hope."

Jones and state officials are hoping changes the state Legislature approved for child protective investigators with the state Department of Children & Families may help reduce the number of children in care.

The state budget includes funding for raises for investigators, increased training and better technology, state officials said.

With more trained and experienced staff, Jones said, a tenured investigator may be able to allow a child to remain safe in their home with the agency's services.

David Abramowitz, regional director for DCF for 20 counties, including Volusia and Flagler, said he loses about 55 percent of investigators in their first year from turnover because of the stresses of the job and high caseloads. The budget calls for an increase in the annual base salary of child protective investigators from \$35,900 to \$39,600.

Funding is also available for improvements to the state's child welfare information system to help investigators access and input information while away from the office, Abramowitz said. He said investigators will be able to spend more time at a family's home instead of going back to the office to input data.

"We will be able to identify exactly what services a family needs," Abramowitz said.

Joe Follick, DCF communications director in Tallahassee, said the first step is ensuring investigators are well-trained and qualified. With better decision-making at the beginning, he said, it "will have a ripple effect for the entire system."

"We want families to stay together and we want to provide them the tools to do that. Our number one goal is to keep kids safe," Follick said.

Statewide, Follick said there has also been an increase in prescription drug abuse.

Jones said locally the cause of about 80 percent of children coming into the foster care system is because of one or both parents are abusing prescription drugs.

The parents, Jones said, are unable to supervise their children properly, are sleeping during the day or driving while on drugs and impacting their decision ability.

"Those cases are really tough," added Clay LaRoche, interim local DCF community development administrator. "We can't leave the kids there often times with services in the home because it's still a danger to the kids."

Jones said diversion and crisis intervention programs, intended to allow children to remain in their homes with their parents, have waiting lists. There are also waiting lists for outpatient and inpatient services.

"The demand is higher than it's ever been before. This is the worst I've seen in 20 years," Jones said.

Randy Croy, executive director of Haven Recovery Center, a substance abuse and mental health treatment agency, said "our waiting list is as long as its ever been" with a number of those waiting needing help for prescription drug abuse.

About 150 people, for example, are waiting anywhere from weeks to months for residential treatment service. They are offered outpatient and other supportive services but not everyone is able to take those services because of lack of transportation or other issues, he said.

As far as funding, the treatment agencies "have been fighting to hold on to what we have," Croy said, for about three years. The funding was held steady the past two years but may be cut about 2.5 percent based on the state budget.