



Our Opinion: Budget hostages

Children's Week is more than cute kids

We are "unraveling our sense of community in this state," a seasoned lobbyist observed, looking over some \$700 million in House and Senate budget cuts currently aimed at health and human services.

For Rich Rasmussen, advocating for the Florida Hospital Association, those losses are magnified because, without a state investment, Florida also loses multimillions in Medicaid reimbursements.

Public hospitals see these losses affecting their ability to serve those without health insurance, of which there are 3.5 million in our state. They are rightly concerned about such things as competition from "boutique hospitals" and the move to abandon certification of the "need" for additional hospitals. This is a legitimate concern if Florida wishes to avoid exacerbating our emerging two-tiered health care system — one for the uninsured and very sick; another for healthier patients with private insurance.

While the proposed cuts in health and human services hurt all uninsured Floridians, most of them working, they will hurt children more than any other group.

How ironic that this is "Children's Week" in the Legislature, an event meant to awaken somnolent lawmakers who perhaps don't realize the gravity of over-simplified ideological budget decisions.

George Sheldon, a former lawmaker from Tampa who now serves as assistant secretary for operations at the Department of Children and Families, knows the game from both sides of the table. And he estimates that DCF's probable loss of 700 positions, as a result of its \$122 million budget reductions, would include 71 child-protective services investigators and 200 employees who work with the food stamp program — which, given the economy, is certain to expand instead of shrink along with its work force.

Children's advocates, including Florida Chief Financial Officer Alex Sink, are united, however, in their support of some legislative actions that wouldn't cost a lot of money — and would, in fact, save.

These include such things as automatically enrolling children in Kidcare, which provides basic insurance at a very modest monthly cost to families, and in general streamlining the now convoluted application procedures for Florida Healthy Kids, the state's health insurance program for uninsured children under age 19. Another is to extend dependent health coverage to age 30.

State Rep. Loranne Ausley, D-Tallahassee, has long been ahead of the curve in her advocacy of children's issues, their health, safety and education. It is shocking that so many of her fellow lawmakers continue turning a blind eye toward these community-building concerns that, if neglected, will quite simply cost countless millions on down the road.

During this Children's Week in the Legislature, we sincerely hope the participation of elementary-school children and other youngsters won't be considered just a cute and endearing distraction from the important work at hand. It's hard to fathom any work that's more important than safeguarding and education children, and it's inconceivable how lawmakers can continue with plans to balance the state budget on their backs.

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