



TALLAHASSEE DEMOCRAT

Kids' needs highlighted at Capitol

Children's Week focuses on need for more resources for children's services

By TaMaryn Waters

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No matter what issue people came to support, the state's wilting budget will more than likely have an effect on how well services are and will be delivered to children.

And that's unsettling for many of the thousands of people who are pouring into the city this week for events linked to the 14th Annual Children's Week. The events included tours, activity booths and a "Kids Only" town-hall meeting with the state's Youth & Children Cabinet.

Supporters are hoping legislators will be mindful of children's needs before they consider voting for budget cuts. And issues, such as the effort to reduce the number of uninsured children and funding for public education have triggered concern.

"They do these cuts on the backs of children, and taxes are an adult issue," Chris Duggan, chief-executive officer of the Early Learning Coalition of the Big Bend Area, said. "If they don't have what they need now, what kind of adults will they be?"

But state officials say they're caught in an ongoing juggling act since Florida must attempt to meet critical needs, even though the state's revenue is suffering. "We are very pleased with the progress, but we have a long way to go," Sen. Nan Rich, D-Sunrise said, regarding state initiatives. "It's going to take time to correct some of the problems."

Gov. Charlie Crist stopped by the "Kids Only" town-hall meeting, which allowed a 12-member panel of middle, high and college students to pose questions to the Children & Youth Cabinet.

It's the second year young people have been able to question state leaders. And Crist said this type of dialogue is helpful.

"The greatest thing that any of us can do is learn," he said.

But the questions were tough, and they touched on subjects like child abuse and neglect, the need for mentors, early-childhood education and pre-natal care for teens.

As a current foster child, 17-year-old Patricia Fincel of Middleburg said she doesn't believe the Cabinet adequately addressed how the state is making sure children are not being sent to unfit homes.

"They are being naive (about) what's going on," said Patricia, adding that she knows people who have been beaten and raped. "The people I know are so traumatized."

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