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We must act now to help more than 1,700 Palm Beach County kids in child welfare system | Opinion

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Palm Beach County's most vulnerable children are in crisis. We must act now, before it's too late.

Right now, more than 1,700 local children are in the child welfare system – the highest number we've seen here in seven years. The number continues to rise, as more kids are removed from their families due to concerns for their safety and well-being.

In the past two years, 260 additional local kids have entered foster care, putting excessive strain on the system of care. More specifically, the influx of children entering care at such an alarming rate is putting significant pressure on the only provider of case management services to kids and families in Palm Beach County's child welfare system: Children's Home Society of Florida.

Charged with protecting every single one of these children, CHS is also responsible for ensuring these kids and their families receive the services they desperately need so they can safely return home – quickly and permanently.

Despite the odds stacked against them, CHS' team in Palm Beach County continues exceed the Department of Children and Families' high expectations for

performance and safety – which is good for kids. They're safe. They're stable. They're safely returning home or joining adoptive families quickly. It's because Children's Home Society of Florida puts kids first. Always.

However, this success, this positive impact on our children's lives and futures, is unsustainable without immediate and long-term solutions.

Caring for the massive number of children entering foster care requires significant expense, most notably through the addition of several case managers, the professionals on the front line who make successful results happen.

By doing the right thing and hiring additional professionals to prioritize child safety and well-being, CHS is expected to take a \$1 million hit by the end of June – and there is no definitive relief. A nonprofit organization responsible for our community's most vulnerable children cannot be expected to suffer such significant financial losses –it threatens the entire mission of the organization, including the good work CHS does to prevent children from ever entering foster care.

That poses a real threat to the future of our children.

We must address this now. Caring for vulnerable children is our collective responsibility.

I urge our Palm Beach County legislative delegation to support funding requests to address this deficit in the short term. The Legislature has options, one of which is a risk pool of funds specifically for these situations. We must ensure relief gets to the front line of our child welfare system.

That's just step one, however; we also need a long-term solution that starts with making sure funding is prioritized to the front line and making the risk pool more accessible to communities in times of crisis.

If we don't address this crisis, our children will pay the price.

That's not a price any of us should accept. I certainly am not.

Andrew Duffell is a Member of the Board of Directors of the Children's Home Society of Florida.



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