NATIONAL COALITION FOR CHILD PROTECTION REFORM

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FEWER CHILDREN TORN FROM THEIR FAMILIES IN FLORIDA

First significant decline in nearly a decade, national child advocacy group says

The report discussed in this release is available online at
www.nccpr.org/reports/floridaror03062008.pdf

For the first time in nearly a decade, Florida has seen a significant reduction in the number of children torn from their families, according to a national child advocacy organization that closely monitors child welfare in the state.

"The fever of family destruction that has gripped Florida child welfare since 1999, and done so much harm to the state's vulnerable children, finally may have broken," said Richard Wexler, executive director of the National Coalition for Child Protection Reform.

Wexler released NCCPR's annual *Florida Rate-Of-Removal Index* today. The index shows that statewide, the Department of Children and Families and county sheriffs' offices removed 17,446 children from their homes, a 19 percent decrease from 2006, and the lowest figure since 1998, when just under 14,000 children were taken.

In 2006, Florida was taking away children at a rate 30 percent above the national average. In 2007, the rate fell to roughly that average "though that still is much higher than systems across the country widely regarded as, relatively speaking, models," Wexler said.

"And once again, the data prove that child removal does not equal child safety. Once again, districts taking proportionately fewer children often performed better on key safety outcomes. In contrast, in the one region that bucked the trend, the Fort Myers area, child safety dramatically worsened even as removals soared."

NCCPR ranks regions by comparing the number of children taken from their parents over the course of a year to the total number of impoverished children in the region. NCCPR also looks at two key safety outcomes used by the federal government to compare states: the proportion of children reabused within six months and foster care recidivism (the proportion of children sent home from foster care who must be placed again within a year).

Wexler cautioned that the data are incomplete and may contain errors due to DCF switching to a new computer system. DCF itself has warned that figures for the second half of 2007 should be viewed as preliminary. In addition, data on entries into care are missing entirely for one county, Flagler. Some of the safety data also are missing for 11 very small counties. "While this is unlikely to change the overall results, it suggests that

the entry-into-care numbers for these counties also might be incomplete, so the total number of children taken from their parents may be understated by, perhaps, several hundred," Wexler said.

He also noted that the safety outcomes often reflect decisions made in the first half of 2007 or, in the case of foster-care recidivism, even 2006, something that should be kept in mind in regions where leadership has changed only recently.

"Nevertheless, The trend suggests that the promises of change from Bob Butterworth since he took over DCF have not been just talk – it looks like he is backing the words with action."

Butterworth's approach is consistent with what Wexler called "a mountain of research on the harm of foster care.

"A Massachusetts Institute of Technology Study compared outcomes for 15,000 children and found that children placed in foster care fared worse than comparably maltreated children left in their own homes. A second study, in Minnesota, produced identical results. A third study, of foster care alumni, found they have twice the level of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder and only one in five could be said to be doing well. That study also found that at least one in three of the alumni reported being abused by a foster parent or another adult in a foster home. The study didn't even ask about one of the biggest sources of abuse, foster children abusing each other.

"And a University of Florida study of children born with cocaine in their systems found that even these children did better when left with birth mothers able to care for them. For the foster children, the separation from their mothers was more toxic than the cocaine.

"Butterworth understands that, for the overwhelming majority of children caught up in the system, it is contrary to their best interests, indeed it is unsafe, to throw them into a system that churns out walking wounded four times out of five.

"In changing direction, Butterworth is showing great courage. In order to do what's right for children, he's willing to, in effect, paint a target on his own back," Wexler said. "That's because now, those wedded to a take-the-child-and-run approach will try to smear Butterworth's reforms by scapegoating them for the next high-profile tragedy. In effect, they'll be making a cynical bet – wagering that Floridians will forget all the horror stories, and the surge in deaths of children 'known to the system,' that occurred during Florida's years of panic, from 1999 through 2006.

"The data also suggest that the one good move in child welfare during the entire Jeb Bush administration is paying off," Wexler said. Bush made Florida the only state in America to accept a "waiver" from federal funding restrictions. "In exchange for accepting a fixed amount of money, instead of an amount that escalates when more children are taken away, more than $100 million per year that used to be limited to funding foster care also can be used for safe, proven programs to keep families together. In one move, the waiver both took away a perverse incentive to tear apart families and provided new resources to keep those families together. The data suggest that some districts, at least, are taking advantage of it."

Wexler said data from individual districts and counties also show "the profound impact of strong, courageous leadership."

He cited Hillsborough County, where cooperation between the privatized "lead agency" Hillsborough Kids, and the county sheriff's office has cut removals of children

by 41 percent in 2007 and by nearly half over the past two years. "Yet of all the counties in the Suncoast Region, Hillsborough has the best record on avoiding reabuse and the second best record on avoiding foster-care recidivism.

"Hillsborough's success stands in stark contrast to Manatee County," Wexler said. Though removals declined slightly, were it a separate district, Manatee would have the second highest rate of removal in the state. Wexler attributed Manatee's problems to "poor leadership from the privatized lead agency, and a county sheriff's office that seems to revel in scapegoating families for anything that might happen to their children. And when that office responds to these data with the usual nonsense equating child safety with child removal, they're going to have to explain why Hillsborough is doing a better job of keeping children safe."

Wexler also cited Palm Beach County, which had been in turmoil in 2006, with removals of children up 60 percent in two years.

"New leadership changed all that," Wexler said. "In 2007, fewer families in Palm Beach County were torn apart than in any year since 2004 – and just as the panic did not improve child safety, there is no evidence that taking fewer children compromised safety." Wexler noted that one of the leaders who brought reform to Palm Beach County, Alan Abramowitz, also worked to turn around Pinellas County in 2007 and now is running the Miami DCF region.

Wexler said that districts taking fewer children often have better safety outcomes because workers are not inundated with as many false reports, trivial cases, and children needlessly removed from their families – so they have more time to evaluate each case more carefully.

In contrast, child safety deteriorated sharply in the one region still in the throes of foster-care panic: the Fort Myers area. In Circuit 20 (formerly District 8), the foster care panic is well into its second year. The number of children torn from their families has soared by 50 percent. "Workers are terrified of being pilloried on the front page of the local paper if they leave a child in her or his own home and something goes wrong – but they can take scores of children needlessly and, while the children will suffer terribly, the workers will be safe. Other workers are fed up with being scapegoated, and are quitting at an astounding rate, further overwhelming those who remain.

"The panic, and the lack of leadership to bring it under control, are so bad that Fort Myers has become a burden to the entire state, forcing DCF to send in teams of workers from elsewhere to clean up the mess in Circuit 20," Wexler said.

"But worst of all, the children of greater Fort Myers are far less safe than they were before the panic. Workers are so overwhelmed they don't have time to figure out which children can safely remain in their own homes and which cannot, so they're making more mistakes in both directions. Even as hundreds more children were torn from everyone loving and familiar, reabuse of children left in their own homes increased by 15 percent and foster-care recidivism – reflecting, in part, decisions made when the panic was at its height in 2006 – soared by 50 percent.

"And then, just last month, still another child 'known to the system' died in Circuit 20. In this case, all of the warnings came during the panic over the previous cases – so it's no wonder no one paid enough attention. Yet so far the response, from DCF and from the local newspaper, is only more of the same. Their behavior is the perfect

illustration of the dictum that the definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over and expecting a different result.

"Lately leaders in Circuit 20 have finally started mumbling platitudes about bringing the panic under control. But their latest monthly 'progress report' reads like something out of *Dilbert* – it's filled with descriptions of meetings to make plans to hold more meetings to make more plans. And the report shows that efforts to curb the panic are the farthest behind and have the lowest priority.

"If they want to save children, the leadership in Circuit 20 is going to have to do a lot more than mumble.

"Indeed, their failure to make a real effort stands in contrast to the work of the new Circuit Administrator for the Jacksonville area, which has the worst rate of removal in the state. "She's made a loud, clear, public commitment to reverse her circuit's record, and won the support of her region's largest newspaper," Wexler said. "And she's backed up the words with action. Though she is not moving as quickly as we'd like, at least she's moving in the right direction. She may not succeed, but she seems to know how to try."

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