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# Consider the children



By Yvonne Abraham | GLOBE COLUMNIST | JUNE 26, 2014

To get just about anything done around here you have to look hard at who it will affect and who it might hurt.

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So why not take that approach to the most vulnerable among us? Why not child impact statements for changes in state services that could put the young at risk?

It's an intriguing idea, tucked into [a report from the Massachusetts Law Reform Institute](#) to be released Thursday. And it could help solve some of the problems at the beleaguered Department of Children and Families.

It's a kernel of wisdom already in place elsewhere — in New Zealand and Scotland, for example. Also Shelby County, Tenn. There, development or budget proposals come with statements of how Memphis children would be affected, generated using data-rich Web tools designed by University of Memphis professor Michael Schmidt.

“The idea was to build in a concern for children in all divisions of our county government,” Schmidt says.

For example, a new mulch plant was assessed in terms of how close it would be to the neighborhood's children, whose young lungs are more deeply affected by air quality. A proposal to cut funding to a hospital was beaten back because the child impact

statement showed a risk of higher diabetes rates and less access to health care among area kids.

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The Mass. Law Reform Institute report is the latest in a series of overhauls proposed for DCF since the department's immense shortcomings were laid bare in vivid, heartbreaking detail a few months ago.

We have had some serious soul-searching since we lost Jeremiah Oliver, the 5-year-old who disappeared weeks before his DCF social workers noticed he was missing, and who was eventually found dead. His case highlighted the weaknesses of DCF, but it also highlighted a wider, maddeningly persistent, problem: that DCF is held responsible for everything that goes wrong in a kid's life. Poverty, substance abuse, homelessness, violence, mental illness — all of these maladies conspire to drive kids to the agency's doorstep, and always will, no matter how much more efficient the agency becomes.

The institute report urges the state to think about DCF's problems in that wider context, rather than focusing solely on how well social workers are funded and supervised. "It's a call for systemic reform," says attorney Susan Elsen, who wrote the report. "We need a multi-agency child welfare system."

If we are going to keep more kids safe, we must acknowledge that everything is connected. What happens in one corner of state government directly affects kids in another, who have nobody but the state to protect them.

Over half of the families with very young children under DCF care have substance abuse issues, mental health issues, or domestic violence issues, according to the report. Many battle all three. If parents can't find adequate shelter, mental health services, drug treatment, or jobs that sustain them, kids face greater risk.

And so before the Legislature reduces funding for detox beds, or the state changes the emergency shelter rules, they should be required to run the numbers. How many kids will be made more vulnerable as a result?

It might not be pretty, or cheap. But child impact statements would force us to confront something we've been dodging for decades: The onus of safeguarding children at risk cannot be DCF's alone. Those kids often require more than any one agency can

give them.

They belong to all of us.

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