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Address the needs of our state's children

By Laurie Rovin



South Carolina Ranks 45th in the Nation in Child Well-Being (2014 SC Kids Count Data)

Treating the needs of abused and neglected children is a necessity in South Carolina. Our state remains 45th in the nation in child well-being (2014 KidsCount), and problems within the South Carolina Department of Social Services existed long before Lillian Koller's appointment and resignation as state director.

DSS reported 3,393 children in foster care on Jan. 17 (Client Affairs Peer Support Services). This is a daunting number because caseworkers are overloaded and children are still suffering in a damaged system. Hiring an additional 200 caseworkers is a start, but this is only part of the solution toward addressing deep issues.

Gov. Nikki Haley's education reform plan expanded funding and improved critical focus on reading in early grades. This is a step in the right direction for South Carolina's children, but there is more we can do. Our state sits at 45th in the nation for child well-being because 57 percent of South Carolina children are not attending preschool, 27 percent live in poverty and 36 percent of parents lack secure employment. Many of these same children are also involved in child welfare services in South Carolina.

To improve the economic, educational and overall well-being of South Carolina's children, I encourage state leaders to fund public and private partnerships and remove the many silos amongst state agencies. Pendleton Place for Children and Families represents a successful state collaboration with public entities and achieves remarkable outcomes for children and families.

Our programs help alleviate the load on Greenville County DSS caseworkers and ensure that at-risk children and families receive the best guidance possible.

Pendleton Place programs like the Family and Child Assessment Center discover the cause for a child's removal from their home and offer primary and secondary recommendations to address the needs of the family. Family Bridges conducts supervised family visitation and safe custody exchange, while Smith Supportive Services offers a safe home to teenage girls and case management for youth who have aged out of foster care.

Our organization has partnered with Greenville County DSS, Greenville Health System and Greenville Mental Health Center to provide services to over 353 individuals in need from 185 families. From those households, 73 percent live in poverty (below \$21,000 annual household income) and 96 percent live below \$33,000 annual household income.

At Pendleton Place, we believe our state, federal and local leaders must work together to address important issues like child welfare finance reform. We support an increase in state accountability and a flexible funding structure that aligns federal funding with what works best for children and families. We must do the following together to address these concerns:

- Provide front-end home and community-based services that keep children in the most family-like environment possible and ensure a stable, strong family.
- Prioritize professional Supervised Family Visitation and Therapeutic Visitation in the state through the coordinated system of care/Medicaid plan or formula grants.
- Ensure SC's Continuous Quality Improvement (CQI) Plan is inclusive of quality residential care.
- Invest in Youth in Transition through age 26 to promote adult stability and financial independence.

By working closely with children and their families, we are better able to identify what is in the children's best interests. Pendleton Place is tracking data and outcomes and demonstrating innovation through our services aimed at keeping children safe and supporting families in crisis.

We extend a personal invitation to any current or prospective legislators, gubernatorial candidates and interested community members to join us for a private tour of Pendleton Place. You can also learn more about our programs and services by visiting www.pendletonplace.org.

Our governor must continue to prioritize South Carolina's children and support the needs of those who have been abused and neglected. To do this, it is imperative that a new state director of DSS be appointed. This leader must have the expertise and vision to partner and fund advancements that analyze outcomes and strengthen hurting families. Imagine the young lives that could be transformed if our leaders would support programs like those happening at Pendleton Place for Children and Families.

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