

Sun editorial:

Failing the children

Cuts in the county Family Services Department budget will cause serious problems

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Clark County is trying to juggle its budget because of the recession and the resulting decline in tax revenue. Sadly, one of the areas expected to be cut is the Family Services Department, which has the responsibility of protecting children from abuse and neglect.

The department has been the focus of concern for several years because it has never had adequate funding. In 2006 the National Center for Youth Law sued the county and the state, arguing the child welfare system in the county had failed. The federal lawsuit outlined a litany of problems, including a high number of child deaths, overcrowding in the children's shelter and a lack of training and resources for workers.

The lawsuit spurred an effort by county officials to address problems in the system, including an emphasis on reducing social workers' caseloads. The county was able to hire new child abuse investigators, whittle down caseloads and reduce the number of children at the shelter.

Now, though, those gains appear to be in jeopardy. A few weeks ago county officials were pleading with the Legislature for \$4.5 million. The money was to be used to continue paying 32 child abuse investigators. The Legislature denied the request. In addition, a 6 percent reduction in salaries and benefits is expected.

As Joe Schoenmann reported in Sunday's Las Vegas Sun, Tom Morton, director of the Family Services Department, said he would be able to save the jobs by trimming elsewhere. A county spokeswoman said that may mean cutting other positions, including administrative workers who do the paperwork so investigators can spend time working with children.

The overall effect will mean Clark County children will be at greater risk of suffering injury and neglect. Why? Because the politicians couldn't find a way to do the right thing and find the necessary money to protect them.

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