

Innocents Lost Changes the Debate

Innocents Lost has shed light on much of what we know, including the fact that as the Department of Children and Families (DCF) focused on family-preservation over the last six years and the number of children in state care declined, the number of children who died of abuse or neglect soared. *Innocents Lost* reported that the Department's budget was reduced from \$2.88 billion in fiscal year 2005-06 to \$2.80 billion in fiscal year 2013-14. At the same time, the total state budget grew from \$64.5 billion to \$74.1 billion.

We've also known that alcohol and drug abuse play a huge role in family dysfunction, abuse and neglect. The *Herald* series found that about two-thirds of the 477 deaths they reviewed were linked to substance abuse.

In response to *Innocents Lost*:

- DCF reported that its investigators will not be allowed to complete investigations until the parents have begun necessary treatment.
- DCF Interim Secretary Esther Jacobo testified that an extensive analysis of gaps in Florida's child welfare services system will soon be released, possibly next week.
- The House Healthy Families Subcommittee, which had planned to vote out its child protection bill ([PCB HFS 14-03](#)) on Tuesday, put off the vote until next week to fine-tune the proposal.
- Senate Children, Families and Elder Affairs Committee Chair Eleanor Sobel committed to change every reference to "adequate care" in statute and in the proposed Senate child protection bills to read "comprehensive and wraparound services," and references to "preserving the family" changed to read "the best interest of the child shall be the first priority, and then keeping the family intact."

Of course, "comprehensive and wraparound services" cost a lot of money, and the committees ramped up their discussion about "how much" this week, thanks to the *Herald* reports.

While Governor Scott included \$49 million in his proposed 2014-2015 [It's Your Money Tax Cut Budget](#) to reduce abuse and neglect, he did not recommend more money to serve children and families once they are in the system. In his proposal's [Strengthening Florida Families](#) section, the Governor recommends investing:

- \$7 million into Healthy Families Florida, so children never have to be touched by DCF in the first place;
- \$31 million to reduce caseloads for Child Protective Investigators and for creating two-person teams for high-risk cases;
- \$8 million to increase funding for the six counties where local sheriffs conduct investigations; and
- \$2.8 million in new funding to strengthen the ability of Child Protection teams to serve families and protect children.