

Legislative Delegations of Pasco, Pinellas and Hillsborough Counties

We the stakeholders and community providers work hard every day and are committed to taking care of the children and families involved in the child welfare system throughout the Tampa Bay area. We want to thank you for your past support, and are writing to you to ask for your active engagement in securing an equitable amount of resources for our children and families in such desperate need of assistance. Our communities and those we serve are struggling due to a persistent shortage of resources and an inequitable appropriation of state funding.

Each of the judicial circuit's system of child welfare services in the Tampa Bay area is underfunded by over \$12 million. As you know, Hillsborough County serves the largest child welfare population in Florida, currently 3,300, yet receives \$18M less in core funding than Miami-Dade, which serves approximately 900 children less. The issue is even more profound in Pasco and Pinellas counties where we serve 500 more children than our partners in Miami yet receive \$28M less in core funding per year. This is by no means to say that Miami/Dade and other counties are overfunded, rather to draw attention to the inequity in funding in the Tampa Bay area that could have the potential of causing tragic consequences for our children and families. On behalf of the youth and families we serve, we would like to request that additional recurring core funding for our 3 counties be included in the 2019/2020 appropriations bill to match the per child funding provided to the Miami/Dade system of care.

In Fiscal Year 2017/18 the two systems of care within our 3 county community operated most of the year with a combined \$9.3M deficit. The legislature provided "back of the bill" funding to cover most of these expenditures, but it required us to utilize private funding to operate until we recouped the payment. Additionally, the money does not fully fund what we need to operate a properly funded system of care, it is simply reimbursing what we spent. For the current fiscal year (2018/2019), we are anticipating a combined \$11.4M deficit. This is largely caused by the growth of children in paid placements which has increased 39% over the past three years in Hillsborough and 32% in Pasco and Pinellas. We are working closely with the community and stakeholders to respond to the Hillsborough County Corrective Action Plan and the recent child deaths in Pinellas/Pasco Counties, but this is only exacerbating our financial challenges. Without additional resources to invest in services we are not going to be able to meet our commitments to foster and adoptive parents, case management organizations, or staff, let alone make the improvements necessary to attain a longer-term resolution.

A fully funded case management system in the Tampa Bay area would have 415 case managers with a 1 to 15 ratio and sufficient support staff to handle transportation, supervision and some administrative functions. To achieve this we need a minimal increase of 68 case management positions along with corresponding family support workers and administrative assistant staff.

The lack of sufficient core funding prevents us from being able to pay Case Management Organizations adequately which hinders their ability to attract and retain the necessary caseworkers to provide supervision of the children in our system of care. It also means we are unable to build adequate "front-end" diversion services and mental health services to successfully partner with the local Sheriffs Offices who conduct child protective investigations. This lack of diversion services has contributed to the inability to stem the flow of child removals and entries into our system of care.

The three counties we serve are expected to have a population surge of 500,000 new residents by 2030. So we do not expect the numbers of children in the foster care system to decline.

This funding deficit also prevents the ability to provide the necessary placement and treatment services needed to deescalate and ameliorate complex emotional and behavioral challenges that these children often bring with them as a result of the trauma they have experienced. This results in children and youth acting out and “blowing out” of multiple placements, or refusing placements, resulting in them being supervised overnight by our staff in offices or at a location where we can convince them to calm down and be safe while we seek a placement that they will accept and cooperate with. The headlines over the last 12 months have told a story of our continued failings as a result of the lack of resources.

Each of us signing this letter have experienced significant frustrations in our efforts to protect our children and to serve and support our families, but we remain hopeful of improvements with your support for needed resources.

We are entrusted with the sacred duty to care for our most vulnerable children. Because of that we respectfully request relief and a fair appropriation of resources. Each day we fail to adequately fund services puts more children at risk. There are significant changes coming to the child welfare system as a result of the Family First Prevention Services Act and the sunset of Florida’s IV-E waiver. Our community cannot be pushed further behind, we need adequate funding to serve and protect our children and families.

Thank you for your assistance we are always available to provide any additional information and respond to any concerns or questions you may have.

Sincerely,
Eckerd
Hillsborough Sheriff
Pinellas Sheriff
Pasco Sheriff
Each GAL office
State Attorney Circuit 6
OAG Hillsborough
Chief Judge both circuits
County Commissioners both circuits
CMOs
Children’s Board
JWB
Foster Parent Associations
Parents Attorneys
Ad litem Attorneys
RGCs
Mental Health Providers
Managing Entity
Board members/Business leaders.