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07.01.2018

News & Media

[Child services professionals gather at summit to tackle common problems](#)

Port St. Lucie – It started with a tray of cupcakes and a simple question: “What can we do to help you serve children better?”

Three months, five panelists and 75 experts later, that question is now the basis for at least some of Rep. Gayle Harrell’s 2016 legislative focus.

The Stuart-based Republican hosted the Department of Children and Families/Department of Juvenile Justice Crossover Kids Summit September 23. The purpose of the summit – which included a panel discussion from two sitting and one former state department secretaries – was to brainstorm possible solutions to issues that impact both the child-welfare and the Juvenile Justice systems.

“I want your best solutions,” Rep. Harrell instructed the room of 75 case managers, child protective investigators, junior probation officers, law enforcement officers and mental-health experts. “The end goal is to come up with very specific, concrete suggestions for legislation we can move forward.”

The idea for a summit came last spring when Rep. Harrell visited case managers in Martin County during Child Welfare Professionals Day.

“We brought cupcakes, and Rep. Harrell talked to them about their jobs and asked if there were any day-to-day issues she could help them with,” said Karen Sweeney, Rep. Harrell’s legislative aide.

From that conversation, it became clear that one of the most important issues involved children who cross over programs and are served by both Devereux CBC’s child-welfare system and the Department of Juvenile Justice.

Five crossover-related topics were discussed in groups during the summit. Those topics included civil citation, parental responsibility, probation violation and mental-health and DJJ “lockouts” – children who default to the child-welfare system because their parents don’t pick them up once they’ve been released from detention.

After discussing each topic for an hour, groups presented at least three solutions to a panel of experts.

That panel included Rep. Harrell, DCF Secretary Mike Carroll, DJJ Secretary Christine Daly, former DJJ Secretary Wansely Walters, Southeast Florida Behavioral Health Network CEO Ann Berner and Martin County School District Student Services Coordinator Michael Lindgren.

“We’ve got to get this right,” said Daly. “We’re not talking about a large number of kids – 42,000 kids are arrested and just over 13 percent – or 1,400 – are kids who crossover into the child-welfare system.”

That small number of children, however, comes with a \$1.7 million pricetag and diverts resources from other parts of the system – and other children, Carroll added.

Locally, Devereux CBC served 29 crossover children in the month of July for \$62,000. Annualized, that cost is \$744,000, or 3 percent of the organization’s total annual budget.

Many of those children come into child welfare by default because their parents are frustrated and don’t know what to do with them once they’ve been released from detention, Carroll said. In Palm Beach County, 23 of the 30 children with active DJJ cases were these so-called “lockouts.”

Follow up on the day’s workgroup recommendations is now underway.

A complete list of those recommendation follows:

Parental Responsibility – The focus of this workgroup was to identify 2-3 challenges and proposed solutions concerning parently responsibility for those whose children are abandoned to the system. Recommendations: 1) Educate the first Point of Contact that youth and families encounter during a crisis (law enforcement and schools) on how families can access services, 2) Establish a Point of Contact in each community to walk families through the process, and mandate that families use the service, 3) Make parents more accountable by requiring that they attend detention reviews, engage in services and pay for child support if their children are brought into the child-welfare system.

Civil Citation– The statewide civil citation process is designed to provide an alternative to formal judicial handling of juveniles committing a misdemeanor offense. The purpose of the workgroup was to propose ideas for better engaging the local community in the process: 1) Require civil citations on first offense rather than leaving it to the discretion of local law enforcement, 2) Include mandatory and early training for law enforcement, 3) Add restorative justice services to address concerns of victims who want juveniles procecuted, and 4) Require certified assessors to use one evidence-based assessment tool.

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September 25, 2015

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