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Build on DCF's successes

By the Sun Sentinel Editorial Board

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"Upbeat" isn't usually the word one associates with the Florida Department of Children & Families. Given the state agency's past, high-profile failings in living up to its mission to provide services to the abused, poor and downtrodden, the two rarely make it in the same sentence.

But David Wilkins, the man who now heads DCF, is optimistic, particularly about the funding prospects DCF faces in next year's budget. He doesn't anticipate another round of major cuts, nor should he, given the workload the department faces, and its bureaucratic challenges in addressing them.

Florida received little in the way of good news from the U.S. Census, which shows the state's poverty rate increased for the fifth consecutive year. The estimated 2.9 million Floridians living in poverty in 2010 represent 16 percent of the state's population, the highest that rate been since 1995.

High poverty figures usually translate into greater demands for social services.

DCF, however, hasn't seen a corresponding spike in funding to handle its increasing workload. In fact, the department's budget has remained flat — around \$2.9 billion — in recent years.

Blame that on the state's ongoing budget shortfalls, and Tallahassee's across-the-board-cuts response to it. Bureaucratic belt-tightening has led to making do in running key social services with fewer resources.

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This has been particularly problematic for child welfare caseworkers, who even Wilkins has acknowledged are overworked and underpaid.

Wilkins continues to make hiring investigators a department priority. However, news that the department may have violated federal labor laws by forcing its child service investigators in Miami and northeast Florida to work overtime without compensation is troubling, to say the least.

Revenue projections for the upcoming fiscal year again signal a "tight" budget, according to an analyst in the Legislature's economics and demographic research arm. But the hole is not projected to be as deep as in recent years when lawmakers wrangled over spending reductions to balance billion-dollar budget shortfalls.

Still, Wilkins is talking optimistically about improving both the department's abuse hotline and the case management process to help investigators spend more time with their caseloads. He wants to find additional support to help boost adoptions, an area in which DCF has shown steady gains. That much is good to hear, budget realities notwithstanding.

He also hopes to develop new ways to lower a dismal 70 percent high school graduation rate among foster children.

Wilkins, however, shouldn't stop there.

The DCF secretary should find ways to restore funding to domestic violence and mental health programs that help keep youngsters out of foster care.

Fully funding DCF's independent living program would also help older youngsters leave foster care as functioning adults.

Wilkins often speaks of his close ties to his boss, Gov. Rick Scott. Now is the time to use those connections for the good of his agency.

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