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## Editorial: Invest in children

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Florida has a choice: invest early in protecting and nurturing children or let them and the state suffer the consequences later.

Here in North Central Florida over the past few months, we've seen how abuse and other problems in families can happen for years before exploding in tragedy. A Bell man shot to death his daughter and six grandchildren before killing himself in September, while a 16-year-old in White Springs was shot to death this month by a sibling who reportedly suffered abuse.

The cases have brought attention to oversight by the state Department of Children and Families. Certainly DCF must be held accountable for these and other child deaths that happened under its watch. But state lawmakers must also finish the task of bolstering funding for DCF.

Budget cuts had been made to child social services before a reversal last session brought new money for hiring child protective investigators. But officials with groups such as the Children's Home Society of Florida say there remains a need to increase the salaries, reduce the caseloads and add support for case managers who handle abuse reports long after the initial investigations.

Low salaries, the stress of the job and an average workload of 15.46 cases causes case managers to have an average tenure of just 2.2 years, said Jennifer Anchors, executive director of the group's mid-Florida division.

Anchors cited research showing that preventing just one fewer case manager from leaving can cut the probability of a child under their watch committing a crime by 21 percent and becoming a teenage parent by 21 percent. Children with multiple case managers tend to stay longer in the system and are less likely to be adopted, she said.

But investing in children goes beyond just funding DCF. Childhood poverty must also be addressed to ensure all kids have a chance to succeed in school and beyond.

Fifty-six percent of public school students in Florida are low income, according to a new analysis by the Southwestern Education Foundation.

A federal judge recently found that Florida's low Medicaid reimbursement rates led to a lack of access to care and children being dropping from the program. The state also has some of the lowest per-capita public school funding in the country.

Gov. Rick Scott has proposed boosting school spending, but more must be done for children in poverty and those suffering abuse. Rather than pushing a tax cut on telephone and television services that would bring only about \$43 in annual savings to families, the governor and Legislature must use more of an estimated \$1 billion budget surplus to make smart investments.

Protecting and nurturing children spares them suffering and saves the state money in the long run. There is no better investment that the state could make.

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