

New Jersey's Division of Youth and Family Services is one of the most expensive state agencies to operate. Its current budget surpasses \$330 million a year, including a \$25 million increase targeted for new hirings and other reform initiatives authorized in 2003.

Governor James E. McGreevey is now proposing a \$141 million boost in direct programs as his response to a spate nationally publicized incidents of abuse, neglect, and death involving children who had been placed under DYFS care. The Governor's plan also would address concerns raised in a lawsuit mounted by child advocacy groups that are seeking sweeping changes in the state's child protection agency.

The proposal is bold and well-intentioned. There are, after all, few government responsibilities as important as protecting the lives of innocent children. But for all of its merits, there is no escaping the fact that Governor's plan is alarmingly expensive and perhaps fraught with the same liabilities as the litany of previously unsuccessful DYFS reform plans of the past two decades. The Legislature should ask tough questions about this newly proposed reform funding plan before giving its approval.

DYFS is a modern-day Dickensian bureaucratic nightmare. Children -- including babies -- are beaten, starved and tortured right under the nose of the state agency that has received billions of dollars as a refuge for children of broken homes, bad parents, and neglect.

The root problem is not the agency's employees, who - with the exception of a few -- have performed heroically in a system that is wired for failure. Nor is it the Governor, who inherited a crisis that had been treated with lip-service reform efforts for decades. Nor is the problem New Jersey taxpayers, who have generously spent billions of dollars to protect these children and are angry and frustrated with the barrage of media stories about dead and abused children who "fell through the safety net."

The problem is the system. DYFS is a shredded safety net, a bureaucracy-laden operation that is rife with chaos, waste, inefficiency and failure. With managers on top of managers, it's a system that chews up taxpayer money by millions of dollars only to still leave children in the lurch.

Before the state undertakes yet another money-centered reform effort, policymakers needs to overhaul DYFS's operational structure and make a full accounting of all the other child-protection services that exist in other state departments, such as education and law and public safety.

Blindly appropriating more money for DYFS is not the answer for the state's child protection system's failures. We can't ask taxpayers to spend more or expect the DYFS workers to succeed if we simply reshuffle the deck and do the same thing, the same way and call it reform.

The way we protect these most fragile children and support their dysfunctional families is through radical change, and that is going to require new thinking.

For starters, we can pass a Children's Rights and Parents' Responsibility Act that articulates our commitment to child safety, stability and well being and also impresses upon irresponsible parents of the swift and dire consequences for child abuse. Then we need to follow up the "talk" with performance assessments that are employed in the business sector.

Communities and churches also need to get involved and be employed as part of the state's child-protection system. A family is part of a community and we must involve the community - whether it is faith-based or secular child advocacy groups. The best place to hear a child's cry is being in the neighborhood, not in Trenton.

We need to create and deploy local "Rapid Response Teams," organized into community networks comprised of local organizations that would be trained by and well-supervised by DFYS social workers. The teams would multiply the professional outreach of the social workers at ground zero. These teams will be responsible for criminal and civil investigations, safety, risk and need assessments. They must be empowered to move rapidly and decisively.

To that end, we should consider creating the Child-Parent Planning and Advisory Council in every county, consisting of community leaders, parents, clergy and care providers, which would coordinate, integrate and replace the many fragmented and autonomous bodies that emanate from state and federal agencies.

Governor McGreevey should be applauded for putting forward a plan that far exceeds the band-aid approaches of prior governors. If given an opportunity to have input and ensure the accountability of this enormous taxpayer investment, I would hope that there would be an opportunity to provide my own vote of support.

The goal here is not to spend more money for the sake of purchasing a sense of accomplishment on a nettlesome issue. The bottom line is creating a system that actually saves children's lives.