

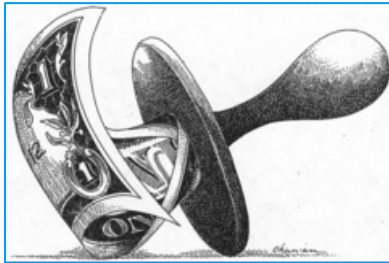
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Alabama mustn't reduce funding for family resource centers

By Linda Tilley August 26, 2007

Just a month ago, VOICES for Alabama's Children reported the results of the 2007 Kids Count Data Book, which revealed that Alabama dropped from 43rd to 48th in overall national rankings of child well-being.

The data conveyed a real wake-up call to community leaders, business leaders and policy-makers that we need to be investing in human capital, especially our children, while we are rising to a level of national prominence for aggressively investing in economic development and high-tech industry. With the advantages of incoming industries in Alabama, we must educate our citizens and move forward in preparing our children to be our future work force.



Unfortunately, we recently received news that will cause a step backward in investing in families. Twelve family resource centers throughout the state received notification recently that the Alabama Department of Human Resources would reduce their support to the centers by 29 percent. The total amount of the reduction is a little more than \$1 million, but the impact will be much greater because the family resource centers use the funds as a match to bring them additional funding and in-kind support.

The family resource centers in Alabama offer unique family support and services based on the specific needs of the communities. The centers provide services such as early intervention, education, parenting support and counseling, mentoring and referrals to nonprofit and state programs. They offer job readiness training, GED preparation and family literacy programs, all vital to preparing Alabama citizens for the new higher-tech jobs coming to our state due to recent high-profile economic development efforts.

The impact of the funding cuts to family resource centers will not only be felt by families in the 12 counties directly affected, but also by the entire state. The influx of high-tech industries in Alabama means we must increase our efforts to make our citizens "job ready" rather than decrease those efforts. Cutting job-readiness programs is unacceptable to many families across the state, as well as to anyone who has a stake in Alabama's future.

Gov. Bob Riley's Plan 2010 states, "I will propose establishing a Family Services Center in each of Alabama's 67 counties to increase coordination of state services and assist our families in need." The centers are, in fact, a linchpin of the work that is currently being done by the Governor's Task Force to Strengthen Alabama Families, a model for other states in developing more efficient and effective ways to deliver health and human services to families. The task force's Web site lists "support creation of a family service center in each of Alabama's 67 counties" as one of its key recommendations.

That same recommendation has been a top priority of the state Children's Policy Council for the past three years, rising to the top after being recommended in multiple county policy council needs assessments.

DHR attributes the reduction in funding for the family resource centers to "dwindling federal funds." It is ironic the commissioner of DHR sits on both the Governor's Task Force and the state Children's Policy Council. We would expect that from those perspectives, leadership at DHR would view support of family resource centers as a top priority. In addition, the family resource centers should naturally be a key priority for DHR, because the programs provided by the centers often keep children and families from needing state services provided by DHR.

Alabama stepped up to the plate and did whatever it took to land prize economic development projects. Now we are faced with the issue of funding centers that provide essential programs and resources to those families and children who will fuel our economy. We must step up to the plate this time, as well.

The 2007 Kids Count Data Book showed us the results of investing too little in families and child well-being, and it is time we learn our lesson. Let's start with addressing funding cuts for family resource centers. We are looking for leaders to "do whatever it takes" this time, as well.

Linda Tilly is executive director of VOICES for Alabama's Children, a statewide nonpartisan, nonprofit children's research, communication and advocacy organization.

E-mail: ltilly@alavoices.org