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YOUR VIEW: MARTHA STONE

Slamming The Door On At-Risk Youth, Families

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While leaders in Hartford argue about sweeping service cuts and painful tax increases to balance the state budget, the citizens of Connecticut who will be among the hardest hit by Gov. M. Jodi Rell's proposed reductions are the children and families who need our help most.

They're the kids with extreme emotional or behavioral disorders, mental illnesses and substance addictions who, but for the existence of a vital public resource called the Voluntary Services Program, might otherwise be in foster care or the juvenile justice system.

The Voluntary Services Program was created under a 1991 federal court order mandating widespread reforms to the state's child welfare system. Since then, it has served thousands of vulnerable families throughout Connecticut — giving children the help they desperately need while keeping them in the care of their families, not the state.

Although Gov. Rell is maintaining the program's current enrollment, she is proposing to eliminate these services for new families and children seeking them after July 1. This would save \$1.5 million, or just 0.001 percent of her proposed savings for the next two fiscal years.

On any given day, there are more than 1,000 children being served by the Voluntary Services Program, according to the Department of Children and Families. Attorneys at the Center for Children's Advocacy, which I oversee, represent many of these families and witness how the casework services, community referrals and treatment services they desperately need make such a difference.

In many cases, the emotional and mental health challenges facing these children are so extreme, parents find themselves at a crossroads: get help or give up. The Voluntary Services Program is a life raft, providing specialized and sustained mental health care that would often be out of reach.

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If the governor's proposed budget is approved, the doors will effectively close to all new applicants. The effect will be devastating.

Many families simply will not survive intact. More children will enter state custody, endangering the sustained progress Connecticut has made in reducing its foster care population. Because children with emotional and behavioral problems are harder to place with foster and adoptive families, many will end up in the care of inpatient treatment facilities that are significantly more expensive to maintain than the Voluntary Services Program. And many will remain wards of the state until they age out of the system — without families, without homes and without any of the resources they will need to thrive as independent adults.

Keeping the Voluntary Services Program running is not only a moral obligation, but a fiscal and legal one. Suspending the program will lead to significant cost increases and extend logjams in emergency rooms, where children needing crisis intervention will add to the wait for expensive psychiatric beds. The price tag will grow as these troubled kids move into juvenile detention or foster care, where Connecticut is obligated to pay their health costs. Those who age out will be disproportionately likely to spend time in the state's substance abuse programs, emergency rooms, homeless shelters and prisons.

Gov. Rell's proposal would also violate the federal court order known as Juan F., which requires the state to provide critical services to children who are deemed "at risk" — which by definition is all those served by the Voluntary Services Program.

Another cut on the governor's desk which threatens kids in crisis would close Riverview Hospital for Children and Youth in Middletown, a facility serving children with serious psychiatric and developmental disorders. Its precipitous closure would endanger lives without a concrete plan in place to offer continued treatment. Everyone knows these are tough economic times, and decisions facing our lawmakers won't be easy.

There is no question that sacrifices are needed to get our state back to fiscal health. But no matter how you look at it, cutting an established and relatively inexpensive program with an 18-year track record of serving families who desperately need help to stay together just doesn't make sense.

• Martha Stone is founder and executive director of the Center for Children's Advocacy and an adjunct professor at the University of Connecticut School of Law.

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