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Child services underfunded Drug crisis hits agencies hard

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The strength of Ohio's decentralized, county-based system for providing children services is that local agencies work with local families in ways that suit local conditions. The weakness of the decentralized system is that counties vary widely in financial support and staffing.

More fortunate counties rely on a mix of federal, state and local funding. Less fortunate counties rely mainly on federal and state funding, with local resources ranging from slim to none. It's not enough.

As an example of the disparity, wealthy Franklin County has a children's services budget of \$193 million annually, with 75 percent of that coming from local property taxes. Gallia County scrapes by on just \$700,000, and has no local children-services levy.

True, Franklin County's population is 40 times greater than Gallia County's, but Franklin County's children's services budget is a whopping 275 times larger than that of Gallia County.

Gallia County is not alone — 42 of Ohio's 88 counties have no local children-services tax levy. Under the best of circumstances, this would be a problem. But for many of these counties, circumstances are not the best. In fact, because of the devastating impact of Ohio's opioid crisis, circumstances are getting worse, as underfunded agencies struggle to meet the needs of children of families ravaged by drug addiction.

According to the Ohio Department of Health, deaths resulting from unintentional drug overdoses rose by 642 percent between 2000 and 2015, reaching 3,050 last year, and the toll has continued in 2016. According to a WBNS-10TV report, between 2010 and 2013, the number of children-services cases opened because of heroin abuse rose by 83 percent. In Franklin County in 2010, 9 percent of children-services cases were drug-related. By 2014, the percentage had climbed to 13 percent.

Nothing brought home the toll that drug abuse exacts on children better than the heart-wrenching photos published on Sept. 8 by the East Liverpool police on the city's Facebook page (<http://bit.ly/2cbHWza>).

In the photos, a 4-year-old boy gazes from the back seat of an SUV, while his mother and a male acquaintance are splayed like rag dolls in the front seats, unconscious from an apparent drug overdose. Both adults were treated with Narcan, an overdose-reversing medication, and taken to the hospital. Later they were charged with child endangerment, among other counts.

The police report on the incident notes: "A call was also placed to Columbiana County Children's Services. Lore Jones responded and assisted in placing the juvenile child."

Not surprisingly, the case and the photos drew worldwide attention. And nothing could illustrate better the impact this scourge is having on children and on Ohio's children-services agencies.

Without adequate services for children affected by the drug crisis, Ohio might simply be creating the conditions for these kids to follow the same self-destructive path.

State Rep. Ryan Smith, a Gallia County Republican, is aware of the struggles facing children-services agencies.

“They don’t have any wiggle room, and then they get hit with an epidemic like this,” Smith told The Dispatch. “It’s something we’re going to have to deal with. Child-protective services is very high on my list to try to increase funding in the next budget.”

Smith’s colleagues in the legislature and the governor should take note. The state has mobilized new resources and legislation to fight the drug scourge, but this is a neglected corner of the problem. Ohio’s most vulnerable counties need more state help to protect the state’s most vulnerable residents.

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