

# The Palm Beach Post

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## POINT OF VIEW: THE UNTOLD STORY OF THE OPIOID CRISIS

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The Palm Beach Post's Nov. 15 story, "Why Palm Beach County is the 'epicenter' of the deadly opioid crisis," bluntly lays out a significant tragedy occurring right outside our front doors. While the devastating number of deadly overdoses in our county – 571 last year – is certainly a crisis,

my mind quickly shifts to those left behind. How many thousands have been affected by these deaths? How many children have lost their parents? How many parents have lost their children?

As a local board member of Children's Home Society of Florida, and the daughter of a father who succumbed to addiction, I am acutely aware of its tragic consequences. Like many others, I've watched with dismay as more children enter the foster care system because of their

parents' uphill battle with this disease.

And as these numbers rise, Florida comes face to face with another crisis: We are less than two years away from losing tens of millions of federal dollars to care for these kids – dollars that could be used to help struggling families before parents turn to opioid use. As a state, we must act now to plan for Florida's future.

Here's the 10,000-foot view: Every state's largest source of funding for child welfare services comes from federal Title IV-E funds. In nearly every state other than Florida, these funds can only be expended after the government removes a child from a home due to safety concerns.

In 2005, Florida proposed an alternative solution to the federal government: Allow flexibility in the use of Title IV-E funds so we may provide necessary services to children and families before safety is threatened, before children endure the trauma of being removed from their families.

Though opioid use is rising – as is media coverage of the epidemic – the deadly overdoses, the entries of children



into foster care and the related consequences would be even greater if we didn't have the ability to use federal IV-E funds to help stabilize and strengthen families struggling with severe, complex challenges.

That is the story that is not always told – the story of triumph, the story of stability, the story made possible only because of this flexibility in how Florida can use these funds.

Here is my fear: I worry that story may be ending soon.

Florida's Title IV-E Waiver is set to expire September 2019. When that happens, we will no longer have the flexibility to help families before crisis strikes. We will no longer have the funding to stabilize families and empower parents to overcome seemingly impossible barriers.

Instead, it will become necessary for Florida to revert to the pre-waiver standards of using Title IV-E funds – and that means we can only help children and families after the intense trauma of a crisis breaks them apart.

Without the ability to intervene and support early on, our child welfare system will undoubtedly feel the weight of more children entering foster care; entering a system already exhausting its capacity of foster homes and family members able to care for these kids.

Florida simply cannot sustain another crisis.

It is time to act now.

We have two proposed solutions on the table, and it is imperative that our leaders find the right solution for Florida's children: 1) Congress can reauthorize Florida's Title IV-E Waiver or 2) The Florida Legislature must start preparing now for the gaping hole that must be filled in the child welfare budget.

A delay in action will be detrimental to our children.

*Editor's note: Thompson is a board member with the Palm Beach County division of Children's Home Society (CHS) of Florida.*

