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Kids do better when families stay together | Opinion

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Numbers can tell a powerful story, especially when it comes to child abuse and neglect.

According to the National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System, 75 percent of children brought to the attention of the child welfare system arrive with allegations of neglect – not, as often assumed – abuse.

Here's what these numbers reveal: Families are struggling to access the support and resources needed to properly care for their children.

Research consistently shows that children who are able to remain safely with their families – with effective services in place – experience better outcomes than children with identical risk factors who are removed.

A study by Massachusetts Institute of Technology, which tracked 15,000 Illinois youth – all of whom had been the subject of a child abuse or neglect investigation – from 1990 to 2002 revealed that kids who remained in their homes fared better than those who entered foster care.

Included in the findings:

- 44 percent of youth who entered foster care were arrested at least once, compared to 14 percent who stayed with families deemed “at-risk.”
- 56 percent of girls who entered foster care became teen mothers, compared to 33 percent who remained with “at-risk” families.
- Children who remained in their homes were 13 percent more likely than their counterparts in foster care to hold a job for at least three months once they became adults.

We see a tremendous opportunity to do better for children. If we can reach families before their struggles escalate, we can prevent more children from entering foster care – and we can create better futures for kids.

This means keeping families safe, strong and together and together. Florida is well positioned to do just this.

With the passage of the Family First Prevention Services Act last year, Congress sent a clear message: Children belong in families. This legislation changes the funding model for serving children in foster care and those at risk of entering foster care, while supporting a continuum of care necessary to respond to the diversity of needs faced by children and families.

As this policy is implemented, the federal government proposes to increase cost sharing for states to provide in-home family support services – from counseling and parenting education to substance abuse treatment.

While the data clearly shows that – when appropriate – children who remain with their families experience better long-term outcomes, there will always be a need for foster care options when children cannot safely remain in their home. Children's Home Society of Florida, as the largest statewide provider of foster care, remains committed to serving the children and families requiring out-of-home care.

But we also have a responsibility to do more, and we can.

In partnership with the Department of Children and Families, community based care agencies throughout the state – including Big Bend Community Based Care here in Tallahassee — and many other entities and stakeholders, Children's Home Society of Florida looks forward to improving outcomes for kids.

With proper services in place, we believe more families can be kept safe, strong and together, building a brighter future for Florida's children.

Michael Shaver is CEO of Children's Home Society of Florida, serving 60,000 children and family members every year.

