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Children in foster care deserve a family, not a facility | Column

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Recent data shows that nearly 75 percent of kids enter foster care because of fixable family issues – not abuse, writes a member of the governing board of directors for Children's Home Society of Florida.

The evidence is alarmingly clear: Children belong with families.

For more than 117 years, Children's Home Society of Florida has been on the forefront of evolution within child welfare, aligning programs with the evidence.

For nearly 30 years, Children's Home Society – with wonderful support from the community – has provided care and shelter to more than 2,000 kids in foster care who found safe beds at Joshua House.

Yet, also during that time, significant research emerged to unmistakably demonstrate that residential facilities are not the best option for children. First, evidence shows children experience the best outcomes when they remain safe at home with their families – with services in place to assure safety. Second, when foster care is necessary, research shows children experience far better outcomes in family homes than in facilities.

As CHS works with its partners to close the Joshua House residential program, who can argue the youth deserve to live in a facility rather than with a family?

Following the evidence and doing the right thing to have the greatest impact on kids demands evolution, courage and determination. It's going to involve unpopular decisions, perhaps even reputational attacks on integrity. But it also requires an organization with the leadership and expertise to take the unpopular stance and do it.

That's what Children's Home Society of Florida has done with its exit from more than 25 residential care programs statewide, and now again with Joshua House. CHS is prioritizing the needs of thousands of children in our community by making the intentional, evidence-led decision to do more to address the root causes of issues that lead to entry into foster care.

Recent data shows that nearly 75 percent of kids enter foster care because of fixable family issues – not abuse. These are kids who may have parents struggling with extreme poverty and may not know how to access resources or support. Kids who may have a parent battling an untreated mental health condition. Kids who may have inadequate supervision because their parents are working three jobs trying to provide.

To read that and do nothing about it would be atrocious. Instead, CHS sees the opportunity to do more – to do better – for kids. Through evidence-

based services that keep more kids safe with their families, CHS is currently bringing stability, hope and opportunities for lifelong success to more than 2,500 children throughout the Suncoast Region every year.

To make the deliberate, difficult move to invest resources and efforts to protect children – to prevent kids from being ripped away from their families in the first place – deserves thoughtful consideration, not vilification.

The time, energy and funding that we've all poured into Joshua House has certainly not been wasted. Just over the past 10 years, the Friends of Joshua House Foundation and the Community Foundation of Tampa Bay have contributed \$1.68 million to help shelter kids at Joshua House. Over that same time period, Children's Home Society of Florida covered operating losses at Joshua House totaling \$3.5 million.

Children's Home Society of Florida's commitment to the children of this community cannot be overstated.

Joshua House has served many children well. But there now are better, proven ways to help children experience safety, stability and success.

We, as a community, have a responsibility to do the very best for our local kids. To ignore the evidence is not only irresponsible – it's harmful to children.

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