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Public outcry is needed for Tennessee to fix the Department of Children Services | Opinion

Without enough caseworkers, children aren't returned to their parents or adopted in a timely way. Children, birth parents, and foster families are left in limbo. We can do better.

Dawn Coppock Guest Columnist

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Key Points

Dawn Coppock is an adoption attorney based in Strawberry Plains, Tennessee, and author of "Coppock on Tennessee Adoption Law," now in its seventh edition.

An entire department of Tennessee state government has collapsed. Not just any department, but the Tennessee Department of Children's Services (DCS).

Their mission is to keep our children safe. But without sufficient resources, they are not protecting children, they are systematically abusing them.

In early September, respected Knox County Juvenile Judge Tim Irwin told a legislative committee, "We don't have enough DCS employees. If you haven't heard that, I'm telling you it's near collapse." In many parts of the state that collapse has happened.

DCS answers child abuse hotline and investigates reports of child abuse, or they used to. The last time I called I hung up after 45 minutes on hold.

Policy requires that a trained caseworker locate, observe, and talk to the child. Meanwhile, they must also gather records and keep the child safe. There is a big shortage of caseworkers.

It is a tough, stressful job with long, unpredictable hours. When reports are not taken or are not investigated, children are left to wander unattended, underdressed, hungry and dirty. They are raped, beaten, locked in closets, and ride with drivers who are drunk or high. Toddlers ingest fentanyl and teens are hurt intervening in domestic violence. A recent news story revealed 35 reports of abuse and neglect in one family with no meaningful response from DCS.

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Many children in state custody are not safe

DCS ensures that abused children are placed safely with relatives or foster parents, or they used to. For children fortunate enough to arrive "in care," there may be no care. The DCS commissioner recently said that they are short homes for at least 1,000 foster children.

DCS and the private agencies contracted to supply foster homes for DCS cannot meet the demand. Maintaining enough quality foster homes has always been a struggle and COVID didn't help. But without enough staff to recruit, train, and supervise foster homes, or even answer the phone when interested families call, there is no hope to dig out of this hole.

When there aren't enough foster homes, children live in DCS offices, and other unlicensed locations and caseworkers babysit. Children spending a night in a DCS office is not new, but children being warehoused indefinitely (weeks or months) without a compassionate foster parent, a place to shower or basic privacy is new.

At least the children are safe, right? No. Young children may be housed with teens with a history of violence or mental health problems. Children and caseworkers are abused in these makeshift shelters. DCS is not providing even basic, physical protection for children or for their own staff.

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Lack of staffing contributes to logjams

Sometimes children are placed with relatives or family friends instead of in foster care.

This is good if the relative's home is safe. But now DCS lacks the staff to consistently ensure the relative's home is safer than the child's abusive home. Some children are tossed out of the frying pan and into the fire, with nobody following up to check on them.

People wonder how children fall into the hands of sex traffickers without anyone reporting them missing. Some of these children can because no one really knows where they are.

DCS moves children from foster care to permanency quickly by helping parents remedy their circumstances or by terminating parental rights, or they used to. Foster care workers must attend court hearings, school meetings, medical appointments, and planning meetings. They develop the steps parents must take to regain custody, refer parents to services, and monitor participations and progress, documenting every action in an antiquated database.

Without enough caseworkers, children aren't returned to their parents or adopted in a timely way. Children, birth parents, and foster families are left in limbo. We can do better. Policy makers apparently need a public outcry to get motivated. Let's give it to them.

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