



THE FLORIDA HOUSE DEMOCRATIC CAUCUS

Representative Perry Thurston, Leader

December 19, 2013

The Honorable Rick Scott
Governor, State of Florida
The Capitol
400 South Monroe Street
Tallahassee, Florida 32399-0001

Dear Governor Scott:

This year, more than 40 innocent children were killed after being placed under your protection. Their deaths were unimaginable and shocking to the conscience. Some were beaten. Some suffocated or starved. Many were toddlers or infants. For all of them, the misery and abuse that defined their lives and deaths is impossible to comprehend.

In view of your abject failure to protect these vulnerable children, I plead with you to avoid in your forthcoming budget recommendations any additional spending cuts to your Department of Children and Families. When you have failed to protect Florida's most innocent residents, it would be abhorrent to ask the agency you have tasked with their protection to make budget cuts.

Of course, not all of the missteps that have caused so much tragedy and chaos at DCF can be blamed on finances. Obviously, it was a mistake for you to put David Wilkins in charge of the agency, as he lacked significant expertise in running a child welfare agency. And clearly, your ideological agenda of smaller government and less regulation doesn't always neatly fit with the priority of child protection, which has resulted in heartbreaking outcomes for too many Florida children.

But funding does matter, and under your administration, hundreds of employees charged with protecting and caring for abused and neglected kids have been laid off. This year, I urge you to listen to the child-advocacy community and to take the necessary steps to stop children from dying in state custody.

I respectfully remind you of a recent report from the Casey Family Programs commissioned by DCF that found systemic failures at DCF, many of which are linked to diminished resources. Their recommendations to address the perilous state of children in your care included hiring skilled social workers, dramatically reducing worker caseloads, restoring budget cuts and providing more resources for mental health and substance abuse programs to keep families safe.

I caution you and my colleagues in the Florida Legislature that, in light of these recommendations, it would be patently reckless to consider further budget cuts to DCF – and it is time to invest in the needs and priorities of our most vulnerable residents. In addition, it is imperative that you and legislative leaders work to refocus the mission of DCF on the priority of child protection.

In this season of renewal, it is my hope that Florida's political leaders not forget their responsibility to the youngest and most vulnerable wards of the state. The safety and wellbeing of these innocent children are our responsibility; and, indeed, as long as you are governor, they are your responsibility.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Perry Thurston", with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Perry Thurston, Leader
Florida House Democratic Caucus