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Emergency children's shelter struggling

State sends fewer youths to Home of the Innocents

By DEBORAH YETTER
The Courier-Journal

Home of the Innocents' emergency shelter for abused and neglected children is struggling financially and could be closed because the state has cut in half the number of Jefferson

County children sent there, home officials say.

Though its other programs remain strong, officials of the nonprofit children's center headquartered at 485 E. Gray St. in Louisville say they are concerned that the crisis care services, also known as the emergency shelter, may not survive a new policy aimed at bypassing it, President Gordon S. Brown said.

"I'm really concerned about the long-term effect," Brown said.

Officials with the state Cabinet for Families and Children said they are following a new policy aimed at placing children with relatives or in foster homes faster and eliminating, if possible, a temporary emergency shelter stay.

"The bottom line is that if you're focused on providing safer, quicker permanent solutions for kids, then the reality is you're not going to have as much of a need for an emergency shelter," said Sandra Wilson, the cabinet's supervisor

in Jefferson County.

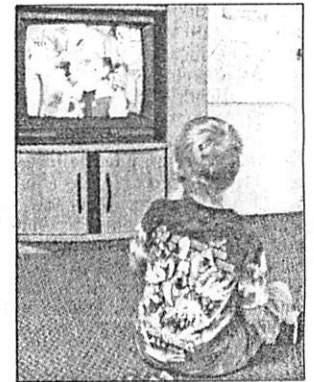
Home of the Innocents officials complain that they were not consulted in advance about the change and question whether it's best for children already traumatized by abruptly leaving their home.

The 40-bed shelter has run at about half its capacity since the Cabinet for Families and Children reduced the number of Jefferson County children sent there over the past 18 to 24 months. At capacity, the shelter cared for about 1,000 children a

year, with an average stay of about two-and-a-half weeks. The state pays the shelter \$100 per child per day.

Brown said the 24-hour shelter provides a secure and stable place, with professionals to care for children usually upset and frightened — and sometimes dirty, hungry and unhealthy.

"We're quite frustrated," said Don Nix, a Louisville account-



BY MICHAEL HAYMAN, THE C-J
A boy watched television in Home of the Innocents' emergency shelter recently.

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tant who is chairman of the Home of the Innocents board. "We have a wealth of experience with children, in what does work and what does not work."

Brown and Nix said they have pressed state officials, including cabinet Secretary Viola Miller, for an explanation of the new policy, but they believe their concerns have been brushed off.

"I still don't think the cabinet understands what all we do for children," Nix said.

MILLER DISPUTES claims the cabinet has not responded to the concerns.

"There is no way we could have been more responsive," said Miller, who said she attended several meetings with Home of the Innocents officials or board members.

Cabinet spokesman Michael Jennings said cabinet officials have tried to address all questions and concerns.

"We don't think it's true we failed to keep Home of the Innocents apprised of their role with us," Jennings said. "Home of the Innocents has received the same information, the same opportunities, the same treatment as every other private child-care provider with whom we do business."

The controversy comes as Home of the Innocents is constructing a \$25 million complex on the site of the old Bourbon Stock Yard, financed in part with \$7 million in state money. The complex for seriously ill, abused or neglected children will include emergency shelter quarters, as well as a 46-bed center for children with severe developmental or physical disabilities and other children's services.

The controversy also comes as the state prepares to launch its "Family to Family" program in Jefferson County funded through the Annie E. Casey Foundation. The program is aimed at placing more children directly with foster families in their own neighborhoods or with relatives — a move that Home of the Innocents officials say may not be best for all children and could further cut the numbers of children in its emergency shelter.

OTHERS NOT involved with the Home of the Innocents also question the policy of bypassing the shelter.

"I'm not so sure this is a great idea," said David Richart, a longtime youth advocate and professor at Spalding University. He said that bypassing the shelter could force it to cut back beds or close, leaving the state without a valuable service.

"If we're going to dismantle our current system of services, we should think very carefully," Richart said.

Wilson said the cabinet's goal under the Casey Foundation's \$300,000-

a-year, three-year grant is to get children more quickly into a stable family and avoid multiple placements, which have been discouraged since Congress passed the American Safe Families Act of 1997.

As part of that effort, Wilson acknowledged the state will have to recruit more foster families. In Jefferson County, the state has about 450 foster homes. About 600 children per year are removed from their homes.

Children who can't be reunited with their families are placed in foster homes, with relatives, at other facilities or are adopted. Wilson said the cabinet has significantly increased adoptions, another goal of the federal law.

WILSON SAID the Family to Family program, already piloted in several other cities around the country, is in keeping with the goal the cabinet adopted over the past two years to place more children directly with foster families or relatives.

Wilson said the state will continue to use Home of the Innocents for short-term placement — for example, when a child is abruptly removed from the home without time for social workers to find a foster home or relative.

Brown said the reduction could effectively shut down the shelter because Home of the Innocents can't continue to operate it at half-capacity. He said the state pays only about \$900,000 of the annual \$1.7 million operating cost. The rest comes from private donations and other sources.

At some point, Brown said, Home of the Innocents will have to decide whether it needs to devote its resources elsewhere. Meanwhile, he said, he and others at Home of the Innocents wonder where the children who used to come to the shelter are going, and whether they are getting suitable placements and the best care.

BEFORE THE cabinet cut back on children sent to the shelter, Brown said, nearly half were children that social workers had to remove from a foster home or other placement because it didn't work out — either the child ran away or the foster parent asked the state to remove the child.

Nix, of Home of the Innocents' board, said putting kids directly into foster homes without adequate time to assess their needs and stabilize them could result in children being placed in more, rather than fewer, homes.

"I'm very concerned that there are children in situations where their quick assessment and quick placement is not going to work," Nix said.

Others wonder if such a plan will work in a system chronically short of foster parents, and whether the state is finding the cheapest — rather than the best — place for a child. Foster

parents are paid about \$700 per month per child — about \$23 a day — compared with Home of the Innocents' \$100-a-day fee.

"I'm just worried about where they're going to," said Lea Fischbach, a volunteer who serves on the Jefferson County foster-care review board and is also a member of the executive committee of the state foster-care review board. "If it's not good and the people aren't skilled or trained to deal with children removed from their homes, obviously we're going to make sicker puppies."

CHARLIE BAKER, president of Buckhorn Children's Center, which operates children's residential centers in Eastern Kentucky and other services, including private foster care, said he's concerned that the cabinet's main goal is to save money. Though foster homes are cheaper, they're not necessarily the best place to put severely disturbed children or children still adjusting to the emotional trauma of being removed from their home, he said.

"We're trying to do everything with foster care, and I don't know that foster care can do everything," he said.

Richart questioned whether the state was overawed by the prospect of a grant from the Casey Foundation — a well-known child-advocacy group based in Baltimore.

"It's next to impossible to tell them they might be wrong," he said of the Casey Foundation. "They are the 800-pound gorilla in the children's field."

John Mattingly, a senior associate with the Casey Foundation, said the goal of Family to Family isn't to force a single plan on a community. Rather, it's to encourage communities to recruit and train foster parents so that more children can be placed directly with families, preferably in their own neighborhoods.

"We don't by any means feel like we have all the solutions for all the problems," Mattingly said.

JENNINGS, THE cabinet spokesman, said cabinet officials met with Home of the Innocents staff and board members to explain what the state was doing.

But Home of the Innocents officials said they were shut out by the state for months, after they first began asking about two years ago why fewer children were being sent to the center.

Nix said state officials should bring Home of the Innocents into discussions about where to place children.

"My perception of the cabinet is that the cabinet says, 'Here's what we've decided. You guys do it or get out of the way,'" Nix said.