

Children's Welfare is Paramount

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The numbers being crunched as legislators tackle a severe revenue shortfall are distressing.

But those figures are no more upsetting than Florida's ranking in child welfare issues, which could drop further when the budget ax swings.

According to The Children's Campaign, Florida ranks 48th in children without health insurance, 43rd in children in jail/juvenile detention and 38th in state support for pre-kindergarten. In terms of overall child well-being, the state is ranked 35th. It's unacceptable that children's services are relegated to leftovers in the budget cycle, especially in an area like Southwest Florida, where brutal abuse and neglect cases caused last year's shake-up at the Department of Children and Families.

Attempting to ensure child welfare on the cheap is a travesty. Children are our most vulnerable citizens, and the need for prevention and intervention services has never been greater.

Slashes to child welfare programs led to the formation of Florida's People - Florida's Promise, a coalition of several groups that is encouraging lawmakers to reconsider their priorities. State Sen. Dave Aronberg, who represents part of Lee County, agrees that cuts to children's services should've been enacted in other areas of the budget.

Former Gov. Lawton Chiles made Florida a national leader with programs for children from prenatal care to higher education. But now - with the budget cuts and the Chiles Endowment Fund in danger of being depleted - the state risks jeopardizing its progress.

Legislators need to know that our children's needs are non-negotiable.