

Preserve Intact Families – A Cost-Effective Means to Prevent Child Abuse

When the General Assembly cut funding for DCFS operations in the FY 13 budget, DCFS Director Richard Calica responded by initiating the layoff of some 375 DCFS employees, including all those who staff the Intact Family Services program. Intact Services enables at-risk children to remain in their family home, while providing intervention and monitoring to ensure their safety.

Governor Quinn claimed that he is not in favor of the cuts and is backing passage of a supplemental appropriation when the General Assembly reconvenes for its Fall Veto session. But Director Calica is proceeding with severe cuts to Intact Services now, without waiting to see if the General Assembly is willing to restore the funding in November. That is placing thousands of Illinois children at much greater risk.

Director Calica claims that DCFS can limp along by pushing off the most at-risk families onto existing DCFS private contractors—without providing any additional resources for those agencies. These agencies currently only handle cases deemed less complex or dire, about one quarter of all intact cases. Expecting them to take on the more complex cases that they are not experienced in handling without any additional resources will mean a significant reduction in access to Intact Services for Illinois families.

Preventing abuse, neglect, and the removal of children from their families

When families are investigated for child abuse or neglect, many studies have demonstrated that removal of children from the home should be viewed as a last resort in seeking to protect their best interest. Placing children in foster care carries its own risks to the children—and can be costly to the state.

The goal of Intact Services is to stabilize families so that they can be responsible for their own children and avoid future DCFS involvement. Intact Services provides short-term counseling and other support services, as well as ongoing monitoring, for an average caseload of 4,000 to 5,000 families annually. Every year Intact keeps approximately 14,000 children safe and in their own homes.

Intact services include counseling and treatment for substance abuse and domestic violence; classes in anger management, parenting, and other identified problems; and referrals for housing, health care or other needs. Families who participate are statistically much less likely to abuse their children in the future.

The option to refer families to the Intact Family Services program provides DCFS investigators with an alternative to immediately removing a child from the home. By providing a mechanism to ensure safety and monitoring, Intact Services reduces the number of children in foster care and reduces costs to taxpayers.

Until August 2012, Intact Family Services were available to any family who required DCFS intervention and was willing to participate. DCFS investigators could identify families for Intact Services as part of a child safety plan even before an actual finding of abuse and neglect.

Services ranged from six to 18 months in duration. When the family demonstrated stability the case was closed. If at any point the family was not compliant and the children were at risk, Intact workers could recommend either that a court enforce the caregivers' compliance with the plan or that the children be removed from the home. Intact Services have proven so effective that fewer than 22% of children whose families participate in Intact Services are removed from the home.

Cuts to Intact Family Services Happening NOW

The entire DCFS Intact staff—nearly 300 DCFS workers—have been notified they will be laid off October 1, two months before the General Assembly can consider a supplemental appropriation. Once the layoff is effective, only private-sector agencies will be available to assist families. Moreover, DCFS is severely restricting which families these agencies will be able to serve by changing the criteria and standards for Intact Services. The newly restrictive policies include:

- **Restricting eligibility.** The new eligibility criteria prohibit services from being offered even in very dangerous situations. For example, where one child in the home is a teenager who has sexually victimized a sibling, where a parent of a young child over age six is seriously mentally ill or addicted to drugs, or where children are being put at risk as a result of spousal abuse—all situations where Intact has been proven to help stabilize the family—none are now eligible.
- **Requiring an indicated report.** Requiring investigators to wait until there is an indicated report before a family can be referred for services will delay services. This may necessitate the temporary removal of the children from the home. It also forces the agency to put parents on record for abuse and neglect in order to help them, when poverty may be the driving factor in neglect.
- **Limiting the duration of services.** Intact services will be limited to 5 to 7 months. The time limit may mean services are removed before treatment or therapy has had a lasting impact. And with Intact Services comes monitoring. If workers can't be sure of long-term compliance because this monitoring would end too soon, they may ask that the children be removed to foster care to ensure their safety.

Intact Cuts Will Increase Costs

With fewer families eligible for Intact Services, delays in providing those services and the services provided for a more limited time, the new system will inevitably increase investigative and child welfare caseloads. It will very likely result in more children being

removed from their homes because investigators will have no other option to ensure the children's safety.

Private Sector Can't Fill the Void

Until now private agencies have been able to decline Intact Family cases they believe are too high risk or costly. DCFS Intact workers have been the safety net. The more stringent eligibility standards mean private agencies will be getting the neediest families—and will simply not be able to appropriately serve them.

Governor Quinn Could Act NOW to Preserve Child Safety

DCFS needs \$27 million in personal services appropriations to prevent the layoffs and dismantling of the Intact Family Services program. Revenue is available to fund this request. The bipartisan, bicameral Commission on Government Forecasting and Accountability's most recent monthly update on GRF revenue projects \$33.88 billion available for FY 13. That is \$161 million above what the General Assembly assumed in developing the FY 13 budget. These funds can be used to invest in children and families. Without that investment, the state will face greater costs as investigative and foster care caseloads rise.

If policymakers don't take action, Illinois' neediest children will be put at greater risk.