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The Further Downfalls of DCFS During the COVID-19 Pandemic

Josie Finch*

The COVID-19 pandemic has undoubtedly brought its waves of challenges throughout the world, but in Illinois, an already troubling situation has been thrown further in despair. In 2019, 123 children in Illinois that had persistent contact with the Department of Children and Family Services (“DCFS”) were nonetheless reported as deceased.¹ It was the highest number of deaths since 2005 when 139 children were reported as deceased despite their contact with DCFS.² “Of the 123 deaths in the fiscal year that ended last June, 24 were ruled homicides, 37 were accidental, 34 were natural, 7 were suicide and 21 were undetermined.”³ Due to budget and lack of leadership issues, Illinois’ child welfare system has long faced difficulties in taking adequate measures to protect the children within the state.⁴

Only a month before COVID-19 began to encompass the country, Governor Pritzker projected a 20% rise in foster children being entered into the child welfare system by the end of 2021.⁵ Prior to COVID-19 this was already a highly problematic situation for Illinois, mainly because “between 2015 and 2019, Illinois’ shelter bed capacity was cut by 71%, from 159 beds to 46, according to DCFS. In that same period, Illinois lost nearly 500 residential beds and 2,300 foster homes.”⁶ In May, the proposed budget was passed to give DCFS a 10% boost, which included providing private agencies with additional funds to grant towards residential placements for children.⁷ Although increasing the budget is a step in the right direction, putting those

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¹ Sophia Tareen, *Report: 123 children died in 2019 despite contact with DCFS*, ABC NEWS (Jan. 6, 2020), <https://abcnews.go.com/US/wireStory/report-123-children-died-2019-contact-dcfs-68100706>.

² *Id.*

³ *Id.*

⁴ Hannah Meisel, *DCFS Faces a Housing Crisis*, NPR (Sept. 14, 2020), <https://www.nprillinois.org/post/dcfs-faces-housing-crisis#stream/0>.

⁵ *Id.*

⁶ *Id.*

⁷ *Id.*

funds to use will be a long and difficult process.⁸ The hard truth is that in during a pandemic, families are experiencing additional economic stresses and overall dysfunction.⁹ And unfortunately, the family issues do not stop there. The president and CEO of Bethany for Children and Families, a social service agency in the Quad Cities, has seen an increase in substance abuse, and mental health seems to be “aggravated or intensified.”¹⁰ With a program that couldn’t keep up with the numerous amounts of cases prior to the pandemic, it is difficult to say that every child’s well-being is taken into account through DCFS during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Removing a child out of an abusive situation is only the first hurdle DCFS faces. There must be a safe place for the child to stay, which has been a persistent problem in Illinois. In the wake of a pandemic, it is an issue that cannot be easily resolved while the cases continue to grow. Children must be placed in beds with individuals their own age and gender, and they cannot be placed near other children with issues that would conflict with each other.¹¹ Additionally, children under eighteen years of age must be placed in facilities separate from individuals over the age of eighteen.¹² With the decrease in shelter bed capacity and the lack of immediate funds, it is practicable to speculate about the potential dangers for vulnerable children amidst the pandemic. There have been unseen consequences amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, and unfortunately one of those issues includes the well-being of at-risk children.

Safety precautions are absolutely necessary amidst a pandemic, but the unforeseen harm of complete isolation amidst the COVID-19 pandemic has detrimental effects for children already subject to abuse. Tensions between families tend to rise after spending countless hours together, and these children have nowhere to escape to in some instances. Daycares and schools have been partially closed throughout Illinois, which is the main outlet for children who are abused or neglected. There are only so many ways a

⁸ *Id.*

⁹ Peter Hancock, *How Illinois DCFS Officials Say the Agency is Working to Protect Kids During the Pandemic*, CAPITAL NEWS ILLINOIS (Sept. 14, 2020), https://jg-tc.com/news/state-and-regional/govt-and-politics/how-illinois-dcfs-officials-say-the-agency-is-working-to-protect-kids-during-the-pandemic/article_ceab0602-74cf-5ebe-ad17-6e654c6333a1.html.

¹⁰ *Id.*

¹¹ Meisel, *supra* note 4.

¹² 20 ILL. COMP. STAT. 505/5

neglected child can be identified, and online learning makes it incredibly difficult to spot those neglects. The main reason is because teachers and school social workers make well over 50% of the abuse and neglect reports.¹³ Additionally, in April, the DCFS abuse and neglect hotline reported a 52% drop in hotline calls.¹⁴ However, there is still some hope in a difficult situation. Since April, there has been a pickup in calls throughout the summer with a showing of only an 18% decrease.¹⁵ Additionally, in July and August, there were more reports made than in the previous July and August of 2019. Although there have been some positive marks and increases since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, numbers are still not consistently comparable to the prior year.

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought waves of difficulties that stretch beyond just those posed by the illness itself. It has negatively affected the economy, people's mental health and the welfare of at-risk children. Illinois has seen difficulties and downfalls in the DCFS system since the original agreement was enacted after a 1988 lawsuit.¹⁶ It is now 2020 and those downfalls have yet to be resolved as children are still dying even after DCFS has made contact with the child and family. As the pandemic wears on it is likely that Illinois will face additional difficulties in relation to DCFS operations and the process of removing neglected children from dangerous situations.

Edited by Ben Davisson

¹³ Jordan Elder, *DCFS Hotline Calls Rising Again After Pandemic Caused Large Drop*, NEWS CHANNEL 20 (Sept. 16, 2020), <https://newschannel20.com/news/local/dcfs-hotline-calls-rising-again-after-pandemic-caused-large-drop>.

¹⁴ *Id.*

¹⁵ *Id.*

¹⁶ Steph Whiteside, *Reports Highlight Problems with Illinois' Department of Children and Family Services*, ILLINOIS NEWS ROOM (July 23, 2019), <https://will.illinois.edu/news/story/reports-highlight-problems-with-dcfs>.