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**Opioid, meth epidemic straining child welfare services in Wisconsin**

Amid rising costs and stagnating state support, one northern Wisconsin county considered eliminating its tourism budget to free up funding for child welfare services.

Other counties have looked to raise their levy caps, delay transportation projects or up bonding for roads.

And some have been forced to make cuts to their Alcohol and Other Drug Abuse treatment programs to divert more money to paying social workers, covering foster care expenses and more.

Fueled largely by the opioid and meth epidemic ravaging the state, counties have seen rising costs to the child welfare services they provide, as caseworkers face mounting caseloads, out-of-home care expenses increase and foster homes fill up, forcing counties to send kids outstate or, in some cases, across the country.

Looking to stabilize the system, the Wisconsin Counties Association has requested an additional $30 million over the 2019-21 cycle in children and family aids allocations, the primary funding mechanism for child welfare services.

But Gov. Tony Evers opted in his budget to set aside just $15 million — a level Joint Finance Committee Co-chair Rep. John Nygren said he expects the Republicans in his chamber would look to exceed.

“I do believe the Assembly caucus will be supportive of increases over and above where Gov. Evers is,” the Marinette Republican told WisPolitics.com.

Evers spokeswoman Melissa Baldauff countered the governor’s budget plan “takes a holistic approach to the opioid epidemic.”

She pointed to the acceptance of federal Medicaid expansion dollars and additional investments in Treatment Alternatives and Diversion programs, home visiting and school-based mental health resources.

“If Republicans aren’t willing to accept federal funds to expand Medicaid, and keep Wisconsin’s federal tax dollars in our state instead of paying for healthcare expansion in other states, where will they find resources to support [children and families aids] increases beyond the governor’s budget proposal?” she wrote in an email. “What healthcare (or other) initiatives would they cut?”

Across the state, counties are feeling the strain. The issue is multi-pronged: in short, counties say the rise in drug abuse has led to more child welfare referrals, unmanageable out-of-home care costs and unsustainable caseloads for local social workers.

Overall, more children are being removed from their homes because a caregiver is abusing drugs. Between 2011 and 2016, Counties Association data shows those removals rose 119 percent, from 577 to 1,261.

At the same time, out-of-home care costs — or expenses covering foster placement in a local foster home, a treatment foster home, a group home or a residential care center — have risen in recent years. Between 2013 and 2017, counties’ expenses in that area increased by more than $14 million, from $81.5 million to $95.7 million, according to data from the Counties Association.

And social workers are dealing with an average of 15 cases per worker, with around 30 children per employee, levels above recommended standards. The current caseloads increase the risk for worker turnover, the Counties Association says, which then means children are in out-of-home facilities for longer.

That data doesn’t include Milwaukee County and its program, which has been administered by the state since the late 1990s following a lawsuit and subsequent legislation OK’ing the takeover.

But back in Madison, state officials and leading legislators appear to agree more needs to be done to aid counties in battling the drug crisis — and the toll it’s taking on children and families in the system.

Whether the Counties Association’s request for the full $30 million increase over the coming biennium will be granted, however, remains to be seen.

*The Capitol Report is written by editorial staff at WisPolitics.com, a nonpartisan, Madison-based news service that specializes in coverage of government and politics, and is distributed for publication by members of the Wisconsin Newspaper Association.*

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