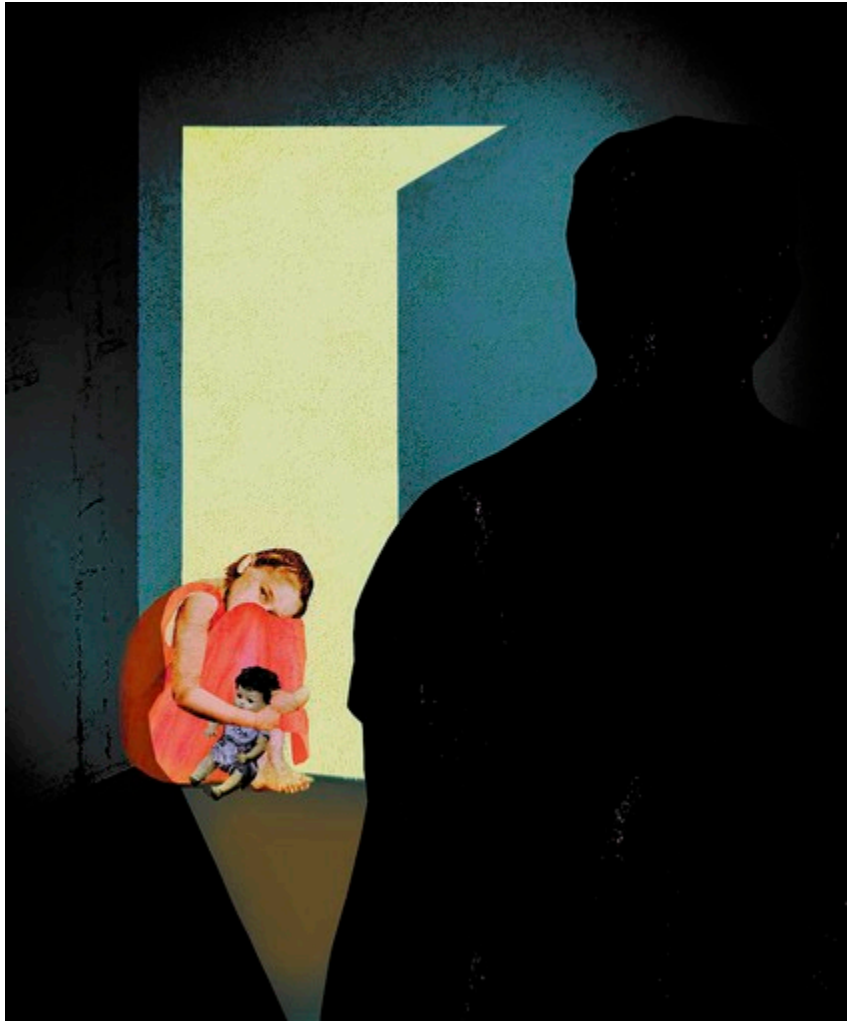


DCF Shift Puts Children's Safety At Risk

By DANIEL HEIMPEL AND ELIZABETH BARTHOLET | COMMENTARY The Hartford Courant

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The state's reliance on an unproven money-saving system, which keeps children — who are alleged victims of maltreatment — in their homes, raises questions about their safety and appears to contribute to worsening treatment of children under the supervision of the Department of Children and Families.

DCF is making progress toward satisfying the improvements ordered in a consent decree stemming from the 1989 Juan F. lawsuit over the state's inadequate protection of children, according to the court monitor's latest report.

But the report also points to a worsening quality of care in cases recently reviewed

The problems include "weaknesses in service delivery, case management concerns and the quality of the assessment and the documentation efforts regarding new reports."

These deficiencies appear, at least in part, tied to the department's Differential Response System. This is no surprise, given the nature and impact of similar programs nationwide.

This system is Connecticut's version of widely used child welfare programs bent on keeping families together, which are applied to varying degrees in at least 30 states.

Differential response is designed to keep a larger proportion of children who are alleged victims of maltreatment with their parents. Among cases meeting the legal threshold for a child protective services response, those deemed less severe are instead placed on the differential response track. In these cases, workers are instructed to forgo fact-finding investigations for softer, "strengths-based and family-centered" assessments. Parents on the differential response track are offered voluntary services, free from the traditional track requirements to engage in rehabilitative treatment or risk having their children removed.

In 2009, differential response was embedded in the department's five-year strategic plan, which said "prevention services will strengthen families and reduce need for DCF involvement" and "children will remain safely at home with their parents or guardians."

Two years later, differential response was implemented statewide, contributing to the reduction of children entering foster care. As numbers went down, the overall budget also dropped. This left DCF betting on the assumed effectiveness of differential response to protect children against repeat maltreatment, without any hard evidence to prove that children were indeed as safe when taken off the traditional track.

The DCF website has a page devoted to differential response, showcasing research that supposedly demonstrates the superiority of differential response over the traditional child protective services approach. But the evaluations DCF cites, and the larger body of differential response research, is conflicting and inconclusive at best. Significant questions have been raised within the research community as to the claims of equal child safety on the differential response track.

Despite the shaky evidence base, differential response remains wildly popular, fueled by the dual goals of keeping families together and saving money. The result can be resource-starved child protection departments in a worse position to protect kids in their care, and in an increasingly limited position to protect kids diverted to the differential response track.

In fiscal year 2012, DCF had a budget of \$881 million and allocated \$4 million to differential response, according to DCF Deputy Commissioner Fernando Muniz. By fiscal year 2014, the budget had dropped to \$810 million and the differential response allocation had grown to \$8.3 million. This doesn't include other funding that DCF uses to buy supplemental services for families on the differential response track. As the number of children in foster care dropped, DCF was left with the more serious cases and an inadequate capacity to deal with them.

"Front line staffing levels are inadequate given the complexity of cases that now make up the pool of investigation and ongoing service cases that social workers have on their caseloads since the implementation of the Differential Response System (DRS)," the court monitor wrote in the quarterly report released in October. "DRS results in the diversion of low-risk cases from workers' caseloads, leaving staff with caseloads made up of only complex cases."

Three months later and the court monitor wrote that the "the situation has worsened."

As money continues to move from traditional foster care into family preservation programs like differential response, something has to give. Without an infusion of money, the quality of care for those children who do enter care will suffer.

More frightening, though, is the prospect of what may happen to children who remain home without traditional child protective services monitoring and without the department's capacity to require rehabilitation or otherwise ensure parental fitness.

We know that "less severe" allegations of child maltreatment, including neglect, which fall onto the differential response track, are our best indicator of subsequent abuse and child death. What we don't know is whether differential response does anything at all to keep those children safe.

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