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## Fixing child welfare starts with resources, flexibility

A recent News-Leader editorial, "Much left to do to fix foster care" (March 16), notes that a federal audit is critical of Missouri's child welfare system. The audit reflects many issues that were thrown into the spotlight with the tragic death of Dominic James here in Springfield.

The audit focuses narrowly on the Department of Social Services, and virtually ignores other parts of Missouri's child welfare system. It requires DSS to solve problems in areas where it has neither direct control nor the resources needed to make a meaningful improvement.



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But rather than panicking or laying blame, let's look at what Missouri and the federal government should do:

The report notes that the state provides initial training for caseworkers, but often does not provide follow-up training. Because of high turnover, DSS has to spend too much time training new workers. All too often its supervisors are also inexperienced and underpaid. Adequate funding is the first step to ensure the child welfare system can support its workers with adequate salaries, which will reduce turnover and ultimately improve services.

There's a great deal of interest in expanding the role of private agencies in the child welfare system. For this to be effective, staff in those agencies will also require additional training.

Missouri must improve and expand training for everyone in the system. This includes family court judges, special guardians and, of course, foster parents themselves. The federal government should, at a minimum, ease restrictions on how federal funding may be spent for training.

Like other states, Missouri finds itself straitjacketed by restrictions on federal funding. The majority of federal funds Missouri receives for child welfare cannot be used to provide treatment to parents, or help them correct the problems that may have led to their children being placed in foster care. Recently, the nonpartisan Fostering Results Initiative found that when states have been allowed more flexible use of federal funds, they succeeded in reducing the number of children in foster care and the length of time that children spent in the foster care system.

Merely throwing money at a problem doesn't guarantee a solution. But the Children's Division knows what needs to be done to improve the system. It needs adequate resources to address the problems, and enough flexibility to use the resources it has to get the job done.

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