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Opinion

Foster-care bill needs more work

The Department of Social Services cannot handle the child abuse and neglect cases it has now. Caseworkers are overburdened. They need help.

Missouri lawmakers keep fine-tuning this year's foster-care reform bill, but it still falls short.

It imposes new demands on an already overburdened state agency and fails to provide what is most needed — more staff and training.

The Department of Social Services cannot handle the child abuse and neglect cases it has now. Caseworkers are overburdened. They need help.

But a Senate committee cut Gov. Bob Holden's proposed \$9.3 million funding to begin improving the department. The goal is a nationally accredited child-protection agency. Without more money to hire and train social service workers, Missouri will never get there.

The committee also unfortunately reduced funding to pay for fingerprinting used for background checks of foster parents and others who work with children. Fingerprinting is an important way to protect children from abusers and molesters.

This is the second year House Speaker Catherine Hanaway has pushed foster-care legislation. Last year, Holden appropriately vetoed a flawed bill. Hanaway deserves credit for working with the legislation's opponents, including children's advocates, to come up with a better version. But this year's bill needs more work in the Senate.

One objectionable feature would make it tougher for the state to make a case that a child is a likely abuse victim. The change could protect abusers and put children at risk.

The bill also would require the state to compete with private contractors to provide child-abuse services. Without adequate funding, the state is at a disadvantage in a competitive situation.

More alarming, the bill doesn't require state licenses for private organizations. They wouldn't have to meet safety, health and staffing requirements designed to protect children from poor conditions. That's a major failing.

The need for a foster-care reform bill is much less obvious than it was a year ago. Much has changed since the 2002 death of foster child Dominic James, which spurred calls for improvements in the state's child-protection system.

The Department of Social Services has made improvements in the child-abuse hotline and in background checks of foster parents. With additional funding, the department's responses to child-abuse calls would be even better.

State Auditor Claire McCaskill recently found the state is doing a better job classifying calls to the child-abuse hotline, but still falls short in checking on children who are the subjects of calls. In 16 percent of the cases, social service workers did not see a child quickly.

Promptness and thoroughness depend on adequate numbers of workers to do the job right. McCaskill's audit underscores that the biggest need is money. Lawmakers should fix that problem first.