

Guest Opinion: Waiver would strengthen child protection, families

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Last December, the Arizona Legislature concluded a difficult and productive special session to reform our state's Child Protective Services and foster care systems.

The Legislature recognized that foster care was not the only answer to protect children from abuse and neglect and that services to families in their own homes were just as critical. Reform in Arizona is beginning. Comprehensive reform will keep children safe and families strong.

Federal dollars are provided for abused and neglected children, but under current federal law, Arizona and all other states face strict limitations on how these federal dollars are used.

Under federal financing rules, the primary federal child welfare funds are available only for children removed from their homes and only for the time they spend in foster care.

Federal funding favors placing and keeping children in foster care over providing services that might help keep children safe in their own homes. This limits our ability to prevent abuse or to intervene before the child needs to be removed.

But there is an answer. Last month, Arizona took a giant and historic step and submitted a "waiver application" to the federal government asking for permission to invest these funds differently. If this application is approved, it will free up federal dollars to develop a comprehensive system of early intervention and family support services that prevent the need for foster care.

We have heard a lot about Arizona's over-emphasis on family preservation. Actually, Arizona has invested very little in strengthening families through prevention or early intervention.

To a great extent, we have provided protective services only when the situation got so bad that removing the child was the only option. CPS workers need more options to avoid costly and unnecessary out-of-home placements.

These options are all part of the new Arizona Child Protective Services vision: keeping children safe and reunifying them in their own homes when other services can ensure their safety. This vision also calls for quickly finding stable and loving homes when children cannot return to their families safely.

Greater federal funding flexibility will allow Arizona to invest in in-home approaches and programs that can make a difference in the lives of children - parent mentors to support and assist families; child and family teams to bring friends and relatives together to help strengthen families in crisis; and flexible funds to assist families in removing barriers to reunification.

The longer term answer is for Congress to provide flexible and adequate funding for every state to assure safety, stability and permanency for all children.

If the Arizona waiver request is approved - and with the leadership of our congressional delegation, our governor and committed Arizona legislators - our system will be an example to other states on how best to protect children, strengthen families, and have a loving home for every child.

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