

SNG-DCFS can't be fixed-3-9-15

Child care agency under fire, again

By Jim Nowlan

Ida Mae and I were classmates in our rural high school, decades ago. Ida Mae often came to school in worn, dirty clothes, but she was attractive underneath it all. I liked her, though we came from different sides of the track and didn't mix much.

Many years later I received a long, wrenching letter from Ida Mae, in which she spilled her guts about her high school years.

She was horribly abused, by her step-father, she wrote. Life was absolutely wretched.

Ida Mae became pregnant and bore a child out of wedlock. I vaguely recalled her dropping out of high school, but that was all I ever knew, preoccupied as I was with basketball and a good life.

"Several white-haired ladies came and took my baby away from me," Ida Mae wrote. In my mind's eye, I could see her crying as she wrote those lines.

Yet that is the kind of decision young, often inexperienced caseworkers for the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) make every day.

The caseworkers make mistakes. They are bound to, over time. And the state makes terrible parents.

Since I was in the legislature four decades ago, I have seen recurring headlines that scream about the terrible job that DCFS does.

Recently, it was a *Chicago Tribune* series about adolescent wards of the state in private residential institutions who have regularly been assaulted, raped and put into prostitution. Worse than in Charles Dickens' day.

The legislature responded with alarm. How could this have happened? We'll reform the system, they declare.

The system has been reformed numerous times, to no avail it seems.

Years ago, possibly in the wake of horror stories of boyfriends murdering the children of girlfriends, or whatever, DCFS increased the number of children taken away from parent(s) and into foster care from 14,000 in 1985 to 50,000(!) in 1997.

There was an old saying: "When in doubt, yank them out (of the family)."

Under the leadership of former DCFS director Jess McDonald, who pushed for subsidized adoptions and guardianships in the late 1990s, numbers in state foster care went down sharply and have now returned to about 15,000.

I talked recently with old friend Mark Testa, who worked for McDonald and is now a professor of social work at the University of North Carolina.

["Illinois is in many ways ahead of the country," Testa said, "in that the state has a low rate of child removal from the home.

["While some children have to be removed, research shows that keeping children with their birth parent(s) and providing them support gets better results overall than taking them into the care of the state."]

Testa thinks Illinois has fallen down in recent years in "not getting into the rhythm moving children from foster care into adoptive homes."

"In Chicago," he adds, "babies come into the state system of foster care and stay for years and years."

Testa also thinks congregate residential centers are generally poor places for children.

"Changing 'parents' three times a day is not good for children," he says.

Testa says “treatment foster homes,” staffed by trained professionals who care for several children, are much preferable, but these caregivers need higher subsidies for their difficult work.

DCFS should also focus on finding adoptive homes for kids before they reach age 12.

“It is very difficult to provide stable living arrangements for 12-16 year olds in institutions,” Testa adds.

[“Everything must be done to avoid having young people age out of DCFS at age 18 without a family.”]

In a conversation I had several years ago with Jess McDonald, I recall him saying that we must focus on the front-line caseworkers, providing them smaller case-loads, better training and the pay that professionals deserve.

This would help reduce turnover among caseworkers, which averaged one-third a year at that time.

Illinois has been moving the other direction.

From 2008 to 2015, caseworker numbers have been cut from 1,326 to 1,040, and the Rauner budget proposal calls for cutting another 271 staff from DCFS.

As for the legislature’s role in all this, changes should be made in the inadequate oversight by lawmakers of DCFS and human services generally. According to one observer, the problems at the residential centers revealed by the *Tribune* have been occurring for years.

I recommend that the legislature return to the days of permanent, joint legislative and public member study commissions for critical responsibilities like child welfare and human services overall.

Such commissions, which were abolished by House Speaker Mike Madigan years ago, would meet throughout the year and keep better abreast of what is—or is not—going on at these agencies.

Government child care will never be able to meet the zero defects expectations of the public, but we can do better than they did in Charles Dickens' day.