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Florida should take care of the children it already has

By Lynn Paltrow
MY VIEW

In early March, Gov. Jeb Bush and Lt. Gov. Toni Jennings announced a plan to spend \$4 million to finance a hot line that would counsel women with unwanted pregnancies to continue their pregnancies to term.

It is clear, however, that neither Bush nor Jennings is serious about reducing abortion rates. What they are serious about is keeping our attention focused on the abortion issue while they act like the proverbial deadbeat dad and welfare queen spending taxpayer dollars for their pet projects instead of on the children they already have.

In fact, Florida does a poor job of providing for the children it already has. Florida is noted nationwide for unnecessary removal of children from loving parents and putting them into an overwhelmed, sometimes dangerous foster-care system. Has Florida already forgotten Rilya Wilson, the 5-year-old foster child who disappeared from her foster home? It took Florida 15 months before anyone in the state child welfare system even noticed.

Is Florida really ready to have more children to care for? Considering how Florida treats its older children, this should be a serious question. Under legislation dubbed the Road to Independence Act, Florida abandons large numbers of foster children the minute they turn 18. The result has been well-documented cases of homelessness, unemployment and illness. The governor's newly announced plan for a token increase in aid for older foster children isn't nearly enough.

The abortion issue is wonderful because it keeps people on both sides of the debate so tied up that our policy-makers can go about the business of abandoning pregnant women, children and working families. The governor, referring to the hot-line plan, and a claimed increase in the number of abortions each year, said, "It does trouble me that in a state as compassionate and caring as ours ... the number of abortions that takes place in our state grows."

Caring and compassionate to whom? Certainly not to Florida's children in foster care, or the significant number of parents who love those children but have been denied custody of them. Here's what \$4 million could buy for those families:

- \$600 a month rent subsidies for 555 families, so their children wouldn't be taken away because of bad housing.
- \$100 a week day-care subsidies for 769 families, so their children wouldn't be taken away on a lack of supervision charges while their parents worked.
- Intensive Family Preservation Services interventions for 800 families on the brink of losing their children to foster care, so those children could safely remain in their own homes.

Florida also refuses to provide health care for all of its already existing children. The state has frozen enrollment into the state's child health insurance plan and disbanded its waiting list. As a result of new eligibility requirements and extremely limited enrollment periods, many of Florida's children just won't be able to get the health care they need.

Florida also limits access to prenatal care for low-income women, has opposed the pregnancy discrimination act, which would prohibit discrimination against pregnant women in the workplace, and does not support paid family and medical leave so that women who do carry their pregnancies to term can spend time with their children. Florida ranks 33rd in the nation for its infant mortality rate, and Florida's maternal mortality rate is among the highest in the nation. If Florida really cared, some of the \$4 million might go to reducing these appalling death rates.

There are also things that the governor and lieutenant governor could support if they really wanted to reduce abortion rates: mandate and fully fund comprehensive sexuality education, and ensure that contraceptive services and supplies are available to all those who cannot afford them.

Many of the special interest groups likely to receive taxpayer dollars under the Bush-Jennings plan are known to provide biased counseling and inaccurate medical information to pregnant women. Giving away millions of dollars to these organizations is neither caring nor compassionate. It is, however, a brilliant distraction from Florida's failure to support the children it already has.

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