



September 1, 2022

An Open Letter to Louisiana's Governor and Legislature:

Louisiana has never *overfunded* its child welfare system. That our state holds a 33-year average rank of 49th in the nation for child well-being¹ indicates we are not taking proper care of our children.

In 2007, the Louisiana Legislature approved a budget of nearly a billion dollars for the Department of Social Services. But, even then, there was no surplus from child welfare, and no one has ever claimed 2007 was a banner year for Louisiana's children.

Today, we are very far from 2007, yet the dangerous decline continues.

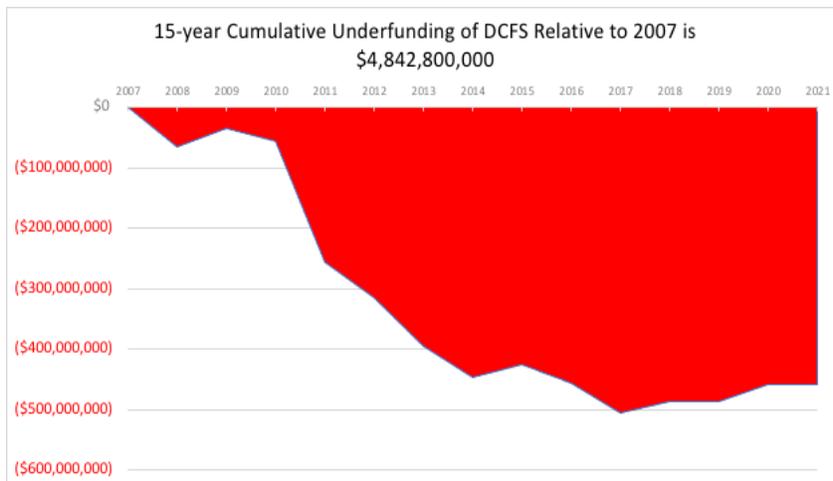
According to recent news reports, relative to inflation, the 2021 budget for the Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) is \$526,200,000. This is about half of the department's effective budget in 2007.

It is true that compared to 2007, in 2021, Louisiana's Governors and Legislature underfunded Louisiana's child welfare system by nearly half, by \$459,300,000. But there is also a much larger truth.

Louisiana's Governor and Legislature have underfunded Louisiana's child welfare system for many years. And each year's underfunding accumulates to the incessant detriment of Louisiana's children.

During the last 15 years, Louisiana's DCFS was underfunded by \$4.8 Billion.

*How alarming is Louisiana's child welfare crisis? 3 numbers that show how kids are suffering², in the August 21, 2022 issue of *The Advocate*, contained two eye-opening charts. The first chart displayed the DCFS budget history since 2007, and the second displayed the DCFS staff size since 2007.*



While the charts in *The Advocate* make the history evident, there is a more telling view of the data. Beginning with 2007 (again, not a great year for DSS), and charting each successive year's short-funding of DCFS, the chart to the left shows Louisiana's 15-year cumulative underfunding of DCFS. The area in red totals to a \$4.8 Billion cumulative underfunding of DCFS since

2007. (Yes, "Billion" with a "B").

Any year in which Louisiana's Legislature and Governor do not adequately fund the critical services necessary to protect Louisiana's children is a bad year for children. One can read in the May 21, 2008, *Management Letter* from the Louisiana Legislative Auditor³ to the Department of Social Services that

2007 was not a great year for child welfare in Louisiana. Clearly, and as daily news reports indicate, the following 15 years without adequate support made matters so much worse.

| Cumulative Understaffing Relative to 2007 | | |
|---|-------|------------|
| Year | Staff | Difference |
| 2007 | 5,165 | 0 |
| 2008 | 5,200 | 35 |
| 2009 | 5,025 | (140) |
| 2010 | 4,600 | (565) |
| 2011 | 4,400 | (765) |
| 2012 | 4,050 | (1,115) |
| 2013 | 3,950 | (1,215) |
| 2014 | 3,700 | (1,465) |
| 2015 | 3,500 | (1,665) |
| 2016 | 3,450 | (1,715) |
| 2017 | 3,400 | (1,765) |
| 2018 | 3,500 | (1,665) |
| 2019 | 3,500 | (1,665) |
| 2020 | 3,500 | (1,665) |
| 2021 | 3,561 | (1,604) |
| Cumulative Understaffing in Person Years | | (16,974) |

Values based on chart in The Advocate

During the past 15 years, when DCFS was underfunded by \$4.8 billion, relative to 2007, Louisiana’s DCFS was cumulatively understaffed by 16,974 person-years.

Leadership matters, and in this matter, the leadership most critical for Louisiana’s children must come from the state’s Legislature and Governor’s office. Only there can the root cause of Louisiana’s inadequate child welfare system be corrected.

The concept of Root Cause Analysis is critical in healthcare. When a horrible event occurs in a high-pressure treatment environment, the natural temptation is to identify what happened, take the apparent corrective action, and move on without ever wondering about the root cause. Correcting root causes prevents

the recurrence of bad events. However, uncorrected root causes maintain the status quo and create environments ripe for repeated failure.

Root Cause Analysis asks, “what ultimately allowed the bad event to happen?” Louisiana’s historic and chronic underfunding of its child welfare services seems chief among the root causes of the system’s current struggles. If the root cause of recent failures is a \$4.8 billion, 16,974 person-year shortfall, then this is the root cause that must be corrected.

Properly funding and staffing DCFS will allow Louisiana’s child welfare system to recover and improve for the benefit of our state’s children. Otherwise, as in the past, without correcting the root cause, Louisiana’s Legislature and Governors will prolong the trauma Louisiana’s children endure.

But know this, no child welfare system recovering from \$4.8 Billion in underfunding and after losing 16,974 person-years will recover quickly. To expect a sudden turnaround is unreasonable.

The Louisiana Legislature and Governor must support DCFS with proper funding, correct staffing, and powerful encouragement to become excellent. Doing any less will work against the well-being of Louisiana’s children and doom DCFS to continued demise.

Sincerely,



Rick Wheat
 President/CEO
 Louisiana United Methodist Children and Family Services

References

1. *2022 Kids Count® Data Profile, Louisiana*. The Annie E. Casey Foundation
<https://assets.aecf.org/m/databook/2022KCDB-profile-LA.pdf>

2. *How alarming is Louisiana's child welfare crisis? 3 numbers that show how kids are suffering.* - Andrea Gallo, The Times-Picayune | The Advocate. 8/21/2022
https://www.nola.com/news/article_6be7c996-1fe3-11ed-9aa7-43ad90fffd4.html
3. *Management Letter Issued May 21, 2008* to Department of Social Services, State of Louisiana from Legislative Auditor, State of Louisiana, Report ID No. 07002542, 48 pages.
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