

Capitolwire: Governor Wolf's child welfare budget proposals draw notice.

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HARRISBURG (Feb. 22) – Several spending proposals to support county-run child welfare services are drawing attention as Gov. Tom Wolf's state budget for Fiscal Year 2022-23 faces legislative hearings.

The governor proposes a \$149 million increase in state aid for county child welfare agencies based on needs to help pay for investigations and child placements as well as smaller increases in two related areas, a \$1.8 million increase in the county court-based Special Advocate program and \$291,000 to hire four staffers to create a child welfare crisis response team in the state Department of Human Services.

The special advocates are trained volunteers who help guide child victims of abuse and neglect identified in the court system to safe outcomes.

The crisis team will help county agencies struggling to manage staff shortages and complex cases and respond to unpredictable crisis situations, according to the governor's office.

The Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children, an advocacy group, suggests the above proposed targeted investments can support children and families in the long term after one-time federal COVID-19 pandemic stimulus funds are gone.

"We are supportive of the \$149 million increase for county welfare agencies, and the creation of the crisis response team to increase county support for children with complex needs because investing in the child care workforce is an investment in the children, youth, and families they serve," said Partnerships CEO Kari King.

The extra funds will go to support agency staff as well as programming and operations costs, she added.

"We know this field experienced high turnover, even before the pandemic – creating long-term consequences in practice, policy and county budgets," said King.

The number of alleged child abuse cases in Pennsylvania was nearly 33,000 in 2020, a 22 percent drop from the year before, while the percentage of allegations that were substantiated was 14 percent in 2020, a five-year high, according the Partnerships' State of the Child Report for 2021.

The report's findings are rooted in the pandemic experience where teachers and physicians and other mandated reporters under state law came into less contact with children while social tensions increased during lockdowns and other restrictions, the report said.

The County Commissioners Association of Pennsylvania said in its January priorities statement that staff shortages and increases in caseloads are the biggest challenges facing children and youth agencies. Increased state aid is needed so the agencies can hire the necessary caseworkers to handle the greater number of cases, added CCAP.

The current staff shortages can lead to unsustainable caseloads for the remaining staff and funding shortfalls leave caseworkers with a lack of safe housing options when a child has to be removed from a dangerous home, said CCAP

The big question is whether the governor's proposed funding increases for child welfare can be sustained with state revenue in future years as federal COVID aid ends, said House Majority Children and Youth Committee Chair Sheryl Delozier, R-Cumberland. Delozier plans to ask about that prospect during the March 8 House Appropriations Committee hearing for DHS.

Delozier wants to know if the proposed \$1.8 million increase for the court special advocates will help expand the program to counties that don't currently have it.

One of the key issues facing child welfare is dealing with complex cases that can involve children with a dual diagnosis who can be harder to place in new residences, added Delozier.

These complex cases of abuse can involve mental health, substance abuse or other needs for services, said CCAP.