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The Florida Department of Children & Families has a hard job. Lying doesn't help. | Opinion

Whether it's protecting abused kids, and more recently providing transparency on addiction treatment centers, the Florida Department of Children & Families usually finds a way to fall short.

Douglas C. Lyons Palm Beach Post

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If there's one state agency that epitomizes the irritating and persistent scratch of a badly broken record, it's the Florida Department of Children & Families. Whether it's protecting abused kids, monitoring adult services and more recently providing transparency about its addiction treatment centers, the department usually finds a way to fall short.

Now, DCF is just lying about it.

A recent examination by Post Investigative reporter Antigone Barton of the DCF website found department inspectors lifting sales pitches from addiction treatment centers and using them as legitimate inspection reports. One glaring example is the brochure of one facility the Post found that read: "... caring about others, giving back and making a societal impact are the foundation of all we do." In DCF's "findings," the word "we" is now "they."

The Post also found that the website has no inspection and disciplinary reports, findings or violations predating 2024. The links to inspection reports on the website only cover a tenth of the programs licensed by the department, and too many of those reports are redacted or riddled with errors. One ends with an unfinished sentence.

It's not the kind of transparency that informs potential clients about quality of service a loved one might encounter under a treatment center's care. Yet, this is the kind of inaccurate and incomplete information Floridians can expect from the state's social service agency. Last year, DCF Secretary Shevaun Harris promised to improve access to records by showing the agency's oversight of addiction treatment after state Sen. Gayle Harrell, R-Stuart introduced legislation that would have required DCF to display license applications, complaints and inspection reports on the department's website. Harris promised to provide the information and Harrell withdrew the requirement from her bill.

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At that time, Harris' office released a statement: "We can tell you that Secretary Harris is committed to ensuring accountability and transparency with the programs and facilities that we regulate."

Florida Shuffle: State's failure to oversee addiction treatment leaves patients in deadly danger

The response to the Post story? Crickets.

Earlier in my career, as a former social services reporter, DCF was a large, yet agonizing, part of my job. I often talked with overworked caseworkers close to burnout, frustrated guardian ad litems who stayed the course in representing young clients in court, and with regional directors about dubious policies. I also witnessed advocates, including foster children themselves, trying to persuade state legislators to boost funding and change procedures to make DCF more functional.

Of course, there were the horror stories. Abused children and senior citizens, overcrowded foster homes, hotlines that went unanswered — to name a few. As a reporter and human being, I would often go back-and-forth between outrage at the agency's overall ineptness and sympathy for anyone stuck in its employ. The agency then was underfunded, overworked and ill-prepared to handle some of the most difficult social ills facing Florida. Not much has changed.

For an agency that tries to fight ill-treatment, DCF can't seem to shake its own abuse. This latest failure doesn't help.

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