

VIEWPOINT

Opioid epidemic increases need for foster care funding

By Kate Breslin

In his State of the County address, Albany County Executive Daniel McCoy highlighted a shocking trend: The county has seen a 23 percent increase over the last four years in the number of children entering foster care due to parental substance use, mental health issues or domestic violence.

This number is astonishing, particularly given that the state's foster care census has steadily declined over the past two decades. McCoy stated publicly, and with specificity, what many of us have heard only anecdotally — that some counties are seeing an uptick in foster care entries due to increasing parental substance abuse, a product of the nation's opioid crisis. Unfortunately, we do not have similar data on the statewide impacts of the opioid epidemic on children and families, particularly those involved in our child welfare system. This data can be difficult to tease out as it is not always immediately clear that parental opioid use is the reason for involvement in the system. However, in order to ensure that our child welfare systems and providers are prepared to meet the needs of children and families, the state needs to make gathering this data a priority.

One thing is clear: the state must provide adequate funding to support children entering care due to parental opioid use or other issues. Unfortunately, last year's state budget cut funding for foster care services by \$62 million. Those cuts are passed onto counties, which are forced to continue to provide the same — or increased — level of services with fewer resources. What's more, this year Gov. Andrew Cuomo proposes to cap funding on the very preventive services that help to keep children safe and out of foster care. While the cap is proposed only for New York City, it is a dangerous step toward capping this funding for all counties, even those suffering the effects of the opioid epidemic that McCoy cites.

It is critical the state recognize that national crises, like the opioid epidemic, have very real consequences for our children and families, and the systems that serve them. Now, more than ever, we should be strengthening our support services — including foster care and child abuse and neglect prevention — to ensure all our children are safe, healthy and supported. We are encouraged by Albany County's focus on the child welfare impacts of the opioid crisis and look forward to seeing the results of their efforts. We hope to see a similar commitment from the state.

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