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Facing Budget Cuts and a Tough Economy

By: Tom C. Rawlings, Director

"[F]irst of all, let me assert my firm belief that the only thing we have to fear is fear itself—nameless, unreasoning, unjustified terror which paralyzes needed efforts to convert retreat into advance." So began President Franklin D. Roosevelt's 1933 inaugural plea to the American people to plow ahead together in the face of terrible economic times.

Nothing to fear but "fear itself." That line from Roosevelt's speech has come to my mind many times over the past several months as our state government has seen its revenues drop by seven percent. I heard those words as the lack of state revenues forced child-serving state agencies, including mine, to propose drastic cutbacks in services. I hear those words as our Congress stands poised to pass a \$700 billion bailout of the financial system that we know will drastically limit the federal funds available for serving children in need, at-risk families, and those with mental illness. And, taken alone, those words sound hollow, don't they?

So today I went back and re-read the speech. Roosevelt gave it at a time in which, as he said, "[G]overnment of all kinds is faced by serious curtailment of income; the means of exchange are frozen in the currents of trade; [and] the withered leaves of industrial enterprise lie on every side." Sounds a lot like these days, when we're told the credit markets are dried up, unemployment is rising, and we'll have to cut programs of assistance for the elderly and treatment of foster children with behavioral issues.

And one sentence in Roosevelt's speech really made me realize how we should approach these tough times for state government and how we should address the budget cuts. We can find in Roosevelt's words of 75 years a good model for making the budget cuts we must make today. Roosevelt said:

"If I read the temper of our people correctly, we now realize as we have never realized before our interdependence on each other; that we can not merely take but we must give as well; that if we are to go forward, we must move as a trained and loyal army willing to sacrifice for the good of a common discipline, because without such discipline no progress is made, no leadership becomes effective."

The lessons? First, we must realize that our state programs that serve children and families are interdependent. The families and children we serve often have multiple needs and receive services from many agencies. It makes no sense for one agency to cut its services if doing so will merely drive the family to another agency's services. Cutting a community mental health service that costs \$25 per child per day, for example, could have the unintended consequence of leaving that child more likely to act out violently and to end up in a juvenile detention facility costing \$190 per child per day.

We must also remember that our child-serving agencies are interdependent with the many nonprofits and other providers that perform the ground-level services for these families. It is not enough to simply say that we will balance the agency's budget by cutting payments to providers. To do so is like saying we're going to lose ten pounds by cutting off an arm. We have a network of services for families and children in this state: part public agencies, part private entities. If we are to shrink the network, we must ensure that both the agency and the provider are sharing the cuts -- and the pain -- equally.

Second, as Roosevelt said, we must give as well as take. The key here is that while we scale back programs whose effectiveness is unproven, we should put some of those dollars into expanding programs we know are effective at keeping children from the youth development centers and residential treatment centers that exist at the "deep end" of the system. Otherwise, a budget cut offers no more of a cost savings than does using a credit card instead of cash. As with credit cards, you merely delay the payment and rack up interest.

Finally, to echo FDR's words, discipline is key to getting us through these tough times. There are times at which I think it would be nice to be in charge, to control the budgets, and to decide the priorities. This isn't one of those times. Those of us in the child advocacy community need to show discipline in our own requests, and we need to collectively focus on saving those programs and appropriations that are essential. We must also continue to work toward making our child welfare system more responsive and efficient, so that as the economy expands our services can as well.

"These dark days will be worth all they cost us if they teach us that our true destiny is not to be ministered unto but to minister to ourselves and to our fellow men," Roosevelt said. The real joy in life, he reminded us, lies "in the thrill of creative effort." So what creative efforts can you make to keep our child welfare system working as effectively as possible? What programs do you think are essential, and what could we scale back or eliminate? Where do you see opportunities to concentrate on basic services during this famine while preparing for expansion during the feast years? Please email your ideas to me at tom@sandersville.net. We'll be sure to compile them and share them with policymakers.

Tom Rawlings, Georgia's Child Advocate for the Protection of Children, was appointed by Governor Sonny Perdue to assure quality and efficiency in Georgia's child protective systems. The Office of the Child Advocate is a resource for those interested in the welfare of our state's neglected and abused children. Tom can be reached through the OCA website at www.gachildadvocate.org