



Opinion

Seidman: For ‘innocent victims’ of opioid crisis, a quicker route to stability

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Early Childhood Court aims to expedite an exit from foster care for infants and toddlers

Since neither Governor Rick Scott nor the Florida House stepped in last week to halt \$28 million in Florida Department of Corrections cuts, you can rest assured the state’s opioid epidemic will continue to escalate. The slashes of 40 percent or more to 33 community partners providing substance abuse and prisoner reentry services will insure that as many as 15,000 individuals will not have access to treatment for their addictions.

But they aren’t the only ones who will suffer. As substance abuse has soared, so has the number of children flooding into foster care, overwhelming the state’s system and budget. That is especially true in Sarasota and Manatee counties, which last year led the state in drug overdoses and deaths, as well as the number of children removed from their homes because of a parent’s drug abuse or neglect.

Most of these children are under the age of 5; horrifically, some have even watched a parent die from an overdose. That kind of trauma, compounded by the disruption of being in foster care, can have life-long consequences. And the longer a child remains in custody, the more irreversible the damage.

That’s where Early Childhood Court comes in. Targeting children under the age of 3, ECC is an intense but voluntary diversion program that expedites the route to “permanency”— either family reunification or stable placement elsewhere — for children in foster care.

But ECC isn't just about speeding up the legal process. It's about addressing the underlying issues by taking a therapeutic approach and making sure trauma-informed mental health care is an integral part of the healing process for both the child and the parent.

"Our client is really the relationship and our goal is to break the cycle," says Kathryn Shea, CEO of The Florida Center for Early Childhood, which oversees Sarasota's ECC program in collaboration with the YMCA, the lead agency, and the Safe Children's Coalition. "It's really a result of multigenerational unresolved trauma and it will keep on going until you can stop it."

While ECCs have existed in Florida since 2012, it wasn't until last October that funding from Sarasota and Manatee counties and the Charles and Margery Barancik Foundation, allowed for formation of three multidisciplinary teams who work with a capacity of 60 families. Yet already eight families have been reunified and, says program supervisor Pam Hodge, "I feel confident that in at least four of those, we have definitely broken the cycle."

"It's not just about them complying to get their kids back," she says. "It's a true change of lifestyle."

Sherrisa Scott is one example. Her daughters, Sarai Scott and Taurren Milton, were placed in foster care last November after Scott and her boyfriend were arrested on drug charges while driving with the children in the car. Sarai, then 4, was playing with a drug scale; Taurren, still breast-fed, was only six months old.

Charged with a felony, Scott was offered the option of entering Early Childhood Court which requires more frequent court visits and drug testing, as well as drug counseling, parenting classes and weekly therapy sessions. She said yes, but not necessarily because she was motivated to turn her life around.

"At that point I was just, 'Whatever,'" Scott says. "I just wanted to get it over with. At first I felt, 'I don't need help, I just need my kids back.' I was angry at them, but at myself as well. To know they were rightly mine and taken from me because of something I did, that was hard to live with."

But almost immediately after her first team meeting — which included a therapist, case manager, state's attorney, guardian ad litem and ECC coordinator — Scott said she began to realize her arrest might be "a blessing in disguise."

“Very quickly, I knew I had my team behind me,” she says. “They became like a part of my family. And it moved a lot quicker because they saw the change in me and really rooted for me.”

Each new assignment became an opportunity. The steady court dates — every month rather than the typical 90 days — let Scott know “every step of the way what was going on.” Formerly a heavy marijuana user, she stopped smoking pot, and gave up cigarettes too. She found a new job with Sprint, established a healthier relationship with her father and began to “become what I want to be and was meant to be.”

Hodge admits Scott is a model client, “but I am seeing more and more like her.” She attributes that to a critical part of the program, the mental health services for both generations.

“Parent’s who’ve also been victims can’t heal until they’ve been treated for their trauma as well,” she says. “So we work with them while working with the child, and that really stops the cycle.”

By about six months in Hodge says, it becomes apparent whether parents can comply. If so, a reunification can be achieved sooner, though team support continues for another six months. If not, the courts can move ahead with an alternative guardianship. Statistics show ECCs reduce significantly the number of days to any permanent outcome, thus reducing the period of traumatic instability for the child.

“It doesn’t drag on,” says Hodge, who has spent 25 years in child welfare in two states. “Parents either get it and make a life change or they don’t. And the ones who don’t can’t stall by hiding behind blame and lies.”

Within two months, Scott was allowed supervised visits with her children. On her 22nd birthday in April, the charges against her were dropped. A week ago, she moved back home with her daughters and her “old-school” mother who, at a recent court hearing, told the judge even she had gained better parenting and communication skills from the program.

Scott plans to enroll at Hillsborough Community College this fall, the first step in pursuing a dream she'd given up: founding a school that "looks at each child as an individual and sets them on the path of their purpose."

"I wasn't a bad mom before, but I was not the best mom I could be," Scott says. "It's funny... I ended up doing what I was supposed to do because of something I wasn't supposed to do. If you're not moving toward your purpose, something has to happen to get you where you were meant to go. For me, this was it."

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