

Private child welfare agencies' top employees pulling in six-figure salaries

By Sally Kestin Sun Sentinel

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Florida's privatization of child welfare services was supposed to be good for kids and taxpayers.

But in the decade since the state began making private agencies responsible for the care of abused and neglected children, one cost has soared — the salaries of top employees.

Child welfare executives throughout Florida are now making six-figure salaries, with some topping \$200,000 — double what state employees used to be paid to do the same work.

"They should not under any circumstances be paid these sorts of outrageous salaries," said state Sen. Ronda Storms, R-Valrico and chairwoman of the Committee on Children, Families and Elder Affairs. "If you get your money from taxpayer funds, you should not be paid more than the governor."

Agency leaders say that children are safer and better off under the private system, but Storms and others say the pay is out of control.

"They're doing a government function, but they're paying themselves an exorbitant salary," said Christina Spudeas, executive director of Florida's Children First Inc., a nonprofit advocacy group for foster children.

The state's highest-paid private child welfare administrator, according to tax returns, is Frances Allegra, CEO of Our Kids of Miami-Dade/Monroe Inc. Allegra makes \$182,000 and last year received an \$18,000 bonus on top of her salary.

In charge of child welfare for two counties, Allegra's salary is higher than the secretary of the state's Department of Children & Families (\$140,000). The governor's job pays \$130,000, although Gov. Rick Scott has forgone a salary.

Besides Allegra, seven other executives at Our Kids make six figures, including the chief information officer, who is paid \$193,000 and last year got a bonus of \$28,000.

In an email to the Sun Sentinel, Allegra wrote that Our Kids operates one of the largest, most complex child welfare systems in the nation with a budget of about \$100 million, and has "experienced and accomplished executives" dedicated to helping vulnerable children.

At ChildNet Inc. in Broward County, the budget is about one-third smaller than Our Kids, \$67 million, but top salaries are comparable. CEO Emilio Benitez is paid the same as Allegra — \$182,000 a year — and four others make more than \$100,000. None of them has received a bonus, Benitez said.

When DCF was in charge of foster care, typically only one official per region made more than \$100,000 — a regional administrator, who oversaw all social services. Those positions still exist at DCF and pay on average about \$115,000 a year.

The administrative costs at the private agencies are warranted, Benitez wrote in an email, considering that they are "outperforming their predecessors, and they are doing so with virtually the same, or even less, money."

In Palm Beach County, Child and Family Connections pays CEO Judith Karim \$135,000 a year and has just one other employee making more than \$100,000.

"We absolutely couldn't afford to pay our top people upwards of \$200,000," Karim said in an interview. "We would have to cut into services for kids."

Glen Casel, a former DCF administrator who now runs CBC of Central Florida Inc., covering Seminole, Orange and Osceola counties, makes \$160,000 a year. He said the agencies bring better management, which had been "one of the biggest missing ingredients of the foster care system in Florida."

On several key measures, "Florida now ranks at or near the top of any state in the country," he said.

For instance, children who cannot be returned home are being adopted on average within 26 months, compared to the national median of 32 months. Florida also is doing better than most states in reuniting families faster.

But one recent tragedy in South Florida has raised questions about the quality of care at some private agencies and the public cost.

The body of a 10-year-old girl, Nubia Barahona, was found on Valentine's Day in a garbage bag in a truck alongside Interstate 95 in Palm Beach County, her twin brother nearby and doused in toxic chemicals. The twins' adoptive parents, Jorge and Carmen Barahona of West Miami-Dade, are charged with murder and child abuse.

A panel investigating the case last month concluded that despite numerous red flags about the dangers the children faced, none of the child welfare professionals "put it all together." The panel recommended DCF examine the "quality of the services" that Our Kids and its subcontractors provide as well as the "salary scales" at the private agencies and why they are so much higher than at DCF.

Child abuse investigators at DCF make about \$35,000 a year compared to \$40,000 for case managers at Our Kids.

DCF's inspector general has an open investigation into the private agencies' finances,

including salaries, spokesman Joe Follick said.



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