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## Social service agencies seek additional funding

### As number of suspected abuse cases rises, Job & Family Services asks commissioners to place operating levy on March 4 ballot

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FAIRFIELD COUNTY - Allegations of abuse and neglect have increased, but funding for protective services has not, social service providers say.

Now, they are asking for more money to fund those programs.

The Fairfield County Department of Job & Family Services wants voters to approve a new operating levy in 2008. That revenue would benefit children and older adults who have been exploited and mistreated, Mike Orlando, the agency's executive director, said.

On Thursday, the Fairfield County Board of Commissioners will vote on a resolution to place the 10-year, 1-mill levy on the March 4 ballot.

County Commissioner Mike Kiger said he supports the measure and hopes voters will too.

The new tax would raise \$2.4 million annually and cost the owner of a \$100,000 home an additional \$30.72 per year - or \$2.56 per month - starting in 2009. That money would allow JFS to investigate more suspected cases of abuse and neglect.

Local funding for protective services has not increased since 1999, despite the fact that the number of referrals has more than doubled since then, according to data provided by JFS. That means the agency only has the resources to investigate about 35 percent of the reports of abuse and neglect it receives.

"We are (in) a period of intense crisis, and the problem cannot be fixed by stretching dollars," Orlando said.

That fact keeps Rich Bowlen up at night. Bowlen is the director of Fairfield County Child Protective Services.

Child Protective Services has received more than 4,000 calls this year about children who have been or are at risk of being harmed, compared to 1,869 reports in 2000.

"As scary as it is going home at night, it is even scarier coming in the next morning," Bowlen said.

Bowlen said that is because he is always fearful a child will be victimized because the agency could not intervene.

Patty Ciripompa, the director of Fairfield County Adult Protective Services, a state-mandated program, has a similar fear.

Her staff has received more than 600 reports of suspected elder abuse this year, up from 232 reports in

2000. However, the state allocates less than \$3,000 annually to the program, which is funded by a Social Services Block Grant from the federal government.

However that award - \$262,000 annually - is set to expire at the end of the year. As result, if the levy does not pass, the program will cease to exist, Ciripompa said.

Pickerington resident Carol Carter said she likely would support the levy, though she takes issue with how some of the agency's other programs are run.

"I don't mind being asked (to support) a levy, if it's (for something) important," the mother of two adult children said.

Orlando maintains there is nothing more important than the health and safety of children and older adults.

"Even the most cynical resident can't blame (victims of abuse) for the circumstances that they are in," he said.

Fairfield County Sheriff Dave Phalen says voters can pay now or pay later.

That is because children who are products of unstable homes often develop serious psychological and behavioral problems, which require more costly interventions.

"The (sooner) that intervention can occur, the less likely they will gravitate toward crime (or drug abuse)," Phalen said.

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