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## Letters: Children dying because of mismanagement at Department of Children and Families

It's been a deadly time for children under the watch of the Florida Department of Children and Families and the community-based care or "lead" agencies charged with keeping kids safe.

Four children have died from abuse or neglect in the past three months. In the cases of 5-month-old Bryan Osceola, 2-year-old Ezra Raphael, 4-year-old Antwan Hope and 1-year-old Fernando Barahona, DCF or its contracted agencies knew about threats to health or safety in the children's homes. Yet caseworkers and investigators approved visits or the children's continued placement in dangerous settings. Some caseworkers falsified reports; some weren't even certified to work for the agencies.

Now – finally – people are seeking answers. We applaud Sen. Eleanor Sobel, D-Hollywood, chairman of the Children, Families and Elder Affairs Committee, who is calling for hearings regarding DCF lapses. We believe Sen. Sobel and her committee will discover what child advocates have feared all along – that the transparency, common sense and sense of urgency infused into DCF during four years of reforms under former secretaries Bob Butterworth and George Sheldon have been eliminated by current Secretary David Wilkins.

For example, during three years of "reforms" – all with the goal of cutting DCF 's budget – Mr. Wilkins eliminated 70-plus quality assurance personnel. He is removing oversight by experienced DCF supervisory reviewers who determine if investigators have made appropriate risk assessments and implementing an untested risk assessment tool.

In my 25 years working with the state child protection system, I've never witnessed the spate of deaths we've seen this year. Without oversight, DCF is blind, rudderless and reactionary. It's especially disheartening that Mr. Wilkins doesn't recognize how far off the course his agency has strayed.

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*Editor's note: Howard M. Talenfeld, a lawyer, is founder and president of Florida's Children First.*