

A T I S S U E : S E R V I C E S

# Support must step up for most vulnerable

BY GINA ARANKI  
and MATT GILLARD

For those who work with vulnerable populations in Michigan, especially children and families, coronavirus has changed our work dramatically. We hope for the support of our legislators and our community to be able to continue to provide the crisis safety net so vital for the overall health and well-being of our state.

With resurging positive cases, including in hotspots here in Michigan, states continue a great balancing act — working to ensure the safety of residents, reopen schools and support students as they catch up and move ahead. But Michigan cannot afford to shoulder this alone. Without significant continued federal relief, the state’s budget crisis will land on the backs of those who are least able to recover, and that will weaken our social structures, families and com-

munities for years to come.

Michigan is facing major financial worries. The state’s leadership recently agreed to fill a projected \$2.2 billion shortfall in the current year’s budget, which ends in September, using a mixture of spending cuts, remaining federal coronavirus relief money and \$350 million from the state’s “rainy day” fund. But looming ahead is another \$2 billion budget hole for the fiscal year starting Oct. 1. At the same time, core issues affecting the health, safety and well-being of Michigan’s children, youth and families (and therefore our state’s medical, economic and educational recovery from this crisis) have grown more severe.

Child abuse and neglect,



Gillard



Aranki

homelessness and domestic violence typically rise in times of crisis. In the U.S., this has been reported

in the wake of 9/11 and Hurricane Katrina, for example. The social isolation that has resulted from COVID has also had a dramatic impact on our mental health, as evidenced by the increasing numbers of people of all ages who are seeking counseling and support in these times. The stresses we are all experiencing contribute to collective trauma, the impacts of which we are likely to feel for months and years to come.

Human services professionals are essential workers, too, and should be compensated as such. Other states in the Midwest

and nationwide quickly developed mechanisms of financing and support for the employees and organizations serving families and communities. We have not seen a similar effort in Michigan as yet. Foster parents and caregivers, and those who serve children through foster care and adoption all deserve per diem and reimbursement rate increases for doing their difficult and demanding work.

Today our leaders have a moral imperative to make tough funding decisions that don’t adversely impact the delivery of vital services to children and families and provide an equitable distribution of resources that sustain our residents. Let’s get this right.

**About the authors: Gina Aranki is the executive director of Child and Family Services Northwestern Michigan. Matt Gillard is president and CEO of Michigan’s Children, a public policy nonprofit.**