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# Viewpoints: Shame on us for putting foster kids last

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Enough.

I am sick of children being – let's be candid – tortured here in Sacramento County.

The heartbreaking stories like those in The Bee recently about Amariana Crenshaw don't just shed a bad light on those directly involved in such a grotesque death.

The appalling deaths of these children disgrace you and they disgrace me.

These are our children. Not in some poetic sense.

When our government uses its blunt power to come into a home and remove children from their parents, you and I assume a terrific moral and spiritual responsibility to do right by these children; a responsibility to do better than the parents we took them from.

As the Book of Exodus commands, "Ye shall not afflict any ... fatherless child."

What happens if we ignore this commandment? God gets really, really mad: "And my wrath shall wax hot, and I will kill you with the sword."

Yet when, via our government, we take these children from their parents, we treat them as if their lives and deaths were somebody else's responsibility.

Consider just a few examples: How many Sacramento County children had to die wretchedly, how many Bee editorials had to scream for accountability and action, before the Board of Supervisors was shamed into doing anything other than publicly defending the repeatedly deadly status quo?

State policy is to kick foster children – already abused and neglected by their parents, then shoved into a system the Little Hoover Commission has dubbed "heartless" – out of their placements to live on their own after their 18th birthdays. Living alone on the cold streets, penniless, nighttime of fear: These are the gifts you and I give our foster children for their 18th birthdays. The meager supports that do exist for former foster children are a mere fraction of what we spend on our biological children when they become young adults.

When the governor last year was forced to line-item \$80 million in state costs to balance the budget, did he make 80 cuts of \$1 million each? No, he cut this lump sum from child welfare budgets.

Proposition 63 was enacted in part to provide new programs addressing the mental health needs of "transition age youth." No group of transition age youth has worse mental health than abused kids

kicked to the streets after their 18th birthdays: Their rates of post-traumatic stress disorder exceed those of combat veterans. (Reading what happened to Amariana Crenshaw, does this surprise you?)

So, surely, the initiative with billions of dollars in its reserve is ambitiously offering desperately needed new mental health programs to our own youth forced into homelessness, right? Guess again. In a recent study by our group, the Children's Advocacy Institute of the University of San Diego School of Law, 26 counties got an F on identifying the needs of these children and helping them.

The one champion these children are supposed to have as they move through our underfunded, secretive system is their court-appointed dependency lawyer. But the number of child clients these dedicated professionals are forced to represent is preposterous. Sometimes it is nearly twice what the Judicial Council itself says is the most these lawyers can shoulder, even while millions are spent building new courthouses.

These lawyers sometimes barely get the chance to meet their foster kid-clients. They often don't have the time to enforce orders for them to visit their brothers, sisters, or grandmothers. Everyone in the know knows this is a travesty.

The whole system depends on social workers. However, these public servants scramble to separate fact from fiction in a life-or-death task laboring under caseloads that are up to twice what they are supposed to be. If your boss came into your cubicle today and announced that you had to work a second full-time job, would he be reasonable in assuming that you could do either job well? In every hall of power, the needs of these – your children – whether it be funding or accountability are too often ranked last, with predictably horrible consequences.

Here's why: There are only about 80,000 of these kids, they can't vote, they don't live in wealthy areas, they can't show up at obscure government meetings to plead their case, most everything that happens to them happens in secret, and – here is the kicker – no official suffers any consequences by placing them last.

Which brings us back to enough being enough. I am not a religious scholar but I do not think God's commandments can be delegated.

Our children will continue to die until some courageous official of uncommon faith or conscience simply decides to put these children on top of their priority list, saying, "Whatever money we have, this gets fixed first." And fatherless children will continue to be horrifically afflicted so long as communities of faith and individuals of conviction read about the anguish of little girls like Amariana Crenshaw, and decide, on purpose, to spend their time, treasure and passion on some other cause.

When a pet-related bill is up for a vote in the Capitol, the hallways are jammed with voters; the e-mails and calls to member offices are countless. But the hallways are empty and the phone stays silent when it comes to finally ending the afflictions of children like Amariana Crenshaw.

Think about that; pray on that, and I bet you won't sleep well tonight.

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