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Addiction to opioids taking toll on children

Social workers urge state to take action

By Dara Kam
 The News Service of Florida

TALLAHASSEE | More than 4,000 babies were born addicted to opioids in Florida last year, an increase of over 1,000 percent from a decade ago.

Substance abuse played a role in two-thirds of the cases where children were removed from their homes within 30 days of birth last year.

And there's been a 38 percent increase in the number of children under the age of 5 who have been removed from homes because of substance abuse in the past four years.

Those are just some of the disturbing statistics rattled off by child welfare workers on Wednesday, in the latest round of hearings where lawmakers are groping to find a way to stem the opioid epidemic gripping the state.

"It's very difficult when you see a baby in the NICU, screaming and crying because they didn't have a choice to be born addicted," Faye Johnson, CEO of the Northeast Florida Healthy Start Coalition, told the House Children, Families and Elder Affairs Subcommittee. "It's just

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Gleeful Democrats see political wave

GOP acknowledges pressure to deliver campaign promises

By Steve Peoples
 Associated Press

NEW YORK | Jubilant Democrats across America are declaring their big election victories in Virginia and New Jersey — their first of the young Trump era — mark the beginning of an anti-Trump surge that could re-shape the balance of power in Congress in 2018. Senate Democratic leader Chuck Schumer says he can "smell a wave coming."

Not so fast, Republicans

said Wednesday. But they acknowledged setbacks in Virginia, New Jersey and elsewhere Tuesday created new urgency for the GOP to fulfill its list of campaign promises before voters head back to the polls next year. They, along with President Donald Trump, have failed to demolish "Obamacare," and now are straining to approve a far-reaching tax overhaul despite controlling the White House and both houses of Congress.

"If anything, this just

puts more pressure on making sure we follow through," House Speaker Paul Ryan said at an event hosted by the Washington Examiner. He added, "I think it simply means we've got to deliver."

Whether the president's party delivers or not, there is clear cause for concern for a Republican Party that would lose its House majority if Democrats gained 24 seats next fall.

Tuesday's results left **DEMOCRATS** continues on A-4



Virginia Gov.-elect Ralph Northam celebrates his election victory Tuesday with his wife, Pam (from right), daughter Aubrey and Dorothy McAuliffe, wife of Virginia Gov. Terry McAuliffe, at the Northam for Governor election night party in Fairfax, Va. (AP Photo/Cliff Owen)

HOME, SWEDE HOME



Ikea co-workers clap balloons to welcome the first customers during the grand opening Wednesday on Gate Parkway. The company, based in Sweden, sells home furnishings and is famous for its Swedish meatballs. (Will Dickey/Florida Times-Union)

Long-awaited Ikea store opens to cheers from hundreds of dedicated fans

By Roger Bull
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With a throng of fans waiting, anthems playing and flags flying, and with marching and dancing and speeches and applause, a furniture store opened.

Jacksonville's Ikea opened for business Wednesday morning — five minutes early — to end a two-year wait for local fans of the iconic Swedish retailer whose stores represent more than just affordable European style with some assembly required. Just 46 U.S. cities can boast an Ikea store. Until Wednesday, the closest was in Orlando.

And if there was any doubt that it was just another store opening, the crowd that started showing up Monday was one indication. By 7:30 Wednesday morning, with the Be Easy Band playing, the line snaked back and forth on itself, 20 people deep in spots, before wrapping around the end of the building.

And then there were the employees, cheering and banging their thundersticks together, creating a pep rally as much as a store opening.

And there were speeches. The pronouncement that shoppers would no longer have to make that two-hour drive to Orlando drew the biggest cheers

for the store's manager, Leotyne Green Sykes, who spoke to the hundreds who had started lining up at 2 a.m. Monday in front of the big blue box at Gate Parkway and Interstate 295.

First in line was Devon Farrar, 21, who drove up from Green Cove Springs. He said, "We really got here earlier but saw no one was here and went to Denny's for three hours."

Retired firefighter Alan Paul drove down from Waycross, Ga., and got there at 1 a.m. Wednesday. That made him 135th in the queue, earning a free Poang chair and a gift card. He'd missed out on the

Ektorp three-seat sofas going to the first 46 adults in line but seemed nonplussed.

"I thought there would be thousands here," he said. "I'm sorely disappointed."

A company spokeswoman said it's not uncommon for all those free sofa and chair spots to be taken 48 hours in advance. "Every market is different," she said.

But, yeah, Paul is a fan. "I think every business in American should be modeled after Ikea," he said.

After the band quit playing, the crew readied the big stage

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Polarizing health care issue powers Democratic wins

Results lead Democratic lawmakers to increase calls for bipartisan fixes

By Noam N. Levey
Tribune Washington Bureau

WASHINGTON | The polarizing issue of health care, which has dragged down Democrats since passage of the Affordable Care Act in 2010, emerged from Tuesday's state elections as a potentially formidable new force in the party's efforts to regain power in next year's congressional elections.

In Maine, voters resoundingly backed a ballot measure to expand Medicaid through the federal health care law, rejecting President Donald Trump's effort to roll back the law and overriding their Republican governor's refusal to embrace it.

And worries about health care in Virginia helped fuel a solid victory for Democratic gubernatorial candidate Ralph Northam and Democratic legislative candidates across the state. The issue topped voters' concerns in exit polls Tuesday, with Northam winning a whopping three-quarters of those identifying health care as their priority.

"There has been a major change here," said Robert Blendon, an expert on public opinion about health care at Harvard's Kennedy School. "Democrats for years wouldn't talk about health care. ... Now, the im-

plication is that if you are a Democrat running in 2018, you can talk about protecting health care for millions of Americans."

Tuesday's elections don't ensure health care will remain a winning issue for Democrats in 2018, when party leaders hope they can retake the majority in at least one chamber of Congress.

But the emergence of health care as a political liability for Republicans marks a dramatic turn-about for the GOP, which for years reaped huge electoral gains by playing on the unpopularity of the 2010 law.

Tuesday's results also represent a warning sign for Republicans eager to revive their campaign to repeal the law and its historic coverage expansion.

"In a year when attacks on health and health care came from every corner, voters in Maine sent a clear message: Access to health care coverage for low-income people should be expanded, not threatened or cut," said Robert Restuccia, executive director of Community Catalyst, a national patient advocacy group. "We hope that elected officials in Congress and other states will take heed."

The electoral results will pave the way for Medicaid expansion not only



Supporters of Medicaid expansion celebrate their victory Tuesday in Portland, Maine. Maine voters say they want to join 31 other states in expanding Medicaid under the Affordable Care Act, the signature health bill of former President Barack Obama, which the Republicans are trying to repeal since it was made a law. (AP Photo/Robert F. Bukaty)

in Maine, but also perhaps in Virginia, where the GOP-controlled state Legislature had blocked expansion there for years. Democrats on Tuesday came close to taking a majority in the state House of Delegates, though final results won't be known until later this week.

Thirty-one states and the District of Columbia have expanded eligibility for the government health care program since 2014, using federal money made available by the law to cover poor, working-age adults, a population that was historically not eligible for the coverage.

Resistance to the expan-

sion has remained strong in many red states, including most of the South. And the law remains deeply polarizing with Republicans and Democrats still split on its merits.

But the GOP's effort this year to roll back the law and weaken coverage protections proved even more unpopular. Fewer than one in five Americans backed the leading Republican repeal bills.

Independent analyses of the GOP repeal bills by the Congressional Budget Office and others estimated they would leave tens of millions more Americans without health coverage, and drive up costs for

many older and sicker consumers.

That, in turn, has helped shift the health care debate nationally. A Pew Research Center poll over the summer found 60 percent of Americans believe it is the federal government's responsibility to ensure all Americans have health coverage — the highest level in nearly a decade.

In Maine, advocates had been working unsuccessfully for years to enact a Medicaid expansion over the fierce opposition of the state's Republican governor, Paul LePage, a vocal supporter of Trump.

LePage and his allies worked hard to defeat

OPIOIDS

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very difficult to hear that high-pitched scream and to know that we're doing everything we can and to also know that this is not the end. ... There are years of trauma that come behind this."

The experts said the explosion of neonatal abstinence syndrome — when babies are born addicted — has skyrocketed due to a sharp increase in abuse of prescription opioids, like oxycodone, and street drugs, such as heroin.

According to Johnson, many mothers are so high during their first two or three trimesters that they don't even realize they are pregnant. And when they do find out, they are "flying under the radar" and reluctant to seek medical care "because they're afraid of the consequences if they get caught using while pregnant," Johnson said.

But newborns aren't the only children impacted by the opioid crisis, which is responsible each day for the deaths of an estimated 14 Floridians and twice that number of non-fatal

overdoses.

Florida has experienced "an increase in removals in almost every age group" and "in almost every region," JoShanda Guerrier, assistant secretary for child welfare at the Department of Children and Families, told the House panel.

The agency doesn't specifically track child removals due to opioids, but instead keeps information about whether substance abuse was a factor in the decision to take a child out of the home, Guerrier said.

Nearly 40 percent of the children who were placed in out-of-home care were newborns, who also remain in foster care longer, Guerrier said.

A study of a sample of children conducted in 2017 found that 125 of 158 newborns were removed from homes where other children had previously been removed, she said.

"Those numbers are alarming," Guerrier said.

Children who were removed from homes where substance abuse was present stay in out-of-home care longer and come from families that have been the subject of pre-

vious investigations, according to Guerrier.

Child welfare workers have implemented some changes in an effort to ensure the safety of children with opioid-addicted parents or guardians, Guerrier said.

For example, the state has sent out behavioral health specialists to assist child protective investigators.

And the child welfare agency is proposing a change in state law that would allow children to be removed from homes because of "prospective harm" instead of the current requirement of "demonstrative harm."

Agencies are also using "family intensive treatment teams" to provide "intensive, family-focused, comprehensive services" to families in the child welfare system. And they're working with the Healthy Families program to try to address challenges with pregnant women and newborns.

"A lot is going on in the child welfare system to this, but much like the rest of the nation, it is a challenge," Guerrier said.

Johnson said the state needs to pay for more

crisis-stabilization beds for pregnant women and mothers.

Hospitals may release infants to addicted mothers without plans in place for close oversight. And the system is overloaded, with waitlists for services, the child welfare advocates said Wednesday.

John Bryant, assistant secretary of mental health and substance abuse at DCF, said he expects waitlists to grow as the drug-abuse epidemic continues to mushroom.

He also predicted that the number of deaths caused by opioids will continue to climb, as will diseases associated with drug use, such as HIV/AIDS and hepatitis.

The state is implementing medication-assisted treatment programs that rely on drugs like methadone and suboxone to wean addicts off prescription opioids or street drugs. The medication is paired with other types of treatment, including counseling.

But the state's history in helping addicts kick drug addictions hasn't been great, Bryant conceded when questioned by members of the panel.

DEMOCRATS

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little doubt Trump's dismal approval ratings can drag down Republican allies, particularly those serving in states he lost last November. And even if his ratings show signs of improvement, history suggests the first midterm elections for any new president often lead to major gains for the opposing party.

An early string of Republican retirement announcements in competitive districts across Florida, New Jersey and Arizona adds to the GOP's challenge.

"We're taking our country back from Donald Trump one election at a time," Democratic National Committee Chairman Tom Perez said in a Wednesday conference call. "This is not just one night. It is a trend."

Added Schumer, D-N.Y., "Our Republican friends better look out."

Trump declared the blame for Tuesday's losses was not his.

"Ed Gillespie worked hard but did not embrace me or what I stand for," the president tweeted as he toured Asia.

Actually, Gillespie, a mainstream Republican who lost the Virginia governor's race, had taken up Trump-like positions on such issues as Confederate monuments, NFL players' national anthem demonstrations and the dangers of Hispanic gangs. Trump endorsed him, but was not invited to campaign in the state in recent weeks.

Republican National Committee Chair Ronna Romney McDaniel had a different view from Trump's.

"I absolutely think any candidate should be embracing the president," she said, "and I think Ed did."

As for Tuesday's longer-term significance for the Democrats, both parties' leaders know much can change in the year before voters decide the 2018 midterm elections. And Republicans enjoy a redistricting advantage that limits the number of truly competitive House races, thanks in large part to GOP routs during Barack Obama's eight years in office.

Also, Democrats wrestle with their own party strife, pitting the Bernie Sanders' wing against the more mainstream.

The liberal group Democracy for America had abandoned Virginia's gubernatorial candidate, Ralph Northam, over immigration policy, then celebrated his win days later. "The plus of a tidal wave

the Medicaid measure. But Tuesday, the results weren't even close. The Medicaid measure passed 59 percent to 41 percent.

"This should be sending a message to the 18 other states that haven't yet expanded Medicaid," Robyn Merrill, executive director of Maine Equal Justice Partners, said at a victory speech Tuesday night.

Medicaid wasn't on the ballot in Virginia, but exit polling suggests the issue had similar resonance there.

Six in 10 voters in Virginia said the state should expand the program, according to a survey by Public Policy Polling conducted for Protect Our Care, an advocacy organization formed to fight the GOP effort to repeal the Affordable Care Act.

At the same time, nearly half of voters said Republican gubernatorial candidate Ed Gillespie's support for legislation to repeal the current law made them less likely to back him.

In Washington, those results prompted Democrats to redouble their calls to Republicans to give up the repeal push and work on bipartisan fixes.

"If Republican leaders hadn't gotten the message, voters made it perfectly clear last night they reject the deeply harmful partisanship we've seen on health care," Sen. Patty Murray, D-Wash., the senior Democrat on the Senate Health Committee, said Wednesday.

like this is it washes away the stains of all the campaigns," Charles Chamberlain, DFA's executive director, said in an interview.

Republican Party leaders also expect their political outlook to improve dramatically once the GOP-led Congress takes action on taxes or health care.

Based on Tuesday's results, they need to act quickly.

Governors' races in Virginia and New Jersey — where Phil Murphy will replace Republican Chris Christie — were perhaps the most consequential, but Democrats also celebrated victories in Maine, where voters slapped the state's Republican governor, a Trump ally, by backing a measure to expand Medicaid coverage under Obama's health care law.

Manchester, N.H., elected its first Democratic mayor in more than a decade. And Virginia voters sent a large and diverse group of new Democrats to the statehouse, including a transgender heavy metal singer, a member of Democratic Socialists of America and a former news anchor whose journalist girlfriend was fatally shot while on-air in 2015.

The results were particularly troubling for Republicans serving in suburban districts in states Trump lost last fall.

Schumer singled out by name one of the most vulnerable House Republicans in the nation: Rep. Barbara Comstock, whose northern Virginia district lies just west of Washington.

Roughly two of three voters in the counties that primarily make up Comstock's district backed the Democrat in this week's governor's race. Sensing opportunity, more than a half dozen Democrats have already lined up to challenge her.

A spokesman for Comstock said Democrats have regularly underestimated the two-term congresswoman. "Barbara has always over-performed and that won't change in 2018," said political director Ken Nunnkamp.

Trump's team concedes the Republican Party's suburban challenges, but predicts voters will bounce back once Congress begins to enact his agenda. Embedded in that diagnosis, however, is a warning for Republican lawmakers that continued inaction could be disastrous.

Sen. Thom Tillis, R-N.C., acknowledged the urgency for his party to produce results.

"We've got to be RINOs," he said, "Republicans in Need of Outcomes."

IKEA

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for the ceremony. Disabled vets raised the American flag to "The Star-Spangled Banner." The colors of Sweden and Florida followed, along with the singing of the Swedish national anthem and "America the Beautiful."

The employees marched in first, shouting and banging together those inflatable noise-makers. The floodgates opened at 8:55 a.m., and the cheering crowd flowed in. They passed through the gauntlet of employees, still cheering and banging their bangers.

Employees and customers high-fived each other. Gift cards and bags were handed out.

Ron Edu got there at 7:30 a.m., just to see what the fuss was all about. He'd never been to an Ikea before.

"It's an exciting day for Jacksonville," he said. "But the noise is a bit much."

And the customers kept coming in, the end of the line being replenished with those who just showed up. It wasn't until 9:50 a.m., a full 55 minutes after the store opened, that there was no line. But there was still a constant stream of customers arriving.

Matt Bishop was already



Ikea U.S. President Lars Petersson (right) gets help sawing a ceremonial log from Jacksonville City Councilman Danny Becton during the store's grand opening Wednesday on Gate Parkway. The company, based in Sweden, sells home furnishings — some assembly required. (Will Dickey/Florida Times-Union)

done with his shopping. He got one of the free couches, having staked out the place starting at 2 p.m. Tuesday. Then, in less than 40 minutes, he dropped \$3,000 on another couch, a dresser and a wardrobe, along with two beds and dressers for his kids.

"We had a shopping list and we knew the bins," he said. "We weren't browsing."

Inside, the lines were forming at the cash registers. Some people had dollies stacked with furniture,

still in boxes and needing assembly. Others, like Marsha Schmidt, had shopping carts full of smaller items.

She dropped off her children at school in the morning, so she wasn't at the front of the line. But, like Bishop, she knew what she wanted for the house her family just moved into in Ponte Vedra Beach.

"We went to Ikea in Orlando three weeks ago, but I forgot a few things," she said. So her cart was full of baskets, hangers and boxes.

"It's all for organizing," she said. "I've got things all over the floor, and I need to organize."

Some left the store without buying a thing.

Diane Elsasser got in line Tuesday afternoon and also got a free couch, but it wasn't even 10 a.m. before she was walking out empty-handed.

"I'll come back tonight for the couch and I'll shop then," she said. "It's too crazy in there right now. And I'm tired."

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