Outgoing Indiana Gov. Mitch Daniels recently declared he was proud of his efforts to upgrade child welfare even as his administration cut millions of dollars from child protection.

“Child protection in Indiana has never been better than today,” he told the Indianapolis Star.

That must have been comforting to the 17-year-old, emaciated youth from Terre Haute, one of three adoptive brothers who spent Thanksgiving day sharing two microwaved burritos and water as the rest of the family feasted on a holiday dinner.

Afterward, the youth — who weighs just 93 pounds — said he was beaten before escaping out a window and running barefoot to a hospital for help. Prosecutors have filed criminal charges against the parents after the teen recounted horrific treatment where the boys allegedly were bound, beaten and silenced by socks stuffed in their mouths, fastened by duct tape.

But at least the boys survived, despite weeks of alleged abuse in the home where they initially were placed as foster children. The state’s Department of Child Services, which oversees foster care in Indiana, said details of its role in this case are “confidential.”

Others on its watch haven’t fared so well.

Earlier this month, police found a two-month-old Indianapolis boy dead from starvation in the dresser drawer that served as his bed. State child welfare officials, who allegedly had an extensive history with the family, had been unable to locate the infant after receiving a report of suspected abuse.

In July, Carmen Ellis, 3, also of Indianapolis, died from a brutal beating, allegedly by her mother’s boyfriend, one week after child welfare officials closed an investigation of the child’s suspected abuse that included bruises and bite marks, according to the Star.

Yet, as Gov. Daniels prepares to exit the office he held for two terms, he boasts that his thrift in running government made it possible to offer state taxpayers a rebate. Under the law Gov. Daniels pushed through the state legislature, each taxpayer will get a tax credit of $111 — $222 for joint filers — to fatten their tax refunds.

The Governor called on Hoosiers to “celebrate the fact that Indiana is in the kind of shape where a refund will happen.”

But there is little to celebrate in a state where children are dying and starving from abuse and neglect. The system Gov. Daniels pledged to reform is instead its greatest shame.

• Many state functions, including education, have endured deep cuts over the past several years. The Department of Child Services has been cut by more than $100 million.

• The children’s agency was rocked by the resignation in September of its director, James W. Payne, a former judge Gov. Daniels hired in 2005 to try to reform the agency. Mr. Payne quit amid ethical questions about his...
personal involvement in a neglect case involving his own grandson.

- A legislative committee investigating the children’s agency has uncovered “horror stories” from families and accounts of a nightmarish central intake system where callers experience lengthy waits just to try to report suspected abuse or neglect, according to the Star.

- Earlier this year, the head of Indiana’s Child Fatality Review Team, a professor at the Indiana University School of Medicine and nationally recognized expert on child abuse, quit the unpaid post out of frustration over a system she called ineffective at protecting children.

- And in March, the state released its most recent statistics available on child abuse deaths, reporting that in 2010, 25 children died. Incredibly, Gov. Daniels cited that as evidence of improvement because the number was lower than previous years.

Really, Governor? The 25 children who died at the hands of abusers is an improvement?

Gov.-Elect Mike Pence has claimed that upgrading Indiana’s child welfare system “will be of the highest priority.”

If Mr. Pence really means that, he’s got a lot of work ahead. And in the New Year, as taxpayers start spending those extra refunds, they should consider the cost to Indiana’s children.