



House Children and Seniors Committee

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Foster Care Overview

Presented by:

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Secretary

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Testimony of:

Phyllis Gilmore, Secretary
Kansas Department for Children and Families

Testimony on:

Foster Care Overview

Chairman Alford, Vice Chair Gallagher, Ranking Member Ousley and Members of the Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to provide information regarding the foster care system in Kansas. As a licensed social worker, I have a great deal of experience in the world of child welfare, and am happy to be in a position as Secretary to lead effective policy and program changes that benefit the children and families of our state. Although the child welfare system in Kansas is not perfect, we have made many improvements to ensure greater safety and well-being of children who are removed from their homes.

Foster care provides a necessary service and fulfills a core function of State government: to protect and nurture children who have been removed from their parent's care for various reasons and placed in the custody of the Secretary of the Kansas Department for Children and Families (DCF). It is not a partisan issue. We all want to do our best for youth in our care.

Kansas Protection Report Center (Child/Adult Abuse Hotline)

One of DCF's primary responsibilities is to effectively operate the Kansas Protection Report Center (KPRC), which operates 24/7 to receive reports of alleged abuse/neglect to children and vulnerable adults. In FY 2016, the KPRC received a total of 67,642 child reports and 16,687 adult reports. Social workers at the KPRC complete an initial assessment of the reports received to determine if DCF has the authority to proceed with an investigation and/or assessment with the family. Reports assigned for investigation and/or assessment are forwarded to the region where the family resides. In FY 2016, 68 percent of the child reports received were assigned for investigation/assessment. The assigned-social worker in the region makes a face-to-face visit with the family, child and collateral contacts needed to establish safety of the child and/or vulnerable adult and then follows up with referrals or services as indicated by the assessment.

Agency Improvements

Over the past year, DCF has focused on improving our processes regarding intake and assessment of child reports. We have clarified removal reasons to adequately reflect why children are removed from the home; continued work on a practice model to incorporate the agency vision, mission and values; enhanced critical thinking skills related to the risk and assessment tool, conducted supervisor training and worked to improve recruitment and retention of social worker staff. The agency also returned to a three-tiered finding structure (unsubstantiated, affirmed and substantiated) to add clarity to case findings, effective July 2016.

Foster Care Focuses on Best Interest

Sometimes our investigations reveal that children need to be removed from their homes to keep them safe. Currently, there are 6,846 children in foster care/out-of-home placement in Kansas. Unfortunately, these children are in foster care because that is a safer option than their own homes. They are where they need to be right now as we work toward reintegrating them with their families. We are committed to a continued emphasis on reintegration of children back into their own homes when it is in their best interest. We offer a wide range of services to help families address issues that prevent them from providing a safe and healthy home for their children. It is our goal to see safety concerns corrected so that families can be reunited. We do not want to see children in foster care any longer than they have to be, and we are reuniting more families. In FY 2016, in 56 percent of cases, children were returned to their own home, within an average of nine months.

Children in foster care are most often placed with relatives or in qualified family foster homes. DCF strives to have an ample supply of family foster homes available to children in care, so they can remain in their home communities and schools, in familiar settings and with foster parents who can address their unique needs such as behavioral health issues.

When a child is in DCF custody and placed in a foster home, our agency appreciates the role that loving foster parents fill in the lives of these children. Foster parents provide a safe, stable and nurturing environment while children are in our care. Most children in foster care have experienced abuse and/or neglect. Every attempt is made to maintain a child's connection to his/her relatives, culture and community when he/she comes into out-of-home placement. Relatives are given first consideration as a placement option, followed by family foster homes. In FY 2016, 33 percent of children were placed with relatives and 56 percent were placed with a foster family. Some children, however, need more structured settings such as a group home or a residential center. In the past two decades, Kansas has reduced group home placements from 30 percent to 5.7 percent.

Kansas contracts with private child placing agencies (CPAs) that are responsible for providing foster care and reintegration services, including case planning, placement, life skills and foster parent recruitment and training. Essentially, when a child comes into the custody of the Secretary of DCF, the contracted providers work with the child and family to resolve issues so the child can return home. The current contractors for reintegration/foster care/adoption are KVC Kansas and Saint Francis Community Services. DCF works closely with its foster care contractors to ensure that safety is the top priority of all concerns related to children in foster care. DCF staff members are responsible to help monitor the safety and well-being of the children who are in foster homes and the progress the children are making toward being able to return to their family home or find another permanent option. We strive always to prevent trauma and abuse of children, whether they are in their own homes or in foster care.

In the event a child cannot return to his/her home (for safety or other reasons), parental rights may be terminated by the court or voluntarily relinquished by the parents. In these cases, we work to ensure the child moves to permanency, through adoption or

permanent custodianship, as expeditiously as feasible. As mentioned previously, relatives are given first consideration as a placement option for a child, so if the child becomes available for adoption, the relatives are in a good position to adopt the child.

Permanency

The Adoption Exchange contractor, Kansas Children's Service League (KCSL), manages and enhances the services for children and families provided by the Kansas Adoption Exchange, Adopt Kansas Kids, to match children in the custody of DCF who are available for adoption and do not have an adoptive resource, with prospective adoptive families. Adoption Assistance is available for children with special needs. In FY 2016, 755 children were adopted from foster care.

We recently collaborated with Kansas Children's Service League (KCSL) to launch the Kansas Post Adoptive Resource Center (K-PARC) which provides post-adoptive support to adoptive families. K-PARC is a resource and service for all adoptive families in Kansas, not just families who adopted out of the child welfare system.

Aging Out of Care

DCF also operates an Independent Living program that provides services and supports to youth for a successful transition to self-reliance. To be eligible for services and supports, young people must have "aged out" of foster care at age 18 or graduated from high school or completed their GED while in foster care, or have a finalized adoption or guardianship after the age of 16. These young people may be eligible for an array of services and supports, including:

- Financial support for post-secondary education and/or training programs,
- Room and board assistance,
- Transportation costs,
- Leadership opportunities, and
- Medical services through the Medical Card Extension Program.

Training

We are also working to improve our staff through an excellent training program. The Kansas Child Welfare Professional Training Program is enhanced by a public/private partnership. Beginning this month, all DCF and contracted providers for family preservation and reintegration/foster care/adoption will be trained together under this new, evidence-informed training system on the essential skills and competencies needed to support the goals of safety, permanency and well-being and use of best practice principles (family-centered, strengths-based, culturally responsive, family involvement, accountability and community based services) that have been embedded in the training content. We are excited about this new system and believe it will positively impact the lives of children in care, as well as our staff members.

Staying Connected with Foster Families

DCF has also sought to encourage and provide opportunity for foster parents to have more of a voice in the process. In June 2014, DCF appointed a Foster Parent and Youth Ombudsman. The Ombudsman specifically addresses concerns of foster parents and

youth who have been or are in foster care. Foster parents provide a valuable service to the State of Kansas and vulnerable children who need love, understanding and compassion. It is our goal to maintain open communication with our foster parents and assist them as they provide the best possible care for the children in their home.

Looking Forward

Strong leadership is key to an effective child welfare system. We will continue addressing sensible regulation and policy changes, strengthening our recruitment of foster and adoptive parents, reforming licensing to encourage quality homes and families, further promoting permanency, and focusing on providing the best possible homes for children in our custody. We also continue to look at the front-end of the system: prevention and reporting of abuse and neglect. We are working to implement a number of strategies and incentives to better recruit and retain child welfare staff. We appreciate the legislature's willingness last session to fund pay increases for our child welfare workers across the state.

Conclusion

Each one of us can play a part in improving the lives of children in foster care. We look forward to working with you as we identify key concerns and collaborate on workable solutions that can enhance lives and bring hope to children who may right now be wondering who is going to help them. Every child deserves to know the love and stability that a safe environment and healthy family can offer. When returning home is not a safe option, we want children to have choices when it comes to both temporary and permanent care.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide my perspective on the Kansas foster care system today. I am happy to take your questions.