

Testimony from Angela Beemer

Good afternoon. My name is Angela Beemer. I have the privilege of working with the Safe Families for Children (SFFC) program in the Topeka area.

Safe Families for Children provides a loving sanctuary where parents can safely and voluntarily provide for the temporary care of their children in times of need. Founded in 2002 by LYDIA Home Association, a Chicago based social service agency, Safe Families for Children has partnered with the local community to grow to a network of over 11,000 volunteers which includes nearly 3700 volunteer host families. This network of volunteers has been able to provide over 20,000 hosting arrangements since the start of the program. Of these 20,000 hosting arrangements, 90% are successfully reunited with their families. Only 1%-2% ever enter foster care. Across the country, Safe Families is transforming the lives of children and their families by simply equipping the local community to help their neighbors.

There are currently more than 70 active sites, successfully established in 27 states across the United States alone. This has also become a global movement with sites now in Canada and the UK. In these countries, along with several states here in the U.S., Safe Families actively partners with the child welfare department to help families that might otherwise fall through the cracks. Locally, Safe Families for Children partners with local places of worship, charitable organizations, ministries, as well as community and government agencies to intervene in the lives of children and families that would otherwise be forgotten.

Lifeline Children's Services is the licensed child placing agency in the State of Kansas that responded to the need and the opportunity to implement Safe Families for Children here locally. Although Lifeline Children's Services is a child placing agency, SFFC is a distinctly separate program, operating uniquely toward re-unification of each family that we serve through this program.

Lifeline Children's Services said "yes" to Safe Families for Children in December of 2012 after over a year of collaboration and discussion between many local child welfare agencies and key leaders in our community. We said "yes" because it made sense to offer a resource in our community that mobilizes trained, cleared (CANs and KBI) and approved volunteer families to serve families in crisis. We spent the first several months of 2013 developing and laying the foundation for hosting our first children and serving their parents.

Homelessness, eviction, housing transition, mental health instability, hospitalization, pregnancy/delivery, unemployment, lack of child care, domestic violence, and unsafe living environment. These are just some of the crises that families face and that can put their children at risk, but not require them to be removed from their biological families. Many Kansas families face at least one of these situations at some point in time. A common characteristic of many of the families we serve include: a lack of extended family support, lack of personal resources in order to advocate for themselves, and the determination to care for and provide for their children a secure stable home. It is our job to help them overcome these challenges and support them as they work to provide a safe, stable home for their children.

In order for SFFC to function and fulfill its mission, the local faith and charitable communities are the engine. We actively and consistently offer the opportunity to churches and nonprofits in the surrounding area to serve. We meet personally with pastors, ministry and community leaders and others to explain the purpose of Safe Families for Children and build collaborative relationships for the good of children and families.

In addition to the 9 churches in Topeka we currently partner with, we are also engaged with the Topeka Rescue Mission, local schools, community centers, and crisis pregnancy centers. Each community partner

interacts with Safe families in their own unique way. For example, Topeka Rescue Mission provides referrals for families facing homelessness, and one church turned a building into a “Closet” that offers needed baby equipment, furniture, and supplies as well as clothing and seasonal items to parents in need as well as our volunteer host families.

Volunteer host families come from a variety of places depending on their first introduction to the program. We cast the net wide to give strong families the opportunity to care for others through hospitality and compassion. Potential host families are interviewed, reference checked, background checked through CANS and KBI, oriented, and trained. A licensed social worker completes a home assessment that looks at their physical space, family make-up, financial ability to provide for extra children, safety of the home environment, and ability to care for children from a variety of backgrounds and potentially with special needs. They must complete several hours of training based on the Foster Pride curriculum, which thoroughly equips them to work with children and come alongside their parents with the goal of reunification. We have more focused training monthly through a national webinar for volunteers as well as quarterly gatherings locally to support and train. Our team is highly engaged and familiar with each host family.

While a child is cared for by an approved volunteer host family, the parent maintains custody and the placing parent and host family communicate consistently during this time. This protects the placing parent’s right to continue to be the parent and to allow the child to feel secure knowing their parents are still close by.

The goal of Safe Families for Children is reunification. Strengthening the placing parent by empowering him/her to get through their crisis and no longer live in social isolation. We take great strides to train the host families to know that adoption is not going to be a result of hosting a child. The placing parent fully understands this as well and knows that he/she has to choose to work the program with the goal of reunification.

We have developed a strong presence and receive intake calls from a variety of sources. The Hope Center of the Topeka Rescue Mission has been a strong source of appropriate families ready for what we offer. The HI Crest NET Reach program, local schools, Community Action Head start, local hospitals, DCF, KVC, Caring Pregnancy Options, family and friends, TARC, and United Way Successful Connections are among those who rely on the option of hosting to serve their families during a time of crisis when temporary care of their children is needed. The success of our work with families relies on strong partnerships with agencies who serve vulnerable children and their families.

For us, every number is a face and a family. In 2014 and the first half of 2015, we accounted for 158 intake calls, 47 families served, 80 children served, 47 hosting arrangements of children with volunteer host families, and more than 89 resource transactions (equipment, supplies, transportation, information) to help them better their lives and care for their children.

The value of Safe Families for Children lies in relationships, support, empowerment, and prevention. The difference lies in strengthening families, protecting vulnerable children and families from social isolation and the impact of abuse and neglect. The opportunity lies in engaging volunteer families who are strong and healthy with families who need that kind of impact and influence....a true community with lasting transformation.