



## Special Committee on Foster Care Adequacy

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# DCF 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:**

DCF Foster Care Overview

**Chairman Knox, Vice Chair O'Brien, and Members of the Committee:**

Thank you for the opportunity to provide information regarding foster care 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 of our state. Although foster care 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 DCF. It is not a partisan issue. We all want to do our best for youth in our care.

**Children in Need of Care Statistics**

Currently, there are 6,591 children in foster care in Kansas. This is a record high number. Sadly, 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 reintegration. It is important to note that we do not have more children coming into care than ever before, but the number of those exiting care is not keeping pace. In fiscal year 2008, the fiscal year average was 301 removals and 326 exits (more children leaving care than coming into care); in fiscal year 2015, the fiscal year average was 317 removals and 286 exits (more children coming into care than exiting). This can be attributed in part to our greater emphasis in recent years of reintegrating children into their homes. We offer a wide range of services to help families address their issues that prevent them from providing a healthy home. It is our goal that those safety concerns are corrected and families can be reunited.

Although we do not want to see children in foster care a minute longer than they have to be, we are reuniting more families. The state has seen a 7 percent increase in reunified families over the past five years. In nearly 60 percent of cases, the children will be returned to their home.

**Foster Care Safety**

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 our custody have experienced abuse and/or neglect. Every attempt is made to maintain a child's connection to his/her relatives, culture and community when they come into out-of-home placement. Relatives are given first consideration as a placement option, followed by family foster homes. Approximately 35 percent of children in foster care are placed with a relative.

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.

DCF works closely with its foster care contractors, KVC and Saint Francis Community Services to ensure that safety is top priority of all concerns related to children in foster care. Any child death is a tragedy and one too many. While we work diligently to prevent these tragedies, unfortunately we cannot be in the living room of every foster home or home of a family receiving our services.

#### Child Fatalities while in Foster Care or Receiving Family Preservation

SFY	Foster Care Fatalities	Foster Care Maltreatment	Family Pres. Fatalities	Family Pres. Maltreatment
2001	8	1	0	0
2002	5	0	1	0
2003	0	0	2	1
2004	5	0	2	2
2005	0	0	1	1
2006	5	1	2	0
2007	3	0	1	0
2008	1	0	5	0
2009	2	0	4	2
2010	3	0	6	2
2011	2	0	4	0
2012	3	0	2	0
2013	2	0	3	0
2014	2	1	3	1
2015	4	1	0	0
2016*	1	0	1	1
Total	46	4	37	10

\*Data through 9/30/15

*(Foster care fatalities can be due to illness of a child, vehicle accident or other non-maltreatment reasons).*

When these tragic events occur, our agency immediately gathers pertinent information so that we can determine if there are policies and processes to avoid future incidents. When a child dies or is injured, it deeply impacts me and my staff. Our hearts ache for the families involved and our social workers who pour their hearts and souls into keeping children safe.

We strive daily to prevent further trauma and abuse of children, whether they are in their own homes or in foster care.

## **Privatization**

Our foster care contracts are designed to promote safety of children in our custody. They also support increasing permanency with a focus on reintegration. They additionally incentivize timely adoptions when reintegration is not an option.

Whether state-operated or privatized, no child welfare system is without concerns. DCF is working to increase the oversight of our foster care contractors in a number of ways. We are placing foster care liaisons with the contractors to assist with placement decisions. We are reviewing cases to ensure quality control and the best outcomes for children in our care. We are also communicating openly with them about potential solutions for issues in various parts of the state.

## **DCF Reforms**

Strong leadership is key to an effective child welfare system. So, we are addressing sensible regulation and policy changes, revamping 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 are also looking 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, particularly social workers. This is a key priority.

We also have given foster parents 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.

## **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 save lives and bring hope to children who may right now be wondering, who is going to help me.

Every child deserves to know the love and stability that a 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 foster care today. I am happy to take your questions.