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Testimony Before the

Special Committee on Foster Care Adequacy

By

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Mr. Chair and members of the Committee:

My name is Malissa Martin. I am the President and CEO for Communities In Schools of Mid-America. Thank you for the opportunity to speak to you about Communities In Schools and our work related to foster care issues.

Communities In Schools of Mid-America is one of two lead partners in a pilot project at Meadowlark Elementary School in Pittsburg and Chanute Elementary School in Chanute; this pilot is designed to achieve a safe reduction in the rate of entry into care for reasons of neglect in these two communities. The joint effort focuses on increasing family strength and stability by working directly with some of these schools' most vulnerable children and families, with special effort devoted to parents who are the most difficult to engage. Funded by the Casey Family Programs, the Kansas Department for Children and Families (DCF) convened the initial meeting that led to our pilot. The other

lead partner is Project 17; their role in the pilot is to facilitate the Circles poverty-alleviation program. Supporting partners include DCF, KVC Health Systems, mental health service providers, churches, and others.

At the start of our project just over a year ago, an average of 8.3 children per 1,000 children in the southeast region of our state were being removed from their home, which was 2.5 times higher than the national rate of removals. Our hypothesis is that by providing high-quality, intensive supports to high-risk children and families through collaborative Communities In Schools and Circles services, factors that might otherwise lead to involvement in the child welfare system can be safely and effectively alleviated, thus leading to our goal of a safe reduction in rates of entry into care for reasons of neglect.

Our early data is both promising and calls for additional investigation. After our first two semesters of services during state fiscal year (SFY) 2015 (July 1, 2014 to June 30, 2015), we can report the following:

Crawford County

- No Pittsburg Elementary School students who were case-managed by Communities In Schools were reported to have been removed from their homes due to reasons of neglect.
- Crawford County experienced a county-wide reduction from the previous year in the rate of removal for reasons of neglect, from 108 children to 95 children.

Neosho County

- At Meadowlark Elementary School in Chanute, there were only two reported incidences of removal for reasons of neglect among children case-managed by Communities In Schools. One of these removals was a single child, and the other was a sibling group of three.

- Neosho County experienced a significant county-wide increase in the rate of removal for reasons of neglect, from 35 children to 51 children. We are working to learn what contributed to this county-level increase. As you know, there can be a number of potential causes, whether a change in the judiciary or child welfare personnel, or other documentable reasons, that are important to understand.

When students aren't doing well, it's often because of issues that are neither attributable to the public education system, nor solved by it. These students often face circumstances that compromise their development and well-being during childhood and adolescence and that we as adults would find daunting. They may be struggling with poverty, hunger, homelessness, a lack of needed medical care, or inadequate clothing for cold winter months. These children may be dealing with violence at home and in their neighborhoods, or experiencing abuse. At school, they may be isolated or bullied or too depressed to adequately function. Perhaps they try to do well, but no one has ever noticed that they are legally blind or almost completely deaf. And of course, too often, they are neglected by a caregiver who is him- or herself overwhelmed and struggling with similar issues.

Communities In Schools is the nation's largest and most effective provider of integrated student supports because we do whatever it takes. Our unique model positions site coordinators inside schools to assess the needs of students and to provide them resources that will help them stay in school and succeed in life. We partner with local businesses, social service agencies, health care providers, faith communities, and volunteers. Whether it's providing food, school supplies, health care, counseling, tutoring, mentoring, or a positive role model, Communities In Schools is there to help.

Communities In Schools provides three tiers of services to students. Tier One services are accessible to all students within a school. Tier One services can include clothing or school supplies, career fairs, field trips, health screenings, and grief counseling. Tier Two and Tier Three services are targeted interventions tailored to case-managed students, with Tier Two services delivered at moderate

intensity and Tier Three services delivered at high intensity. Services can range from counseling, mentoring, tutoring, homework help, free or low-cost health or dental care, finding the student a safe place to live, or ensuring the student has transportation to and from school. It also includes intensive interventions with parents, caregivers, and family members.

The Communities In Schools model has a special focus in this pilot. While the service delivery model is the same, the Tier One services include only programs that address issues closely related to parent engagement and capacity building, as well as increasing family stability. Rather than a typical caseload of 65, the caseload is about 45 students per site coordinator. And the case management services are focused on children in kindergarten through 4th grade who are currently involved in Family Services and Family Preservation processes, and students whose families appear to be at high risk for imminent involvement in either.

Our Communities In Schools site coordinators regularly conduct home visits, monitor attendance and behaviors, and provide a positive adult figure. Through home visits, parent engagement and conditions in the home environment, such as filth, lice, or consistent availability of food, are improving significantly. The site coordinator works intensely with parents, checking in frequently. While our model is rigorous and comprehensive and hundreds of pages of detail about it could be provided, for today's hearing perhaps the best way to describe it – and understand its results – is to share this success story.

A Communities In Schools site coordinator began working with the M family in late September of 2014. The M family was already in the family preservation program. The site coordinator conducted an initial home visit to talk with the family, which included three young children. The mother was suffering from significant depression and was unemployed; the family was in deep poverty and consistently lacked sufficient food, clothing, and other basic needs. The site coordinator also began building a relationship with the oldest child, who was a student at

Chanute Elementary, by checking in on her, having lunch with her, and providing Communities In Schools support services. In October, the M family had an infestation of head lice. The site coordinator purchased treatment materials and went to the home to provide instruction in lice treatment, removal, and home cleaning. The M family was able to have the student back to class the next day.

In early November, the police were called to the M family's home due to its deteriorating living conditions. At that time, officers were ready to put the children in protective custody because the home was not safe; however, because the M family had court in a few days, it was decided that the children would remain with their mother and the judge would determine a proper course of action. Prior to the court hearing, a DCF caseworker spoke with the county attorney and disclosed that the family was in family preservation services and working with Communities in Schools, advocating that Communities In Schools' intensive intervention services could safely maintain the children in the home. The county attorney agreed, and removal was delayed.

The site coordinator immediately spoke with the mother and other supportive family members about a plan to clean the house. The site coordinator explained to the family how close they were to having their children removed and was extremely clear that the issues must be addressed in order to keep the children at home. The mother of the M family appeared to understand the severity of the situation and agreed to do whatever was needed.

The site coordinator purchased cleaning supplies for the family and then went to the home and established a cleaning plan with the family. The plan included daily home visits to monitor progress and assess for additional needs for approximately two weeks, a timeframe that could be extended if needed. She returned the same day to check progress and offer support to the family. The M family had indeed begun the cleaning process. After the two weeks of daily

visits were completed, the site coordinator continued to make weekly home visits to ensure that the safe, clean conditions were maintained.

In addition to the assistance with the home's living conditions and keeping the three children safely in their home, Site Coordinator continued to meet with student at school. By the end of the school year, all three children were doing better in school and were no longer living in chronic hunger. Mom's depression was greatly alleviated, she was parenting and maintaining the home effectively, and she had enrolled in community college. Most importantly, the family was intact; the children remained safely in their home, the family was functioning better than it ever had, and they had a plan for their future.

Communities In Schools is a heavily evaluated model with very high outcomes that has repeatedly demonstrated it can turn around struggling students and support families so that students stay in school. In this pilot, we believe we will also demonstrate that we can help students safely stay in their homes. When they stay in their homes and stay in school, they are far more likely to be sufficiently prepared for their next steps after high school graduation, to achieve in life, and to break the cycle of lack of education and poverty.

Chairman Knox, I appreciate the legislature's attention to foster care issues and thank you for the opportunity to address the Special Committee on Foster Care Adequacy. I welcome answering any questions.

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