

Kansas Chapter
National Association of Social Workers
...advocating for the practice and profession of Social Work...

Testimony:

Kansas Foster Care System

November 17, 2015

Special Committee on Foster Care Adequacy

The Kansas Chapter, National Association of Social Workers (KNASW) is the professional association working on behalf of the profession and practice of social work in Kansas. Social workers have been licensed at three levels of practice since 1976. These are the baccalaureate (LBSW), the master (LMSW), and the independent clinical social worker (LSCSW). We are the largest group of mental health providers with over 6000 social workers practicing in the majority of the 105 counties in Kansas. The practice of social work is performed in many fields including adoptions, addictions, aging, child welfare, courts and corrections, corporations and businesses, domestic violence, early childhood, hospitals and health, hospice and palliative care, mental health, community based prevention, problem gambling, pre-schools and schools, trauma, veterans and military, research and teaching, and more. We work in both the public and private sectors of the economy. Social workers serve thousands of Kansans everyday.

Child welfare and specifically, foster care, are often the first professional job for new graduates in Social Work. The strength of the child welfare system is in the long term tenure of staff, especially the social workers, who are making clinical judgments on child safety, plans of action, determination of abuse and neglect, placement decisions, permanency plans and ultimately recommendations to the court for case decisions. An important part of this work is the collaboration with foster parents who care for the children day in and day out. Without them, there would not be home based care. Foster parents make foster care possible.

Recent media reports have drawn attention to the rapid turnover of social workers in the child welfare systems, both at Department for Children and Families (DCF) and the contractors.

Children in state custody are outlasting their social workers. Every time one social worker moves on and a new one is assigned, it is yet another loss and disappointment for the child and their caretakers. It is a continuing problem in foster care work.

Foster care has been the topic of legislative attention for a number of years. For example, since 1991, there have been 13 Legislative Post Audit reports on different aspects of foster care. This does not include the 15 reports on the foster care settlement.

Foster Care Settlement

In 1989, Sheila A. v. Hayden was filed that included the following allegations:

Failure to protect children

Inappropriate Placements

Absence of Plans (plan of care)

Insufficient and Untrained Staff (too few social workers for caseloads and no training)

Proper Care (missing mental health appointments)

Information System (lacking basic information and planned goals for children in custody)

The nine children involved in the case are now well into their 20's and 30's.

This lawsuit was resolved in 1993 through a settlement agreement. The agreement expired June 30, 2002.

There were over 130 actions that were required to be met by the then child welfare agency, Social and Rehabilitation Services (SRS). About 80% of the actions were met.

Two areas of action that never reached were:

- assessing and modifying services for children in custody
- implement and maintain information on worker caseloads

Both of these measurements are connected to staffing. It is the social workers in child welfare, who determine the necessary and right services for the child and family. These services may be about reunification between a child and his or her family. They may be services to help a child whose parent's parental rights have been severed. Child welfare cases are typically very complex and complicated and involve a multitude of systems. Caseloads must be realistic in order to work effectively with the child, family, foster family and all of the systems involved with the child.

KNASW suggests these actions:

- Investigate the scope of social work turnover in both DCF and contractors, including caseloads.
- Determine the reasons social workers are leaving.
- Implement a multi-year focus on recruitment and retention of social workers.
- Develop long term incentives, supports, career path (advancement), professional development, on-going training, supervision, student loan forgiveness, and competitive compensation.

Thank you for caring about the kids and those who are working to make their lives better.

Contact information

Sky Westerlund, LMSW, Executive Director
700 SW Jackson, Ste. 1109, Topeka, Kansas 66603
sky@naswkansas.com or Office: 785-354-4804; Cell: 785-393-4642