



## Testimony before 2015 Special Committee on Foster Care Adequacy

November 17, 2015

Senator Knox and Foster Care Adequacy Committee Members:

Thank you for giving me the opportunity to provide written testimony to your committee. I am pleased to be able to provide you with information and comments.

Midwest Foster Care and Adoption Association (MFCAA) is a comprehensive, grassroots support and advocacy center for abused and neglected children and the families caring for them. Created by foster and adoptive families, we operate with the belief that it is within the context of a family that children learn, grow, heal and thrive. Due to this perspective, MFCAA enjoys the designation as a national leader for innovative service development and parent-led advocacy.

MFCAA has facilities in Springfield and Independence, Missouri, and Olathe, Kansas, which serve over 2000 families in our service area. MFCAA's services include the following: foster home licensing, services for relative, kinship, and adoptive homes, direct services (food, clothing, back-to-school, medical equipment distribution), foster parent training, support groups, and advocacy for foster/adoptive families. MFCAA is also very effective at connecting families to the community-based mental health treatment services needed to maintain the stability of foster/adoptive placements.

### **Innovations based upon needs of families for these interventions, developed by families for families.**

#### *Behavioral Interventionist Program*

MFCAA's Behavioral Interventionist (BI) Program is an innovative service designed to keep children who have severe behavioral or mental health challenges stable in their current home, and limit the need for placing these children in residential treatment facilities. The BI program began in 2012 as a collaboration between MFCAA's President, Lori Ross, and Lifeworks, Inc. – a regional leader in behavioral treatment

and therapy for foster youth. Lori, who has been a foster parent to hundreds of children, and adoptive mother of 26, observed the limited impact and astronomical costs of in-patient residential treatment while seeking treatment for several of her special needs children. Behavioral Interventionists work directly with parents and children in the home setting to help children develop coping mechanisms, deescalation techniques, and attain life skills in a way that is comparable to that achieved in a residential treatment setting – but at a fraction of the cost. Essentially, the program serves families who have exhausted every other resource, and are on the path that eventually leads to placement and adoption disruption – a horrible situation that leaves psychological scars on both children and parents. By reducing disruption, we significantly impact the child’s educational, interpersonal and psychological development and greatly increase the chances that they will successfully transition to adulthood with happy lives.

Since its inception, the BI program has been highly successful. 100% of participating children experienced reductions in time spent in residential treatment facilities. 89% of children showed improvements in global functioning, skill attainment, and interpersonal relationship building. 90% of families said they were highly satisfied with the services provided through the BI program. Most importantly, none of the families who received BI services moved to permanently disrupt their placement, or asked that their children be placed in another home – a massive accomplishment for these families which directly benefits all the children currently in their homes.

### *Extreme Recruitment*

In the field of foster care and adoption, MFCFA's Extreme Recruitment program is a tectonic shift – comprehensive, aggressive and fast. It finds “forever” homes for abused and neglected children who are likely to age out of foster care without a family. These most challenging children are called “hard to place.” They are age 12 or older; typically of minority heritage; part of a sibling group; and/or with physical, mental, or behavioral challenges. These children are considered by many as unadoptable, although not officially labeled as such.

Using an effective model developed by another foster parent agency, in Extreme Recruitment serves these hardest-to-place children by identifying at least 40 potential caregivers for each child, reconnecting them with relatives, creating dynamic permanency plans for children who are languishing in foster care and placing many in adoptive homes. The program uses traditional recruitment strategies supplemented by case file mining, Internet searches, and a unique private Detective-Recruiter team who go door-to-door to track down relatives. A Licensing Worker prepares the new prospective adopting parent for the child’s placement. This multi-faceted approach greatly increases permanent possibilities for any child, no matter how “hard to place.”

83% of the young people served in this program demonstrate improved “global functioning” and 91% of them are reconnected with appropriate and supportive relatives and kin, providing them the opportunity to enjoy family connections and positive adult influences that all young people want and need to successfully transition to adulthood.

## *Family Advocacy*

MFCAA's Family Advocacy program is the first stop for families seeking advice and guidance on the common challenges and barriers experienced by foster/adoptive families and the children in their care. Our Family Advocacy staff are highly-experienced foster parents and social service professionals who have wide-ranging knowledge of the child welfare and foster care systems. Families seeking advice and guidance typically receive immediate responses to their questions and concerns, allowing them to address crises and mitigate disasters as they occur. Since our organization's founding in early 2000, Family Advocacy has formed the foundation of our service-delivery model, and is our organization's flagship program. Begun informally as a support group for Kansas City area foster parents, our version of peer-to-peer advocacy has proven itself effective at crafting innovative solutions to the everyday challenges facing foster and adoptive families. These problems and challenges include delays in reimbursement payments, problems accessing school-based resources, accessing mental health services for children with significant needs, accessing respite services, misunderstandings about the court system and much more. MFCAA's Family Advocacy program consistently produces high satisfaction rates among the families who access its services – contributing greatly to MFCAA's 90% retention rate of licensed foster homes. Client satisfaction surveys regularly indicate a high level of satisfaction with the quality of our advocacy services, and the immediacy of their implementation. Families are able to access our Advocacy services by calling MFCAA, visiting one of our three resource centers, or by connecting with us on social media (Facebook).

In 2014, MFCAA's Family Advocacy program served over 350 families with advice, guidance, and support in times of crisis. Families who responded to Advocacy client satisfaction surveys indicated that 90% were "highly satisfied" with the services provided, and were very likely to recommend MFCAA advocacy services to a friend or family member.

### **Where KS Foster Care is Today:**

The current landscape of child welfare system in Kansas has many strengths, but also several significant weaknesses. **Strengths** in Kansas' foster care system include low use of congregate care for placements and high use of relative placements. However, **areas for improvement** include rising numbers of children entering system, an increase in the length of stay for those children, inadequate number of homes to assure safety and permanence for children who don't have family to which to return, and a lack of support for foster families. These weaknesses have produced a situation where families are constantly pushed to care for more children while having access to fewer resources, pushing many to burn-out and decline to extend their foster parent license – effectively shrinking the available pool of foster homes, and limiting the resources which may have otherwise been used to help foster children.

### **MFCAA Believes:**

- Foster parent recruitment and retention can be greatly improved when those efforts are informed by the experience of families who have actually parented children who have suffered trauma, and when these parents receive support that is tailored to their needs. Lack of transparency and a clear grievance procedure leaves families unsupported, vulnerable, and feeling as though they are at the mercy of a bureaucratic system that does not understand (or care about) their day-to-day struggles. The recently created ombudsman is a promising step in the right direction - but with this individual being an employee of the foster parent licensing agency without any oversight ability, this step is fairly small, and appears quite weak.
- The Kansas Foster Parent Bill of Rights (draft legislation), as refined by the Senate Committee last session, provides parents with transparent procedures by which they can resolve problems and grievances. Treating them as equal partners will encourage committed families to continue to provide loving, dedicated homes for kids, and will help grow the overall pool of available homes.
- Based on our experience of over 15 years of working with LGBT families, we recognize that they provide valuable services to children and make secure and safe families for children who would otherwise not have families in our state. Any effort to reduce or eliminate these families from fostering or adopting would be a great disservice to our society, and the children we intend to serve.
- The resources for foster families are limited by the silos created by the many agencies who provide licensing and supervision – a latent effect of the privatization process that keeps many families from accessing valuable services. Training opportunities, support groups, and supportive services should be available to all no matter which agencies holds a family’s license.
- Adoptive families have little to no support or services offered to them after adoption. Because of the trauma suffered by children in the system, these adoptions are at high risk of disruption, and the children are at high risk of returning into foster care as older and more traumatized youth. A formal program of post-adoptive supports would reduce risks to these young people, and likely result in a greater number of adoptions that are successful over time.

This is a good opportunity for Kansas to review successes and incorporate innovations from others into this forward-looking system.

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