

Testimony to the Joint Committee on Child Welfare System Oversight

Thank you, Chairperson, and committee members for allowing me to speak with you today. My name is Kristine Fowler and I live in Smith Center, KS. I am a person who continues to have interactions with the Department of Children and Families along with St. Francis Ministries,

I am here today to speak with you about maintaining a separate oversight agency to ensure that the policies and procedures, as well as gaps that may exist within, are explored when there is a complaint made. The Division of the Child Advocate or the creation of appointing an ombudsman are important additions to ensure that children, along with their parents, are protected from devastating consequences to the health and welfare of the family unit when policy and procedures are not followed. The following information is important background to lead into why an independent review of cases would benefit future families from living through a similar American horror story. It has been daunting trying to find a way to save my children and file a complaint against DCF procedures or lack of.

My five children have been the most cherished people in my life along with their father, who would be standing right beside me today if he were still alive. I have devoted the last 24 years of my life attempting to ensure that these souls become productive members of society. Like all families, we have had challenges and as parents were able to find the appropriate resources independently as needed. I will whole-heartedly share that as an infection preventionist, the worldwide pandemic seemed like a vacation in comparison to dealing with DCF and St. Francis Ministries.

This story begins in 2016 when my 16-year-old child began to have behavioral concerns that we as parents wanted to address with a professional. Somehow miscommunication occurred between law enforcement and DCF which resulted in this child being labeled a child in need of care case. The entire process was never explained to us. Over the next two years, we were ignored as parents, challenged on all our suggestions to assist our child, and waited months to finally receive unsubstantiated findings from DCF. There were eleven different caseworkers during this time frame, and I was only spoken to twice for relevant information about my child. The conclusion of this story ended when my child aged out and was sent to prison for methamphetamine use that began while in the custody of DCF. The rest of the family was emotionally and financially drained and I am open about the fact it almost caused me to take my own life. A family of seven lost the pursuit of happiness emotionally, physically, and financially.

I thank you for allowing me to share part of my family's story. There are so many other details I would like to share about the heartache we experienced and are still experiencing. It is my prayer that this committee will continue to ensure that families are treated fairly and provide independent oversight when policy and procedures are not followed.

Respectfully,

Kristine Fowler