



Testimony: Special Committee on Foster Care Oversight

August 25, 2020

Hello, I am Denise Cross, President and CEO of Cornerstones of Care. Thank you so much for the opportunity to talk with you about our work in communities throughout the state.

Cornerstones of Care is a behavioral health organization providing prevention, treatment and support services to children and their families. The children that we serve have all experienced some kind of trauma through no fault of their own. Trauma resulting from abuse or neglect, witnessing or experiencing violence in their community or from being separated from a loved one. I am proud to share that Cornerstones of Care is certified in the Sanctuary trauma informed model. This model helps guide our approach to responding to the trauma the children and families we work with have experienced.

On Oct. 1 of last year, we were connected with over 1,000 children and youth in Wyandotte, Leavenworth and Atchison Counties. Our team members immediately began to learn about each of these children, to understand their history, their current placement and the roadmap for permanency. We brought new strategies and approaches to help reduce the time for children to spend in care and help connect them with a permanent placement.

Cornerstones of Care utilizes two child specific approaches to finding permanent homes for children in care. The first is 30 Days to Family. The goal is to identify as many relatives and/or kin for youth within the first 30 days of coming into care. We know that placements with relatives or someone familiar with the child has numerous benefits- it is less traumatic for the child than being placed in a home with a stranger, the placements tend to be more stable because there is already a bond or connection, the caretaker is more likely to provide other supports (connections with other family members, financial support) and the placement is more likely to be long term. If we can get the right home the first time, the outcomes for that child will be much better.

The second approach we utilize is the Wendy's Wonderful Kids model. This model was developed through the Dave Thomas Foundation to help expedite adoptions for hard to place youth. These may be youth who are older, are medically fragile or are a part of a large sibling group. The goal of this approach is to recruit an adoptive home that can meet the specific needs of the child or sibling group, it is a child specific recruitment process. This model has been proven extremely successful for youth in care.

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In our approach to Foster Care Case Management and Reunification, we also utilize Nurse Case Managers as part of the team. Our nurses focus on care coordination and consultation for youth with complex medical needs, behavioral health issues and medication management for medically fragile youth. As members of the planning/treatment team, they help support the youth, foster parents and biological parents in addressing the health care needs of the child. This added support helps in stabilizing placements that otherwise may disrupt due to the physical/behavioral health needs of the youth.

These strategies and the tireless work and commitment of our team members are moving the needle and producing positive supports. Today we are serving 913 youth across the three counties. The majority of youth who exited care over the past 10 months were reunified with their parent or caretaker, the second reason for exiting was through adoption and third reason was through establishing a custodian/guardian.

In January of this year, we began providing Family Preservation Services in the 25 counties of the DCF Eastern region. Through this program, we are providing services to families with identified risk factors, to help mitigate the risk through early intervention, help build competencies in parents/caretaker to resolve problems and provide resources to overcome barriers. The goal is to keep children safely in their home through intensive time limited interventions. To date we have worked with 223 families across the 25 counties.

We have been providing Functional Family Therapy since the state's implementation of the Families First Prevention Service Act. This evidence based treatment model works with youth who have exhibited conduct or behavior disorders in an effort to keep them out of the juvenile justice system. The model works with both the parents and the youth to improve problem-solving skills among the family members and increase solution oriented decision-making.

Cornerstones of Care appreciates the opportunity to work across several grants and programs to be able to meet families where they are in their own journey. Whether it is working to help keep a family safely together, providing functional family therapy to help a young person avoid involvement with the juvenile justice system, or working with a child in state custody to connect them with a safe and loving home. All of these strategies contribute to our mission of partnering for safe and healthy communities.

Submitted by
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President & CEO