



# Special Committee on Foster Care Oversight

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## **Closing Comments**

Presented by:

Laura Howard

Secretary

Kansas Department for Children and Families

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**Testimony of:**

Laura Howard, Secretary

Kansas Department for Children and Families

**Chair Concannon, Vice Chair Baumgardner, and Members of the Committee:**

Thank you for the opportunity to provide some closing comments to this Committee. I want to thank each of you for your thoughtful approach to oversight of the state's child welfare system. As I said the first time I stood in front of you this interim – foster care and the child welfare system is bigger than any one entity and it takes all of us working together – across systems and across branches of government to continue to improve outcomes and life trajectories for vulnerable children and families.

When I stepped into the role of Secretary in January 2019, I knew I was walking into a child welfare system in crisis:

- Too many children in foster care;
- Foster Care contractors struggling with an overwhelmed system, and struggling financially with not enough resources to manage the demand;
- Significant placement instability leading to consequences like children regularly spending the night in child welfare offices; and
- Few options outside of foster care to support families.

I knew it was not going to be easy and it has not been easy. I also knew that as an agency we would need to take both immediate steps to turn this trajectory around AND build the foundation for long-term sustained progress.

We have made a lot of progress in the last 19 months. Our data is beginning to show the fruit of this hard work. Some of our most important accomplishments include:

- The number of youth in care has gone down more than ten percent (from almost 7,600 youth in care at the end of fiscal year 2019 to just over 6800 at the end of September 2020.
- Increased the array of placement options to provide specialized services in family foster and relative settings;
- Placement stability has improved – Currently in FY21, 64% of youth in care are at the federal performance standard of 4.4 moves per 1000 days in care or better. To put that into context, in SFY 19 the state was at 9.7 moves per 1000 and in SFY 20 the number dropped to 5.9.
- Added targeted resources to accelerate adoptions;

- Kansas adopted the new federal Family First Option one year ago – providing new options to keep children safe in their families. As we reported to you, 94 percent of families served have not had a child go into foster care.

As important as these efforts have been -- the hard work of putting in place new practice models for Kansas – Structured Decision-Making, Signs of Safety, Team Decision-Making and Family Finding -- provide the foundation to ensure we can continue and sustain this positive trajectory. I am interested not just in short-term progress but a system that is fundamentally transformed.

Allow me to provide a couple of examples:

Take the recent experience of a mother in need of substance abuse treatment. She asked that her mother attend a Team Decision Making meeting. Using the guidance of the practice model, a plan was formulated to utilize the grandmother as temporary care for her grandchild while her daughter awaited a bed at an inpatient treatment facility that allows children to come stay in the facility. The mother retained custody with an agreement she wouldn't resume care of her child until she goes into treatment.

Consider this story of how mapping and genograms can lead to success:

A DCF worker completed a mapping and genogram with grandparents who are currently caring for their grandson while the mother is in the hospital due to extensive drug use. The mother resides in Missouri, which had an open case on the family. There was miscommunication between the Missouri worker and the grandparents for what needed to happen. By completing the mapping conversation, we discovered the grandparents have the same goal as the Missouri worker; a stable living environment for the child. The genogram allowed us to see other relatives, particularly those in Missouri, who could care for the child more permanently while the mother gets drug treatment.

While I am proud of what we have accomplished in these last months – I am not satisfied – there remains much work to be done. As we continue this path, I am grateful to do this work alongside a supportive Governor and Legislature. I've been heartened by this Committee and your attention and focus, and how much your focus has been on wanting to ensure the best life trajectory for youth in our care and vulnerable families.

## **Looking Forward**

We talk a lot about the foster care system and the child welfare system. I'd like to remind you of a concept David Sanders from Casey Family Programs talked about at your September meeting. He spoke about a 21<sup>st</sup> Century Family Well-Being System. I believe this concept fits well with what you have heard from many conferees, and with

much of the dialogue you have had as a committee. A Family Well-Being System does not just respond to child abuse and neglect – it intervenes much earlier to support families and keep harm from happening in the first place. Our goal in Kansas should be to have the best Family Well-Being System in the nation.

Some of our key agency priorities moving forward to support this effort, for which we seek your support, include:

**Practice Models.** Continue to phase-in our practice models across the state to equip the DCF and contractor teams with the best models and practices to support families;

**Kin First.** As an agency we will continue to put emphasis on safely keeping children with kin – relatives or other close connections. We would appreciate the Legislature's support as we focus our system to best support relatives and other kin in supporting our youth. This might include support for stronger legal supports for families.

**Prevention.** Families First has been a great start in providing prevention-based alternatives to foster care. It has been just a first step, but a powerful step at the importance of upstream services. Continued legislative support for our prevention efforts will be crucial.

**Crisis and Mental Health Supports.** I am excited that we will be awarding a contract in the coming months for 24/7 family crisis response services, as well as embedding new expectations in CMHC contracts regarding services to foster youth. While we're beginning the mobile response with Family First transition dollars, we will need the Legislature's support to sustain that progress.

**Older Youth Supports.** One of our legislative priorities this session is a focus on supports to older youth. This Committee has had significant discussions about education and mental health as it relates to older youth. I would appreciate the Committee's support of our 2021 Legislative package related to older youth, specifically:

- Adding current and former foster youth to the list of individuals eligible to participate in the Individual Development Account program offered through the Department of Commerce.
- IDA's would allow foster youth to save money towards financial independence while receiving matching funds for every dollar they save.
- Creating the Keys to Independence pilot program which would pay the cost of driver's education, licensure and motor vehicle insurance for eligible youth in state custody.

**Workforce.** You heard from us and our contractors as well as others about the importance of a strong, skilled workforce. We would appreciate the committee's

ongoing support for our internal initiatives as well as your support for a broader look at the entire child welfare workforce, as recommended by several conferees.

**Class Action Lawsuit Settlement.** At DCF, we will also be focused on taking the steps needed to successfully meet the practice improvements and outcomes we agreed to as part of the child welfare class action lawsuit settlement – focused primarily on placement stability and access to mental health supports. Accountability and oversight will be a key part of that work. In the coming weeks, we'll be standing up an independent advisory group to inform action planning and implementation. We will be entering into a formal agreement with a neutral entity to ensure our performance data is validated. And our performance will be visible for all to see.

Again, I would thank you for your work this summer and fall. As an agency we look forward to continuing to work closely with you in improving supports across systems the well-being of Kansas families.