

To the Joint Committee on Child Welfare,

My goal is to provide the committee with honest and unemotional feedback. I am very grateful for the opportunity to share our perspective.

I briefly want to provide the context for where our feedback is coming from. My wife and I have fostered 5 children over a 5 year period. Our focus was children under the age of 3, with the sole purpose of being a bridge for reintegration back to biological families. We were asked to foster a new born that was still in the hospital. We picked that child up from the hospital and had placement for over 3 years. 2 older biological siblings were already in care. We worked very hard with the biological mother on building a motherly bond and got in a nice rhythm for her doing positive supervised visits. Unfortunately, the mother was not able to get healthy and her rights were terminated after 20 months. During this time the biological father who was present at birth abandoned his child, proactively avoided paternity and requests to appear at hearings. The father was completing probation for multiple felonies and the court also learned of a past conviction for human trafficking. At 21 months the father came forward and was immediately granted visits and time with the child. Over the next 16 months the bar for integration with bio-dad was very low. None of his required classes were done on time and several incidents of misbehavior by bio-dad/family during supervised visits were never addressed and simply looked over. During multiple hearings it was Cornerstones of Care's recommendation that the father's rights be terminated. Their recommendations were ultimately overruled by DCF and they were forced to change their stance. When this was done the court immediately mandated a 35 day rapid integration with bio-dad. When we asked how this was to be done, the case worker said she had asked her supervisors and they didn't know how. They didn't know how because to their knowledge it had never been done before.

So in a 35 day period this child went from 2 hour supervised visits to moving into a home with a family she did not know.

Our feedback and suggestions are as follows.

- Accountability standards for GAL's. In our case the GAL had never met the foster child or the 2 other siblings in care. GAL had only advocated for the parent's best interest, not child's. GAL was unresponsive and often not prepared for hearings.
- As foster parents we were not allowed in most conversations. We believe that after 12-18 months of care, the foster family should legally be viewed as kin. This statute is done in other states like Texas.
- If abandonment can be proven by a parent, it should be a felony. The current KS statute for abandonment in KS is 90 days, but there is not legal penalties associated with it.
- Evaluation of DCF's decision making ability with the providers they pay contracts to. To force Cornerstone's of Care to change the stated case plan from "termination" to "reintegration" puts CoC in a horrible spot when they know they are going to have to rebid for their contract. The child's best interest and safety are greatly at risk.
- Especially for newborns and toddlers DCF needs to be fully up to date on the research of bonding and the life long effects of pulling child from the only family they have ever know. This research needs to be incorporated into the decision making process.

To sum up our thoughts. We were continually told that foster parents are too emotional and they we needed to tone down our advocacy for our foster kids. With all due respect, when the system is so slow

and can't create a plan for permanency within 3 years. How could any loving human not be emotional. The older 2 siblings still have not been formally adopted by the foster parents who love them. It's been 5 years they have been in care. 35 days was the plan to integrate our foster child. This state approved a 35 day plan that literally broke down the soul of an innocent 3 year old. We will NEVER get over her cries, we will NEVER get over her restless nights, we will NEVER get over looking at the terror in her face as the caseworkers drove her away and we will NEVER stop wondering how she is doing.

Thank you for the opportunity to share our testimony and thank you for your efforts on this task force.

Respectfully,

Blake and Meaghan Briscoe