

Children *SAFE* Families *TOGETHER*



Joint Committee on Child Welfare System Oversight
November 16, 2022

Tammy Thomas, Kansas State Director Safe Families

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Chairwoman Concannon and Members of the Joint Committee on Child Welfare Oversight. My name is Tammy Thomas and I am the Kansas State Director of SafeFamilies for Children.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide an update regarding the expansion of Safe Families for Children (SF) program in southeast Kansas, as well as the greater Kansas City and Wichita metropolitan area.

I want to reiterate our appreciation for the legislature's investment and DCF's support in expanding Safe Families Kansas. I am proud to report that at the end of September, SF has helped prevent **88** children from experiencing the trauma of being removed from their families and placed into foster care - this is not possible without your investment, again, thank you.

Before I provide an update of our program's expansion, I want to provide the committee an overview of our organization, our model, and how we partner with families to prevent them from coming into contact with the child welfare system.

As Dave Anderson, founder and Executive Director of Safe Families for Children, says, "*We believe parents are capable of being the parent their children need them to be.*" Safe Families believes a parent, not the state, are the best suited to raise their child.

In addition, SF is a volunteer driven and professionally supported movement serving Kansas families in crisis and beyond. SF was founded in 2003 in Chicago, IL and focuses on Family Preservation by connecting vulnerable families in crisis or need to a qualified and vetted host family.

The connection between the placing family and host family is the most central relationship of the SF movement, as it creates a safe haven for the children, as well as social support and a network for the placing family. The relationship between the two families is a partnership in caring for the children, with shared decision-making and responsibility. Throughout the hosting arrangement, the host families and **SFFC Circle of Support (COS)** (volunteer host families, family friends, family coaches, and resource families) address the placing parents' needs to prepare the children to be safely returned to their parents.

After the hosting arrangement ends, SFFC's goal is for families and COS to remain in contact, thereby reducing social isolation for the placing family and potentially providing ongoing support to the placing family after the child returns home. The host family also develops bonds with the children placed in their home and the placing parents, generally staying very invested in their lives over the long run

SF of Kansas currently has a 97% success rate in maintaining connections i.e. a child that returns home to their parents following a SF hosting.

In Kansas, we are seeing an increase in the number of children and families being served through Family Friendling without leaving the home. SF is not foster care or adoptive services. Parents maintain parental rights and full custody of their children, and in many cases, serve families prior to any DCF engagement.

SF engages families, in many cases, who are considered to be at the edge of becoming involved in the child welfare systems. Families find themselves in a crisis situation that could lead to DCF involvement due to many factors. This can be social isolation, unemployment, homelessness, helplessness, hospitalizations due to addiction and substance abuse.

SF serves as an extension of their family while parents get on their feet. Our service is not only focused on the child, but the parents as well. We encourage parents to achieve effective progress towards independence.

SF seeks out volunteers through the local community, faith-based communities, schools, and other community organizations, to move volunteers from being "Observers" of a situation to an "active participant".

We focus on **building relationships** by surrounding a family in need with a COS for the child **and** the parent. We are family focused, **NOT "program"** focused.

This means we require volunteers to go through an application process that includes reference checks, training, and FBI and KBI background checks and fingerprint screens. In addition, Safe Families for Children is a licensed Child Placing Agency through DCF which provides an important layer of oversight and accountability.

Additionally, the SF Family Coach Supervisor performs home walk throughs /screening addressing Fire Arm Safety, Corporal Punishment, and Water Safety requirements.

As mentioned earlier, thanks to the generous support of the Kansas legislature and the Kansas Department of Children and Families, an additional \$500,000 was appropriated to expand our work. So what are the results?

While not exhaustive I want to highlight some of the outcomes as a result of our partnerships across the state:

SFY22 3rd Qtr – served **18** children within 11 families and 24 volunteers

SFY22 4th Qtr – served **28** children within 15 families and 57 volunteers

SFY23 1st Qtr – served **42** children within 22 families and 68 volunteers

In total, since the beginning of this year, through Sept 30, 2022, we have served 88 children within 48 families and 68 volunteers. This means 88 children who did not enter foster care, 48 families who did not experience the trauma of family separation, and 68 volunteers who

are forming enduring relationships with vulnerable families to serve as resources if that family comes into crisis again.

At the close of 2021, SF Kansas employed five staff including the State Director. As of today, Safe Families has nearly doubled its staff to nine, while actively working to add two additional staff members.

The additional funding appropriated by the legislature also allowed us to move our intake hotline from **Monday-Friday 8am-5pm to Monday-Sunday, 8am-5pm**. Provided below are some specific additions SF Kansas has made as a result to the increased funding:

Wichita Region - First site to be fully staffed with a Chapter Director, Family Coach Supervisor, and Community and Faith-Based Engagement Coordinator. We are developing a strong presence in the Wichita Region building strong cross cultural partnerships.

Kansas City Region - Employs a Chapter Director, Community and Faith-Based Engagement Coordinator. Currently interviewing for the position of Family Coach Supervisor. Recently SF secured its first community and faith-based partnership in Wyandotte County. Safe Families is processing volunteer applications with diverse backgrounds.

Southeast Region - Added a Family Coach Supervisor and currently interviewing Chapter Director. SF Kansas opened in August and already completed its first hosting (this week)

By expanding staff, SF Kansas is able to expand its contact in each chapter by helping foster strong community partnerships. We know that community partners are the most suited to provide services to a family in their neighborhoods experiencing crisis.

Below highlights some of the faith-based organizations, school districts, and community partners we have across Kansas.

Kansas City Region – Life Mission Church, three campuses in Kansas City, Kansas, Olathe and Ottawa. Westside Family Church, two campuses Leavenworth, and Lenexa (main campus) Christ Community – Olathe. Unified School District (USD) 500, USD 232, USD 204, Impact KC, Avenues of Life, SingleMomsKC, A Step Above Academy, Advent Health, Care Portal, Joy Meadows, Blood House Youth Services, Emporia, FindHelp.com-Social Care Network DCF, DCCCA, and the Kansas Parent as Teachers Association

Wichita Region – Pathway Church, West Evangelical Free Church, Central Christian Church, First Evangelical Free Church, Life Church of Derby, Catholic Diocese of Wichita, Unified USD 529, United Way of the Plains, Big Brothers and Big Sisters, Youth Horizons, Wichita Police Department, WorkForce Centers of South-Central Kansas, the Wichita Children’s Home, DCF, Kansas Family Advisory Network, Care Portal, Hope Net

SouthEast Kansas – Care Portal, Fostering Connections, Safehouse Crisis Center, social worker at local hospitals, Pittsburg Public Libraries

Finally while I am pleased to report on SF Kansas's growth, success often begets additional opportunity. SF Kansas is exploring program expansion in the following communities:

McPherson Area - SF Kansas is currently holding community meetings to gain interest and strengthen community and faith-based partnerships. SF Kansas is planning to launch a McPherson Chapter early next year

Manhattan and Fort Riley Community - Fort Riley reached out to SF Kansas asking to expand and support a chapter in the area. SF Kansas has recruited three host families on base that have served through SF in other locations across the U.S. We are working with community partners as well as Officials at Fort Riley.

In order to expand its impact in the McPherson, Salina, Manhattan and Fort Riley areas, Safe Families is seeking additional support in the amount of \$350,000. This support will allow SF to establish two staff in McPherson and 3 staff in the Manhattan/Fort Riley areas. The return on this investment is that ***children safe and families together.***

To close, I want to again thank Chairwoman Concannon and this committee for allowing me to provide an update on the progress Safe Families Kansas has made. In closing, I wanted to show a quick success story of a family who was able to stay together because of the work we are able to do through your continued support. Thank you.