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JOINT COMMITTEE ON CHILD WELFARE SYSTEM OVERSIGHT November 17, 2022 Testimony

Chair Concannon, Vice Chair Hilderbrand, Ranking Member Ousley, and Members of the Committee, my name is Kristalle Hedrick, Vice President of Kansas Programs with FosterAdopt Connect. FosterAdopt Connect (FAC) is a nonprofit, human service organization founded by foster and adoptive families in 2000. FAC exists to provide advocacy and unique programming directed at supporting youth impacted by foster care and the families who care for them. We focus on filling system gaps to create a more caring and effective child welfare system.

FosterAdopt Connect is recognized locally and nationally as an expert in assisting foster and adoptive families to navigate the challenges related to caring for children who come from hard places. By employing staff with extensive professional child welfare experience as well as lived experience (foster/adoptive parents, people who experienced foster care as children, and people who grew up in families that fostered/adopted), our team is able to recognize the needs of families and develop innovative solutions to address their challenges.

In 2021, the Kansas Department for Children and Families (DCF) awarded our agency two contracts related to adoption recruitment and support across the state of Kansas.

KANSAS ADOPTION EXCHANGE/ADOPT KS KIDS:

The **Kansas Adoption Exchange**, also known as **Adopt KS Kids**, is a statewide program developed to match children in DCF Custody who are legally free for adoption with families who are interested in adoption from foster care. We develop and utilize targeted strategies in compliance with national standards and best practice guidelines to help identify, educate and support potential adoptive families for the children listed on the adoption exchange. In collaboration with DCF, the Child Welfare Case Management Providers (CWCMP), Child Placing Agencies and other community organizations our team works to raise public awareness and education around the need for families willing to adopt from foster care in Kansas.

The Adopt KS Kids team receives referrals from the CWCMP's when it is determined a child (or children belonging to a sibling group) in DCF custody who is legally free for adoption does not have an identified adoptive resource. At the time of referral, the CWCMP identifies the type of recruitment service(s) most appropriate for each child or sibling group. Recruitment services may include but are not limited to: private matching (not listed for public view), Extreme Family Finding™, professional photos, videos, television ads, radio profiles, newspaper profiles, social media sharing, and website profile listings.



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The Adopt KS Kids team collaborates with the designated CWCMP to obtain information necessary to register children with the adoption exchange and develop an individualized recruitment plan leveraging standards, ethics, and best practice guidelines from our federal partners such as Adopt US Kids, the National Adoption Association, and the North American Council on Adoptable Children.

Prospective Adoptive Families are able to review a child or sibling group's strength-based profile and submit an inquiry to the Adopt KS Kids team for additional information. Inquiries can be made through the website, by email, or by telephone. Each inquiry is reviewed to determine where the family is at in the adoption process, if they are being supported by an agency competent in adoption-related matters, and if they have completed the adoption home study or adoption assessment process. Depending on the family's adoption status, they are provided with information to help them best continue their journey towards adoption from foster care.

The Adopt KS Kids team has ongoing communication with each child or sibling group's CWCMP representatives regularly to ensure recruitment efforts remain relevant and current based on their unique needs. When appropriate and approved by a CWCMP, the Adopt KS Kids Child Specialists spend time with youth who are able to actively engage in their own recruitment efforts. They are able to work together with our professional photographer/videographer to design recruitment material that reflects the vision and hope of each youth in a way that resonates with them. Child Specialists are trained in Darla Henry's 3-5-7 Model[®] framework to support their efforts in preparing youth for adoption.

KANSAS POST ADOPTION RESOURCE CENTER (K-PARC):

The **Kansas Post Adoption Resource Center (K-PARC)** is a team of four (4) advocates and trainers who have lived experience as parents who have adopted from foster care. The team works to connect families to services, support groups, and other adoption competent professionals to help strengthen family relationships and improve parenting skills.

Families who are interested in or have adopted from foster care have access to quarterly retreats where they are offered free hotel stays, child care stipends, training hours, peer to peer support, and much needed rest and relaxation.

K-PARC offers several trauma-informed caregiver trainings throughout the month and partners with the Children's Alliance of Kansas to allow families access through their statewide learning management system/training platform.



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ADVOCACY & FOSTER PARENT SUPPORT:

Advocacy is the core of our existence at FosterAdopt Connect. It is with intention and purpose that 40% of our staff members have lived experience related to foster care and adoption. We believe in the power of leveraging our own experiences to advocate and use our voices at the local, state, and national level to create positive change in the child welfare system.

FosterAdopt Connect appreciates the efforts of this Committee to help caregivers succeed in combatting the negative outcomes that await children in foster care in search of a permanent family. Providing care for children and youth in the trenches of any child welfare system can be just as difficult and confusing as it can be rewarding and life-giving. We stand prepared to partner with legislators, DCF, and all of our fellow child welfare agencies to ensure families caring for our most vulnerable children feel their voices are heard and are able to advocate for the best interests of children in their care without fear of repercussion.

We would be happy to work with the committee members to explore opportunities to further strengthen our work with children and families.

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