

February 9, 2012, Testimony for legislators: A story of failing a child in need

My husband and I have lived in Kansas since 1975. We have two sons. In 1982 we adopted a mentally ill 10 year old girl from SRS custody. Until this past year, we had no experience with the Juvenile Justice system. I am here today to tell you about our grandson, J. He was born to our daughter in 1998, and is now 13. We have been his permanent custodians for 6 years. While J. was with his mother he suffered maltreatment, sexual abuse, and the death of his baby brother. At age 6, J. was in our temporary custody, but the system decided to put him in SRS custody and "reintegrate" him with his mother. While still in SRS custody, caseworkers enabled J.'s mother to kidnap him and abscond; they were missing for 10 days. Some of the worst abuse happened during that kidnapping.

J. has been diagnosed with PTSD, Mood Disorder, and Reactive Attachment Disorder. Sometimes he has hallucinations and bizarre and self-harming behaviors. He needs 24-hour supervision. We have found psychiatric care, family therapy, privately paid attendant care, and have had limited services from Community Mental Health.

Last spring, while in his third PRTF placement, J. was making some progress. In therapy he disclosed horrifying memories of past sexual abuse; his report was deemed truthful. Though dealing with the memories was very distressing for J., it seemed to be a turning point in his healing. His functioning was still at a very low level. Then, at that critical point, because of a change in state policy driven by finances, J. did not screen for an extension of stay at the PRTF. There was no option except for him to come home. CMH did not have even a plan for services.

J.'s mental impairments meant he was unable to attend school full time, if at all. Crises were the norm. During this period, CMH provided a few hours a week of attendant care and occasional crisis advice. We made multiple 911 calls, and the police were very helpful. But on the day my mother-in-law died, J. went from agitated to totally bizarre and dangerous. He was transported by the police to the ER, screened for hospitalization and admitted to KVC hospital.

The hospital described J. as "psychotic, delusional and aggressive." But a screen for PRTF admission was denied. Again, there was no option except to bring J. home, no matter how unstable he was, and no matter the risk to him and to us. Two days after coming home, J.'s behavior escalated. We were up two consecutive nights with him. He was obsessive, building weapons and trying to find pornography. Then at 6 a.m., J. attacked me. The police arrived. J. was charged with sexual battery and criminal restraint. J. spent the weekend at the Juvenile Detention Center. The director called me and said that J. did not belong there -- he was too severely mentally ill. J. was then placed in Juvenile Justice custody. They were able to get a "revision" of the screen and get J. admitted to a PRTF.

J. is still there, receiving intensive treatment. We are anxious that he may be discharged arbitrarily again. We lost custody. I was the victim. J. consented to a plea of sexual battery. He is on the sex offender registry. Our family is exhausted and traumatized. We have been urged repeatedly over the years to just give up custody. But we acted responsibly, caring for our child ourselves. We asked for help only when we truly needed it. And then we didn't get it.

People say "the system is broken." But I don't think "system" is the right word for the assortment of agencies in Kansas that all seem to have the motto, "It's not our department." I hope for the day when instead there will be an integrated child-centered or family-centered system to provide a continuum of supportive services to the people who really need them.