

Kansas Chapter
National Association of Social Workers
...advocating for the practice and profession of Social Work...

Testimony:

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Special Committee on Foster Care Adequacy

Presented by Sky Westerlund, LMSW

The Kansas Chapter, National Association of Social Workers (KNASW) is the professional association working on behalf of the profession and practice of social work in Kansas. Social workers have been licensed at three levels of practice since 1976. These are the baccalaureate (LBSW), the master (LMSW), and the independent clinical social worker (LSCSW). We are the largest group of mental health providers with over 6000 social workers practicing in the majority of the 105 counties in Kansas. The practice of social work is performed in many fields including adoptions, addictions, aging, child welfare, courts and corrections, corporations and businesses, domestic violence, early childhood, hospitals and health, hospice and palliative care, poverty prevention programs, mental health, community based prevention, problem gambling, pre-schools and schools, trauma, veterans and military, research and teaching, and more. We work in both the public and private sectors of the economy. Social workers serve thousands of Kansans every day.

Child welfare services are the ugly truth of families in crisis. It is the intersection of family privacy and the government role of protecting the vulnerable. The vulnerable are children. Children grow and develop by the guidance of parents and family. Family is the first protector. But when families are mired in crisis, the stress and strain can create the terrible lashing out of abuse and the frightening uncertainty of neglect. The family environment is anything but safe and calm. Our social obligation is to intervene. Child welfare plays a dual role: protect children and strengthen families.

In 1996, the state of Kansas moved into a privatized system of child welfare. Most of the provisions of services were contracted out to private providers. One specific goal was to eliminate the multiple workers involved with a family and create the “single SRS advocate as the ‘champion for the child/family.’”

Twenty years into child welfare privatization, the current system essentially duplicates the circumstance of state involved families: stress and crisis. Children in state custody are outlasting their social workers. Every time one social worker moves on and a new one is assigned, it is yet another loss and disappointment for the child and their caretakers. It is a continuing problem in child welfare work that results in a crisis-oriented system.

Child welfare is often the first professional job for new graduates of Social Work. The most crucial element of a strong child welfare system is in the long term tenure of staff, especially the social workers, who are making clinical judgments on child safety, plans of action, determination of abuse and neglect, placement decisions, necessary services, permanency plans and ultimately recommendations to the court for case decisions. The second crucial element of a strong child welfare system is an extensive selection of services to strengthen the family. These services must address the acute and continuing needs of the family. The outcome of the services must enable the family to care for their own children, free from abuse and neglect.

Foster care has been the topic of legislative attention for a number of years. For example, since 1990, there have been 13 Legislative Post Audit reports on different aspects of foster care. There were an additional 15 reports issued on the foster care settlement.

Foster Care Settlement

In 1989, Sheila A. v. Joan Finney was filed that included the following allegations:

Failure to protect children

Inappropriate placements

Absence of plans (plan of care)

Insufficient and untrained staff (too few social workers for caseloads and no training)

Proper care needed (missing mental health appointments)

Information system (lacking basic information and planned goals for children in custody)

The nine children involved in the case would now be well into their late 20's and 30's.

This lawsuit was resolved in 1993 through a settlement agreement prior to the child welfare privatization. The settlement agreement expired June 30, 2002. This was about six years into privatization. There were over 130 actions that were required to be met by the state. About 80% of the actions were met.

At the close of the settlement, two of the nearly 31 areas of action that did not reach compliance were:

- Include services to meet the child's needs and reinforce family strengths
- Implement and maintain information on worker caseloads

Both of these measurements are connected to staffing. Many years after the settlement, staffing continues to be problematic due to high staff turnover. It is the social workers in child welfare, who determine the necessary and right services for the child and family. These services may be about reunification between a child and his or her family. They may be services to help a child whose parent's parental rights have been severed. Services include the support for foster families who create the most immediate protection and day to day stability for a child in state custody. Child welfare cases are typically very complex and complicated and involve a multitude of systems. Caseloads must be realistic in order to work effectively with the child, family, foster family and all of the systems involved with the child.

To address staffing stability, KNASW suggests these actions:

- Investigate the scope of social worker turnover in both DCF and contractors, including caseloads.
- Determine the reasons social workers are leaving.
- Implement a multi-year focus on recruitment and retention of social workers.
- Develop long term incentives, supports, career path (advancement), professional development, on-going training, supervision, student loan forgiveness, and competitive compensation.

Thank you for caring about the kids and everyone who is working to protect children and move families in crisis to families of calm.

Contact information

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