

## Written testimony in support of HB2345, Office of the Child Advocate

My name is Heidi Beal. This is my testimony regarding the deceptive practices of Saint Francis Community Services which led to the adoption of my nephews to fosters after my husband and I were recommended to adopt them.

I have been advocating for Malachi and Paxton since November, 2018 when I learned that Malachi was being abused in his kinship placement. The boys had been placed with Paxton's paternal grandmother, Linda. She is not related to Malachi and reportedly did not want him but Saint Francis would not split the boys up. During the time the boys lived with Linda, several family members reported that Malachi was being abused.

Between 11/2018 and 01/ 2019, we submitted 3 photographs of Malachi taken 30 days apart. He had a black eye in every one of them. We obtained an audio recording of Linda's son, David describing the abuse Malachi was subjected to. Multiple family members followed up on the reports and evidence we'd submitted to DCF and St. Francis Community Services. An investigator told us to stop contacting her about Malachi so she could 'investigate *real* child abuse'.

Shortly after that, DCF opened an investigation on two of the family members who had been pressuring DCF to take action. This is a common tactic that DCF and caseworkers use to silence those who cross them.

On January 7<sup>th</sup>, 2019 we filed a Pro Se 'Motion For Change Of Placement' which the judge denied.

On January 15, 2019 we obtained a copy of a protective order, alleging that Linda had threatened to kill her son, David. A copy of the PFA was forwarded to SFCS. Despite the evidence that Malachi and Paxton were living in an unsafe and volatile environment, SFCS and DCF refused to act in the best interest of the children.

At that point, the family had done everything we could to bring the boys out of the foster system. We were resigned to wait until Linda's abuse of Malachi became so extreme that she would not be able to cover it. We hoped a physician, teacher or neighbor would report it and DCF/SFCS would be forced to take the boys from her.

In October 2020, we learned that SFCS had taken the boys from Linda and that they were living in Galena with a foster and that adoption proceedings had already begun. Immediately upon learning the boys had been moved, we reached out to SFCS. Malachi and Paxton's maternal grandmother, Diana Ashby called them daily. Her calls were re-routed to multiple staffers who either claimed to not know anything about the case or simply did not return her calls. Realizing that SFCS was deliberately avoiding us, I sent letters to 12 elected officials on the Federal and State level asking for help.

Two months later Adoption specialist, Heather Amaya emailed me. We set a meeting for February. 3 ½ months had passed since we first learned of the boys' change in placement. It was decided that my husband and I would adopt the boys. During this meeting, the adoption supervisor acknowledged that the family had not been treated fairly when we first attempted to bring the boys out of Linda's custody. When asked why the boys were taken from Linda she said, "My supervisor became aware of some things happening in the home that concerned her." She now denies saying either of these things.

The home study was conducted in June, 2020. 8 months had passed since we learned the boys had been placed with fosters. No concerns were noted in the assessment and we were recommended to adopt the boys.

The best interest staff meeting was set for July. A few days after the meeting, the adoption specialist called to inform me that SFCS had chosen the fosters to adopt the boys. I was absolutely stunned. When I asked why, I was told the boys had already been with the foster too long and they had 'bonded' with her. Nine months had passed since we learned the boys had been secretly moved to a new placement. This was somehow counted against us. The adoption supervisor refused to tell me exactly when the boys were taken from Linda but she said it had been 'over a year'. I quickly calculated that they had to have moved the boys shortly after we filed the motion for change in placement. That motion is now missing from the CINC case file.

According to the adoption supervisor, Kristi, MacMeeken, there was no information in the boys' file that family had been advocating for the boys. I told her this was impossible because we had made contact dozens of times with DCF, SFCS, Judge Walters and numerous elected officials from 2018 to 2019.

I have emailed every member of the executive branch of SFCS requesting they investigate. In response to one of these emails, customer service supervisor Jill Miller admitted that SFCS has a record of multiple contacts from me and other family members since 2018, proof that **SFCS DID know we were advocating for the boys.** When confronted with that lie, Kristie MacMeeken then changed her story, stating that it was the judge's decision to adopt the boys to fosters.

Since then I've reached out to several legislators. One of them forwarded my request for an inquiry into the case to Ethan Belshe. Government Relations Manager for DCF. He contacted SFCS on my behalf. The following is the blatant lie SFCS told him about why they gave the boys to the fosters:

**“As you know, we strive to place children with relatives when it is in the best interest of the children and no safety concerns are present. As their relative, Ms. Beal was selected as the initial long term placement for the children but due to a safety concern that Ms. Beal knowingly brought into her home a new placement had to be found and a new plan for the case established.”**

When confronted about the lie they told Ethan Belshe, Jill Miller finally admitted that our 'relationship' with the boys mother, Sarah was the reason they denied our request to adopt the boys. She stated:

**“During the Best Interest Staffing, your family was selected by Saint Francis as the adoptive resource for the children. Based on the concerns throughout the case with your involvement with biological mother and continued concern this would continue, you were not unanimously selected and therefore Saint Francis’s decision was outnumbered.”**

I reminded Kristi MacMeeken that we had made it abundantly clear in our adoption inquiry narrative that we intended to give the boys access to their parents and that no one involved in the boys case had expressed any concerns about it until the BIS meeting. I also reminded her that the purpose of kinship placement is so that children do not lose contact with their family members. It is outrageous that Linda still has contact with the boys after SFCS took them away from her, yet they are worried about the boys mother, who has never been accused of abusing her children.

I am now in the process of mailing A Request For A Formal Inquiry to every member of the Kansas House and Senate. Kansas families need protection from the arbitrary decisions and personal whims of these caseworkers. Because these contractors have no oversight, they are free to abuse their power. Files are confidential and court proceedings are closed, making it impossible to expose the sort of deceptive practices that led to losing my nephews to a stranger. I intend to do everything in my power to find out who is responsible and hold them accountable.

If Kansas already had an Office of The Child Advocate, I believe my nephews would be with us today. My family and many others have been devastated by this system that was created to help children, not rob them of their family and identity. For this reason, I support HB 2345.

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