

Testimony from Sue Smith, LMSW

Good afternoon. My name is Sue Smith. I have the privilege of leading and developing Safe Families for Children in the Topeka area. Lifeline Children's Services is the licensed child placing agency in the State of Kansas that responded to the need and the opportunity to implement Safe Families for Children here locally. We said "yes" in Dec. 2012 after over a year of collaboration and discussion between many local child welfare agencies and key leaders in our community. We said "yes" because it made sense to offer a resource in our community that mobilizes trained and approved families to serve families in crisis. We spent the first several months of 2013 developing and laying the foundation for hosting our first children and serving their parents.

Homelessness, eviction, housing transition, mental health instability, hospitalization, pregnancy/delivery, employment, lack of child care, domestic violence, and unsafe living environment. These are just some of the crises that families face and that can put their children at risk, but not require them to be removed from their biological families. Every family faces these crises at some point in time. The common denominator of families we serve include but not limited to: a lack of extended family support, lack of personal resources in order to advocate for themselves, determination to care for and provide for their children a secure stable home, and a willingness to allow strangers to become friends and care for their children in order to assure their safety, not risky loss of custody.

In order for Safe Families to function and fulfill its mission, the local church and faith community is the engine. We actively and consistently offer the opportunity to churches in the surrounding area to consider giving people in their congregations the opportunity to serve. We meet personally with pastors, ministry leaders and others to explain the purpose and program of Safe Families. Churches who partner with Safe Families have a few common denominators: ready to share their resources – people, supports, ongoing programs and more. Partner churches are usually already engaged with Topeka Rescue Mission, their local school or community center, and often have specialized programs that benefit families in crisis. Since 2013, we are partnering with 13 churches. Each church implements SFFC in their own unique way. For example, one church turned a building into a "Closet" that offers needed baby equipment, furniture, and supplies as well as clothing and seasonal items to host families who say yes to hosting children and thus need items to do this, or to parents who are in need and will be empowered by the provision of items like these.

Host families come from a variety of places depending on their first introduction to the program. We cast the net wide to give strong families the opportunity to care for others through hospitality and compassion. Potential host families are interviewed, reference checked, background checked through CANS and KBI, oriented, and trained. A licensed social worker completes a home assessment that looks at their physical space, family make-up, financial ability to provide for extra children, safety of the home environment, and ability to care for children from a variety of backgrounds and potentially with special needs. They must complete several hours of training based on the Illinois foster care training program which thoroughly equips them to work with children and come alongside their parents. We then have more focused training monthly through a national webinar for volunteers as well as quarterly gatherings

locally to support and train. Our team is highly engaged and familiar with each host family. We have 13 approved host families to this date.

We have developed a strong presence and receive intake calls from a variety of sources. The Hope Center of the Topeka Rescue Mission has been a strong source of appropriate families ready for what we offer. The HI Crest NET Reach program, local schools, Community Action Head start, local hospitals, DCF, KVC , Caring Pregnancy Options, family and friends, TARC, and United Way Successful Connections are among those who rely on the option of hosting to serve their families during a time of crisis when temporary care of their children is needed. The success of our work with families relies on strong partnership with agencies who serve vulnerable children and their families.

For us, every number is a face and a family. In 2014, we accounted for 106 intake calls, 28 families served, 43 children served, 82 hosting arrangements of children with host families, 112 resource transactions (equipment, supplies, transportation, information) to help them better their lives and care for their children.

The value lies in relationships, support, empowerment, and prevention. The difference lies in strengthening families, protecting vulnerable children and families from social isolation and the impact of abuse and neglect. The opportunity lies in engaging families who are strong and healthy with families who need that kind of impact and influence....a true community with lasting transformation.