

Kansas Judiciary Committee
Hearing on the Kansas Foster Parent's Bill of Rights Act
2/10/15

Lori Ross, President and CEO of Midwest Foster Care and Adoption Association, a bi-state nonprofit agency serving foster, kinship and adoptive families and the children they care for. (www.mfcaa.org). Lori and her husband are also foster parents, originally licensed to foster by SRS in Wyandotte County, KS in August of 1985. She has fostered more than 400 children since that time in Wyandotte and Johnson Counties in Kansas, and in Jackson County in Missouri, working with both public and private agencies.

MFCAA's mission is:

"MFCAA provides foster and adoptive children a stable, loving and nurturing family environment by support and advocacy for abused and neglected children and the families caring for them."

Testimony:

- MFCAA is a bi-state social service agency serving foster and adoptive families. We were created by foster parents for foster parents. We currently have over 400 Kansas foster, kinship and adoptive families who are members of our organization.
- As I testified to last spring, MFCAA has heard from its Kansas constituents that Kansas families are unable to adequately participate in the child welfare system, and feel un-heard, un-supported, and un-able to voice their opinions and concerns to their licensing or child placing agencies or to the KS DCF for fear of retaliation to include removal of children without cause, refusal to place new children in their homes, or revocation of their fostering license without cause.
- Kansas foster parents care deeply about the children they care for and the families from which these children come. They also care deeply about assuring that the Kansas Child Welfare system is providing the best possible services to children and their families so that Kansas most vulnerable children have the opportunity to become successful, productive adults.
- Retention of foster parents is critical to any child welfare system. When foster parents are retained, their skills and abilities develop so that they can take on children with increasingly difficult mental health and behavioral issues. It is within these homes that these most at risk children have the best possible opportunity to heal and thrive.
- Retention of foster parents will reduce the number of Kansas children who end up in congregate care settings including detention centers and treatment facilities, because families will have the skills to meet their needs.
- Retention of foster parents also contributes to stability in foster care for children placed in their homes. Children who move in the foster care system experience unparalleled trauma and are unable to develop healthy attachments. This leaves them at enormous risk for long term negative health and mental health outcomes. By failing these children we are creating the prison population and the welfare recipients of the future.

- The original proposed bill in the last session was based on language that was originally proposed in a *Fostering Families Today* magazine article by a foster parent/attorney in Illinois. It was highly similar to statutory language currently in place in Missouri, where my organization has done advocacy work for several years.
- The balloon amendment that was adopted by the Senate last year, and which eventually died in the House, was a step in the right direction, but did not address a significant number of concerns that foster parents had.
- Since the legislative session ended this spring, DCF, KDHE, KFAPA, my organization (MFCAA), and many private contractors have worked diligently to address the issues and concerns identified in the original bill. Among the things that have occurred since that time, there have been some significant steps taken. **1.** DCF issued a foster parents' rights document which listed some very basic expectations that foster parents in Kansas may have, **2.** DCF identified an ombudsman, who is collecting information on foster parent concerns that rise to her level, **3.** Several stakeholders have participated in a Kansas Bill of Rights Group (KBORG) convened by KFAPA to discuss the various perspectives of stakeholders and try to come to some agreement on a process for moving forward, and finally, **4.** The Kansas Judicial Council's Juvenile Offender/CINC Committee met extensively on foster parents rights and came up with a recommendation for this legislative committee today.
- As the original drafter of the first bill introduced, and a participant in both KBORG and via invitation the Judicial Council's committee, I want to reiterate my belief that **it is critically important for foster parents to have easy access to a bill of rights which are protected in law.** I believe that this can best be accomplished by enacting the changes in law suggested by the KS Judicial Council. I believe strongly that any additional efforts by KBORG, DHE, DCF and other stakeholders to create policies as a result of the awareness that this effort has raised, will be welcomed and will serve to strengthen the way that Kansas recruits, trains, supports and retains qualified and caring foster families for her abused and neglected children.
- I believe that the state of Kansas owes a debt of gratitude to the families who do the day to day work of protecting and caring for its most vulnerable children, and that as a state, it is our obligation to support them in a real and substantial way. Thanks to the Judicial Council we have a legislative package which has been well-vetted and which will enhance and responsibly expand foster parents' rights in Kansas. We ask you to please support their proposal and help us to see it through to becoming Kansas Law.

When foster parents have the right to advocate on behalf of themselves and on behalf of the children and families they serve, systems are stronger. We believe that Kansas' child welfare system needs this bill of rights, and the time is now.