

Presentation to JCCWSO September 11, 2024

By Mike Kriwiel, President of Pyxis

Introduction: Thank you for giving me this opportunity to present our testimony on behalf of the many vulnerable children, primarily foster children, that we serve. My hope is that we can begin to create a vision of what could be, reimagining a service model that inspires a more community-based approach promoting healthy living arrangements for our most vulnerable kids.

Background: The Kansas Department for Children and Families (DCF) mission is to protect children, promote healthy families, and encourage personal responsibility. DCF has come a long way. I started providing services back in 1994 while I was teaching and coaching. Back then, the state agency was called SRS. Soon after we started, the state decided it would be best to privatize services.

If you were to look at where we are today and compare it with where we were pre-privatization, most would say we have improved. Change continues to happen, and more often than not, lives have been improved. Often, change disrupts the norm, and the improvements come as those affected begin to adjust to the new reality.

Analogy: A good example of this is college athletics. Millions of dollars flowed into our universities across the country. These athletes, who performed the entertainment, were getting a few perks but nowhere near the amount that seemed fair. So, the NCAA decided to allow boosters to pay student athletes and also allow these athletes to transfer from one school to the next, as they wish. Well... Chaos ensued... We are now living, as some might say, in the wild west of college athletics. Eventually, systems will be implemented, and order will come. But for now, this disruption is affecting lives, most for the better, yet some are being hurt by the decision.

Kansas Child Welfare Changes: Here in Kansas, Child Welfare has taken on many changes. One of the more significant changes came with the 2016 Senate Bill 367. The consequence of the decision was that it put these kids back into our community. These are some of our most vulnerable kids, and as we now know, the decision was correct, yet having healthy places for these kids to go was and is not an easy solution. Often, the families of these youth were not capable of taking these kids back into their homes, and consequently, many of these youth ended up in foster care. The influx into the foster care system was disruptive, and some might say the wild west. Most foster care agencies were not prepared for juvenile delinquent tendencies and the complex behaviors from past traumas these youth display.

Day Services: Permanent placements became much more difficult, and disruptions in placements became common. This resulted in the need for day services, a place where these youth can go while permanent placement is being sought out. We (Pyxis) are one of

the 'day' service options for foster care agencies. These youth come to us during the day, and in the evening, they go to emergency homes to sleep.

Movement: There is a movement that is sweeping our country, led by social service agencies, schools, juvenile justice agencies, community mental health centers, and even with science and the study of human Biology, they all seem to be saying we can and need to do a better job of serving kids with trauma. For most of us natural consequences are enough for us to learn the lessons needed to make better decisions. Rewards for doing well and punishment for our mistakes usually works.

But for those kids that have grown up in unstable homes and that have received little if any nurturing, with few people caring about their future – consequences mean very little. For these kids, they might say, “There’s not much you can do TO me that’s worse than what I’m going through.”

Many of these kids have little hope for themselves with no one cheering them on, and with few or no adults modeling healthy behavior.

Multiple trainings have sprung up across our country teaching front line workers how to best serve and treat adverse behaviors. These **trainings** are sending a very similar message, if we want to help these kids, we must change our approach. Rewards and consequences can work for some, but for kids with a history of trauma, change happens when trusting and safe relationships are built, and kids feel valued.

This change... this new approach that everyone is talking about happens on the front lines. It’s relationship building. Staff training is paramount to its success. This movement – this change happens face to face. These kids need a positive healthy mirror that says you’re okay, I believe in you.

We’ve all heard of children losing their innocence... It’s a natural human experience. The Latin word for innocence is “unwounded”. We all have been wounded through life’s many challenges. Whether it was when our needs were not being met or when we decided to go against what we knew was right. Being wounded and recovering from those wounds is how nature works. It seems through this natural flow of woundedness and recovery - we are drawn back to a sense of peace and self-worth. Lessons are learned from these wounds – these challenges. Much of the recovery experience comes from someone or some message from somewhere saying you’re okay, you’re valuable – you belong, and we need you. Early on – this comes from a nurturing parent – yet as we go through life – those helping us recover from our wounds could be a friend, a spouse, a sibling, a co-worker. We need each other...

For many of our kids, they came into the world in stressful, dysfunctional homes. Homes where nurturing and basic necessities were simply not available. Consequently, many kids grow up with this inner void – never feeling valued or even wanted.

It's much harder to learn when you don't feel worthy of the lesson.

Most unwanted kids act as though – they don't care whether you accept them because they don't accept themselves. Antisocial behavior is normalized. They feel disconnected to our community. Often, we see poor school performance, lack of healthy friendships – coupled with little if any connection to parents or guardians.

Across the county and in our own community – these kids – through their behaviors are **screaming** for help. And, as Dr. Nadine Burke Harris says, “We are in a national crisis”. She as well as many others are sounding the alarm.

History of Day Service: Saint Francis reached out to us in 2018 to see if we would be interested in working with these youth during the day. With over 25 years of experience providing community mental health to Comcare children, we believed we were up for the challenge. We soon realized these older, more aggressive youth were going to need something different. One of the first changes we made was to disperse children into many different locations. Putting 25 to 30 troubled youth in one location was not a good idea. We now have 7 locations (mostly small homes) and have anywhere from 1 child to 8 youth at one location.

Another reason for the improvement is our commitment to training staff in behavioral management techniques. Safe Crises Management is our behavior management training model that emphasizes building safe, trusting relationships, bringing calm to their chaotic minds and lives. Over these past few years, we have made significant improvements in this area. Yet, we are not where we need to be. This staffing position, what we call Community Support Worker, is extremely difficult. Having empathy and compassion for troubled youth who often don't treat you well, is a tough job to perform. These are our heroes!

Temporary Emergency Placements: After spending the day with us, these kids are placed in temporary emergency placements. This provides them with a bed to sleep in for the night. These placements change regularly, creating what is now commonly referred to as a 'Bouncing Culture.' These bouncing kids are basically homeless. They get a bed to sleep in at night, then come back to us during the day, creating instability in the child's life. We must remember, these are the kids that have been removed, kicked out, banned from many of the permanent placements currently available to more stable children.

Often, these placements are simply not equipped to provide the level of care these children need. Things happen at night that can be disheartening and sad. The next day, they come back to us, and often we start back to square one. Consequently, these kids are living a chaotic lifestyle, not knowing where they are sleeping each night.

Senate Bill 367: Senate Bill 367 was the right decision. We should do all we can to prevent institutionalizing kids. Prevention of locking kids up is a worthwhile goal. Our day service

program serves the kids that are one step away from an institution, either juvenile detention centers or Psychiatric Rehabilitation Training Facilities (PRTFs). Many of our kids are on their way in or on their way out of an institution.

This is hard work. I don't need to tell you that. If you haven't seen it up close, you have heard about it. Some of these behaviors are extremely challenging. We've had at least 10 TVs shattered and broken. Numerous holes in walls. Countless windows broken. A deck and the side of a house burnt down. Cars dented and even stolen. Just to name a few... And that's just damaged stuff.

We've had kids commit suicide, attempted suicides, kids involved in murders sent to adult prisons for who knows how long. And other stories that break your heart.

The national crisis is here.

We need to act... and we are... There are some great things happening in our community to meet the needs of struggling kids. Senate Bill 367 pushed these kids back into our communities and some families and some services were able to serve these kids well. And for that, we should applaud the Bill. Kids lives were forever changed, because they didn't have to go through the previous institutional model.

Proposed Solution: We believe the state needs to create a place where these kids can land until they are ready for a permanent placement. We believe our current Day Service/Emergency Bed model is not in the best interest of these kids, which ultimately is not in the best interest of our community and our State. It would be great if we could put these kids in foster homes; however, most, if not all, of these kids have disrupted placements so often that these homes are not available to them. How many well-meaning foster homes have we lost because we put these high-intensity acuity kids in situations both the kids and the foster parents weren't ready for?

We would like to see our Day Service model extended an additional 7.5 hours, from 11:00 pm to 6:30 am. This would mean our day service becomes a residential facility. A residential model for this type of youth is not currently available. A new residential model where we begin with safety (Maslow's first physiological need) coupled with compassion and empathy leading to trusting relationships. The primary goal for the Pyxis home is to prepare the child to enter a permanent foster home or to prepare them for an independent living opportunity.

Conclusion: Thank you for giving me this opportunity to present our testimony on behalf of the State of Kansas most vulnerable children.