



Testimony: Joint Committee on Child Welfare System Oversight

September 11, 2024

Submitted by Lori Gonzales, President of EmberHope Youthville

Chair Concannon, Vice Chair Gossage, and other members of the committee, I want to thank you for the opportunity to speak with you about the impactful work we have been doing developing a Therapeutic Foster Care (TFC) program.

Foster care youth are among the most vulnerable in the world, so it is “no surprise that the majority face mental and behavioral health problems”. According to a 2022 article in *Trauma, Violence & Abuse*, “foster care children experience high rates of mental health disorders and are at an increased risk of experiencing negative long-term health outcomes.” Studies suggest that “among the 40% of youth in foster care, up to about 80% exhibit a serious behavioral or mental health problem requiring intervention”.

Therapeutic Foster Care services, a family-based alternative, can meet the needs of children with significant emotional and behavioral problems, “it provides critical services to approximately 46,000 or 1 in 10 foster children across the country”. Research found youth in TFC have equal or better therapeutic outcomes when compared to similar youth in institutional treatment.

EmberHope Youthville (EH YV) submitted a proposal to DCF to develop and provide a Therapeutic Family Foster Home (TFFH) model in Sedgwick County that is driven by evidence-based practices (EBP), a trauma responsive environment and a clinical framework. Our model is designed to support the foster parent(s) through evidence-based trainings specific to providing treatment foster care, intensive treatment team support, in-home clinical supports, respite, support groups, and childcare (during training/support groups) and more. This model is designed with the ultimate end goal to assist youth placed in the program to achieve success of residing in a home and community setting while ensuring all safety, well-being and permanency needs are met. Our program includes a trauma responsive focus creating a safe and supportive environment for foster families, staff and those served through knowledge, sensitivity, respect, and a focus on resilience and recovery.

The target population for our TFFH program includes youth ages 0-18 years, any gender, with high acuity needs that can be served in a family setting and/or may be diverted from a congregate care setting. Youth may exhibit behaviors including but not limited to running away, substance use, problematic sexual behaviors, antisocial, defiance, aggression, behaviors related to experiencing trauma and mental health needs. Youth served may also require additional attention to address their medical and developmental needs.

We have created a targeted recruitment plan to identify and license families who are committed to serving this population and are willing and able to support the model and requirements to be a successful TFFH foster family. Families should be conducive to supporting each child’s cultural, spiritual, academic, and emotional development. The DCF grant has allowed us to devote a position specifically to recruit TFFHs, and respite resources for these special-needs populations.

We are committed to recruiting homes that will help facilitate timely permanency, maintain connections to their family and community, complete treatment goals, and ensure educational progress. Our goal is to recruit, train and license 12 families by June 30th, 2025. This may not sound like a huge number of families but please remember we are asking these families to open their homes and care for the most challenging and difficult youth.

Our recruitment activities to date include hosting two TFFH informational nights, attended by 11 families and participating in 12 community recruitment events. These events include:

- 6/14 Hispanic Chamber of Commerce
- 6/15 Juneteenth Celebration
- 7/8 Church presentation
- 7/20 Sunset Summerfest
- 7/28 Church presentation
- 8/7 Church presentation
- 8/12 Church presentation
- 8/19 Church presentation
- 8/24 Back to School Bash
- 8/24 3x3 charity basketball tourney
- 9/5 McPherson charity and volunteer fair
- 9/7 Race for Freedom

Currently, we have one approved TFFH home and 7 additional families going through the process to become TFFH homes (one who has her license already, the other 6 in the training/licensing process). We have three other families that have expressed interest but are choosing to hold off on providing this level of care until their lives become more flexible to provide the added responsibilities, this service is a heavy ask of families. We also have three families that have expressed an interest in providing respite for TFFH families.

EH YV is not just looking for TFFH homes, we are looking to build a TFFH network, which includes the homes that accept TFC youth, but also invested families and individuals who may not be able to provide that level of care, but willing to support it through respite, hard goods, childcare, driving programs, educational programs, employment opportunities, etc.

Our foster families receive a 10- weeks Model Approach to Partnerships in Parenting (MAPP) Foundations or 7-weeks Deciding Together (DT) pre-service training as required per federal and state guidelines.

Additionally, within the first 6 months of licensure, all TFFHs will complete the evidence-based foster parent training, Together Facing the Challenge (TFTC). The goals of TFTC are for both therapeutic foster parents and supervisors to build therapeutic relationships; perform and teach cooperation skills; implement effective parenting techniques (communicate effectively, set expectations, reinforce positive behavior, avoid power struggles, etc.); prepare youth for their future by teaching independence skills; create a positive home environment through family fun time, taking care of self, family meetings, etc.; and improve outcomes for youth served in therapeutic foster care settings.

All families will also complete the Trust-Based Relational Intervention (TBRI®) intro training in their first year of providing therapeutic services. TBRI® is an evidence-based training on the

concepts and systemic approach to complex developmental trauma. TBRI® adds trauma-informed tools and interventions into our program. TBRI® was developed by Dr. Karyn Purvis through the Texas Christian University. Per the Karyn Purvis Institute of Child Development website, “TBRI® is an attachment-based, trauma-informed intervention that is designed to meet the complex needs of vulnerable children. TBRI® uses Empowering Principles to address physical needs, Connecting Principles for attachment needs, and Correcting Principles to disarm fear-based behaviors.”

EH YVs therapeutic foster families will be supported by a licensed Foster Care Worker (FCW) who will oversee a case load of 12 therapeutic families. They will provide support and supervision of the families to achieve safety, well-being, and permanency for youth in their care. Our FCW ensures compliance both to regulatory board requirements (EH YV is accredited by CARF), and DCF licensing standards. They will provide the knowledge, skills, and tools to the foster families to promote their success working with this population.

One of the exciting pieces of our TFFH model is the clinical framework. Our model is designed to support foster families through EBP training specific to providing therapeutic foster care, intensive treatment team support, in-home clinical support, respite, support groups, and childcare (during training/support groups) and more. Our model includes working with Foster Adopt Connect to replicate their Behavioral Interventionist (BI) Program™. “The Behavioral Interventionist (BI) Program™ provides intensive one-on-one services within the family home to children who struggle with behavioral and emotional management to the degree that the behaviors threaten the stability and well-being of their family.

The BI utilizes trauma-informed care, approved behavioral intervention & de-escalation techniques, and implements neuro-stimulating activities that re-wire the neuropathways in the brain to assist in healing the child from trauma. The BI’s objectives are to teach their client:

- Positive and healthy behaviors and responses
- Independence in activities of daily living
- Coping skills & self-regulation

Additionally, the BI practices and models to the client’s caregiver(s) healthy responses that work for their child’s individualized needs and works as a united front with the caregivers. The support of the BI provides relief to the caregivers which increases overall family functioning within the home” per the Foster Adopt Connect BI Replication Information Sheet. EH YV has hired to date a Behavioral Intervention Program Manager, Behavioral Intervention Case Coordinator and two Behavioral Interventionist who have been receiving or are preparing to receive intensive training from Foster Adopt Connect.

EH YV is deeply grateful for the funding received to launch our TFC program. We recognize that the development and implementation process may take time, but we are confident that it will ultimately make a significant difference for the youth in Kansas who have experienced trauma and abuse and exhibit some of the most challenging behaviors. EH YV is enthusiastic about offering a program that will provide much-needed support for these young individuals.