

Testimony: Joint Committee on Child Welfare System Oversight

September 11, 2024

Submitted by Brenda Watkins, President EmberHope Connections

Chair Concannon, Vice Chair Gossage, and members of the committee, I want to thank you for the opportunity to speak with you about the successful transition for case management services in Sedgwick County. We have many wins to celebrate, including finalizing twenty-five adoptions since July 1. We have received eighty-five new referrals (40 in July and 45 in August), and 45% of children and youth are placed with kinship. We have made twenty-six long-term placements for youth experiencing night-to-night placement and 168 total long-term placements. We have decreased the number of youths absent from placement to nine. We acknowledge this is nine too many, but it is a much smaller number than Sedgwick County has had in the past.

We have made several adjustments to our staffing model to come into compliance with the newly required caseload sizes, and the child welfare population is approximately 250 youth higher than anticipated due to aftercare cases. Our average caseload size for reintegration is 21 (contract 15) and twenty-eight for adoption (contract 25). The goal was to maintain case manager continuity, but that was not possible for approximately half of the cases due to the new caseload requirements and the creation of new specialized teams for Crossover Youth (dually adjudicated in both the juvenile justice and child welfare systems) and Independent Living (youth sixteen and older). Case manager transitions have been a pain point in the first 60 days, but we anticipate this will smooth out over the next 30 days.

Adding additional positions has decreased our filled positions and rate from 90% to 85%. We have fifty-eight contract vacancies resulting from the addition of approximately twenty-five direct care positions in the last two weeks. Our turnover rate is 7%. The total number of direct care staff with a degree in social work or a closely related degree is sixty-two. We are concerned about the availability of licensed staff, and only three direct care staff are licensed by the Behavioral Sciences Regulatory Board (BSRB). We have eight total supervisors, directors, or executive leadership staff who are licensed. The shortage of licensed social workers is statewide, and we would like to see targeted efforts to increase the number.

Internally, there have been several challenges that we are working through to include:

- File transfer and access to child information.
- Training staff on new evidence-based practice models.
- Becoming fully staffed and meeting new contract caseload requirements (addressed above).
- Meeting the needs of high-acuity youth in day services and
- Finding placement for difficult to place youth in night-to-night placement.

Unfortunately, the data system the former contractor utilized was not downloadable, and Connections received approximately seven hundred boxes of paper files. Staff had to pull the paper file to review needed information for case plans and court reports. By the end of July, we obtained access to the former contractor's SharePoint site, which has improved the staff's ability to timely complete their court reports and case plans, but some files are still missing. We have had some late court reports and case plans because of the lack of information.

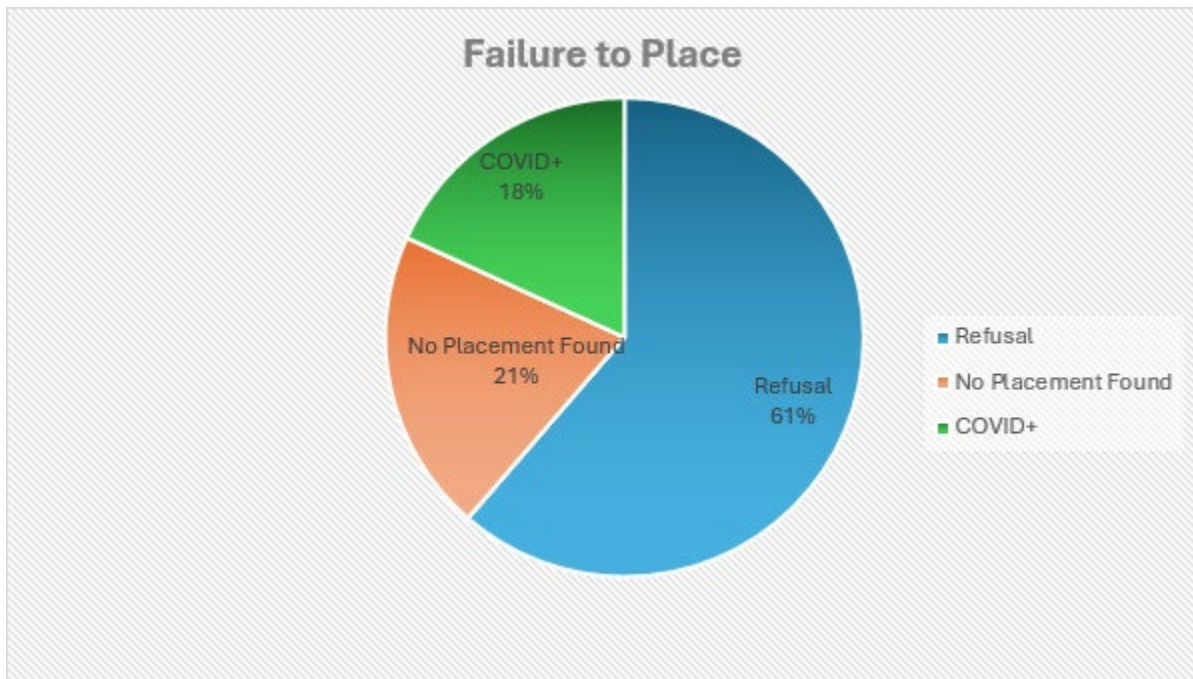
Staff who transitioned with the contract are learning to use our Electronic Health Record (EHR) system (EVOLV). They have received training from Safe Generations on the full implementation of the Kansas Practice Model (KPM), and staff will be transitioning to a new way of safety and permanency planning, which will be fully implemented within the first contract year. Permanency staff have started to be trained in the Crossover Youth Practice Model, Team Decision Making, and Family Finding. Staff will receive on-going evidence-based training for the contract's life. Connections will be the first Case Management Provider (CMP) to implement the KPM tools for the life of the case. We are also the first CMP to have a specialized Crossover Team. We have already seen an increase in crossover youth not being re-arrested and in long-term placements.

The Crossover Team is comprised of a supervisor, nine case managers, and six support workers. They are currently serving fifty-three young people, and when fully staffed, will be able to serve seventy-two young people. Crossover youth are especially challenging due to court hearings in both the juvenile and child welfare systems, detention, probation, high-risk behaviors, safety concerns, and difficulty to place. Our case managers carry a low caseload of eight youth to improve outcomes. The Crossover Youth Practice Model (CYPM) developed by researchers at Georgetown University is being utilized, and a Sedgwick County Protocol has been developed. The team participates in the statewide crossover workgroup with DCF, KDOC-JS, JDF, OJA, and other stakeholders. Regional meetings and staffing's are held as well. Some of the expected outcomes include a reduction in rearrest, an increase in communication/collaboration with ISO/PO enrollment and engagement in school increase, prevent youth who are at risk from crossing over by providing support and building connections with youth, and a partner to support youth and prevent them from becoming dually adjudicated. We look forward to providing ongoing data about the work and success of this highly specialized team.

On July 1, Connections inherited 30-40 youth on any given day who do not have identified long-term placement (referred to as night-to-night youth). This is a two-fold problem because we must staff and supervise the youth during the day, and if placement is not found by midnight, it renders them overnight in our day services sites. These youth have incredibly challenging behaviors and complex needs that are difficult to meet during placement instability. We have struggled with meeting the demand for the day services and have utilized two Connections sites and seven sites with our contracted partner, Pyxis, who are also conferees today. While our model has reduced the number of critical incidents and police callouts, there is still work to be done. We are staffing each youth with a Multidisciplinary Team (MDT) to find solutions for them. One solution to this

concern is building a new Youth Residential Center (YRC II) on our 45-acre Goddard property. We should be able to refer eligible Connections youth to this licensed placement by November 1. We anticipate our residential center will eliminate instances of Failure to Place (FTP) (children sleeping in an unlicensed facility known as an office sleeper). We continue to build provider relationships to better support high-acuity youth in care and accept them into their program. We receive daily denials for our toughest youth, both locally and statewide.

The biggest challenge Connections faces in Sedgwick County is inheriting the culture of night-to-night placement. This culture can be described as instances of residential providers and the stand-by-bed network refusing our youth and foster parents who are only willing to take a youth late at night to be picked up early the next morning. In some instances, the youth does not even shower or is fed while there; it merely is a bed for a few hours to avoid an FTP episode monitored per the McIntyre Settlement with the Department for Children and Families (DCF). Children’s Rights NY has been conducting in-person interviews in Wichita with any youth who experienced an episode of FTP in July or who were considered night-to-night at a specified point in time in July. Often, youth refuse their placements, which also renders them an FTP (61% see pie chart below). Unfortunately, children have the right to refuse to go to placement, and most frequently, their reason is not being able to have their cell phones or access to Wi-Fi. Despite our greatest efforts, we have had 46 FTP instances since the contract started.



Per DCF data, children and youth served by each CMP (as of 8/20/2024): 5,757.

COC serves 8.8% (508 youth) and has a 0% incident rate of FTP (0 for SFY2025)

TFI serves 18.6% (1,071 youth) and has 3% incident rate of FTP (1 for SFY2025)

KVC serves 25.1% (1,443 youth) and has 3% incident rate of FTP (1 for SFY2025)

SFM serves 24.1% (1,389 youth) and has 0% incident rate of FTP (0 for SFY2025)
EmberHope serves 23.4% (1,346 youth) and has a 94% incident rate of FTP (46 for SFY2025)

DCF data shows this has been a historical problem in Sedgwick County. In April 2024, there were forty-seven instances of FTP; in May, there were thirty-two. Things leveled off in June, with only seven reported instances before the contract transitioned on July 1.

In SFY 2024, there were 143 statewide instances of FTP, and ninety-seven were in Sedgwick County (68%). We believe a contributing factor that must be considered in the FTP data is the number of youths placed in Sedgwick County from other counties. Sedgwick County has the most licensed foster homes and residential centers in the state, but we are unable to meet our own demand, largely because of the number of out-of-county youth placed in Sedgwick (444). Only 64% of area seven children are placed in Wichita; 34% of the children placed in Wichita are out-of-area clients, which places us at a disadvantage in our own area. If we had an additional 34% of the capacity, then 97-98% of our clients could be placed in their county of removal, assuming there are no other factors in play. It is acknowledged that each CMP can place youth in their own licensed placements, and EmberHope Youthville, our Child Placing Agency for foster homes, currently has 115 homes in Sedgwick County. Please see the Area 7 Placement Analysis following this testimony.

Training material on the SOUL Family Permanency options has been distributed and presented to Connections staff. We are pulling forms from the Kansas Judicial Council website and integrating them into our system. We are becoming familiar with the new legal permanency option and educating our youth and court parties. Additionally, we are discussing concurrent case planning and what that looks like with SOUL as one of the options. We continue developing training material that will assist case managers in how to identify one or more SOUL legal custodians, and the financial benefits associated with SOUL permanency options. Additionally, we are working on educational material on how to compare the different legal permanency options between Permanent Custodians, SOUL, or adoption so that youth can choose which permanency option works best for them. Best practice in August provided material to all attorneys and court parties. Conversations on the Court level is occurring. Several forms need to be updated by the Kansas Judicial Council. We are still determining who will draft those forms and provide them to the Court. We will address this at the next Contractor's meeting. There is no Federal Recognition of SOUL as a permanency option. Therefore, we are moving forward with concurrent case planning to ensure we meet our ASFA requirements. We have three current cases with SOUL permanency goal possibilities.

We are proud of our work in addressing the needs and challenges in our county. We are working towards solutions with DCF, the other CMPs, and our provider community. We desire to proactively address what may appear to be an EmberHope Connections problem regarding FTP.

We are concerned that we have not been given enough time to address a historical problem in Sedgwick County since 2018.

We look forward to working with the Legislature and the Child Welfare System Oversight Committee in the upcoming session. We appreciate DCF's support during and after the transition, and our CMP partners' collaboration to address statewide systemic challenges in serving high needs youth.