

I support House Bill 2345 to establish an Office of the Child Advocate

Dear House Committee on Children and Seniors regarding House Bill 2345,

I previously worked at Saint Francis Ministries as a case manager. I have noticed so many issues in the foster care system while being employed. One of which is there is a large issue with ensuring the supervision and safety of children due to the workers being overworked. Often many of the employees would have overlap visits to get all the children and families seen within their 40-hour work weeks/160-hour work months along with all the meetings and documentation necessary and trainings since employees were most often denied overtime. I find this very wrong that they would put the safety of the children at risk because of wanting to save money. Many of the children/foster families reported to me that the workers dropped the children off with unfit parents at what were supposed to be "staff-supervised" visits and left them alone. The children often came back with unexplained injuries (that the staff and parents and children all report different stories on what allegedly happened, or the children state they were told not to tell anyone what happened. Many of the children also have recurrent behaviors after being left alone whether that is screaming, hiding, bowel/bladder incontinence, talking back, fighting, or regressing progress. Another issue that I noticed while working in foster care case management was many children were unable to maintain stable homes and there was a lack of substantial foster homes that would suit many of these children's needs. Sometimes too, the children were placed in kinship, which is often a good option, but most of the kinship homes my clients were in ended up being not trustworthy, dishonest, and would interfere with the process by allowing unsupervised visits. Not all kinship homes were like this, but several were. Many of the kinship homes would try to input false information to the case workers about why the other non-related was an unfit parent and would often do this in front of the children. The children would have issues feeling able to talk honestly about the parents in front of the kinship relatives.

I do know that while I was employed as well as after I was no longer employed with this agency there has been a large amount of false documentation and many of the parents made no substantial progress did not attend visits or complete hardly any parts of their case plan and the cases would go to court and immediately be continued and set for a couple months out. The parents would show up a week or couple days before court and act interested and immediately after court they would disappear. This caused the CINC cases to get dragged out for 1.5 to 2 years when the parents continued to show they were unfit, but due to the court being so busy with cases, they would push the pause button and cause more trauma to these children when their parents would be inconsistent have a visit here and there and disappear for months on end likely abusing drugs. Another issue was that my supervisor at the Garden City office would progress visits quickly when workers left so that she would not have to do any extra work. Visits would be supervised for a year or so with no substantial progress or initiative and within a week go to monitored visits and the next week unsupervised visits because the workers/supervisors wanted

to lessen their workloads when the visits were not ready to progress and they would soon have to regress visitations again. As stated above this caused a lot of issues. I know that many of the children were fearful to be left alone with their parent(s) and stated they did not want to go on visits and stated their fears yet were forced. These children are not given the voices they are claimed to have given. Many of the children do not get the chance to talk to their GAL or CASA worker or caseworker ahead of time to discuss how things have been going. I know part of case management is having worker child meetings each month (along with worker parent meetings each month) but due to COVID we had to do these worker child visits over video chat or over a phone call. Children were often not able to be alone during the meetings. In person we were encouraged to try to be alone with the child for a few minutes each and 'ask them to show us their room.' This allows us a few moments to try to see if there is anything the child would like us to know and see how things are going but often the children have nothing to share with us.

In going back to the false documentation aspect, I know many foster families/kinship homes have reported to me over the time employed that they would go multiple months without seeing or hearing from their case workers. Some of these were coworkers of mine that the management knew they were not accurately reporting but refused to address the issues. Other times it was my partner who despite the child and foster parents and often the parents reporting she dropped the kid off and left until it was time to take the child back home, my partner and other coworkers would continue to be dishonest and claim they were there the entire time and try to make up false information about the visits despite it not being what the parent/foster parent/child reported occurred. This also happened with the injuries trying to cover up the fact that they were absent, and the child was injured, and they were unaware what happened. Plus, many of these unfit parents would have multiple stories about the injuries that occurred each time you asked about it. I also know many people who have reported different people abusing and neglecting children and the department of children and families does not investigate and if they do it is minimal. If the parents do not allow them in to see the child, DCF often dismisses the case. I find more issues with the parents who do not allow agencies to assess the children than the ones that are willing to comply. I would like to mention the bias that many of these parents are compliant and must fight for months to get their children back and is not able to progress visitation, yet the other parent (separated from the compliant parent) does little to nothing and is given the same visitation and opportunities and this causes the children to be placed out of home for much longer and case numbers are higher. There is often no reason the child must remain in out of home placement when one of the parents has completed all necessary tasks and has proved to be a fit parent. Lastly, a major concern I noticed is due to the high turnover rate of case workers, whether they quit or are fired, the information on their cases is often lost. The agencies will not try to access the computers/work phones or ask for the login info, and months upon months of data is missing. This causes the new workers that are thrown on the case to be going in 'blind' and the children who often were able to trust their workers are now unwilling to open about their situations and start to regress because there is little to no stability in their lives.

I am advocating for the Office of the Child Advocate because I believe there needs to be more oversight into these agencies and the information they are documenting to ensure these children are being kept safe and that their needs are being provided for. The children are in the system nearly always by no fault of their own (except for a few cases with behavioral issues, substance abuse, and truancy most commonly in teenage-aged children). Foster care is a confusing process and there is not enough advocating being done. We need to do what is in the best interest of the children, not what is easiest on the agencies. We need to ensure these children are being protected and that these cases are taken seriously and not strewn out like it continues to be for so many of them. I also believe these children should be provided more insight into what is going on within their case as well as ensuring they are being educated properly and learning life skills to help them once they age out or once they return home. Many of the parents do not take case plans seriously and upon getting custody of their children again return to the same old lifestyle and it becomes a recurring issue. And as stated again, DCF is not doing their part either nor is Saint Francis and likely any other Kansas child welfare agencies that may exist and DCF often does not take many of the reports seriously despite continued concerns. This office would ensure that children and families along with foster care homes/kinship homes are able to report concerns and that these concerns are being taken seriously and that the children are able to have a voice into what is going on in their case/in their lives and to ensure the children are able to get the services they need to work through their trauma. Please let me know if I can provide any more backstory/information.

Sincerely,

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