

**Pennsylvania House**  
**House Democratic Policy Committee**  
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***The State of Foster Care***

**Testimony submitted by:**

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Thank you for the opportunity to testify regarding the state of foster care. My name is Debra Schilling Wolfe. I am the Founding Executive Director of the Field Center for Children's Policy, Practice & Research at the University of Pennsylvania, a collaboration of the University of Pennsylvania's Schools of Social Policy & Practice, Law, Medicine, Nursing and the College of Arts & Sciences as well as the Children's Hospital of Philadelphia. I have spent the past four decades of my career in the child welfare field in a variety of settings across the country, and focus my work on improving policy and practice for the benefit of abused and neglected children and those involved in the foster care system.

I am here today to confirm that, indeed, the foster care system is in crisis and in need of reform. Foster care is designed to provide temporary care for children who cannot remain safely in their own homes, primarily due to child abuse or neglect. Children enter foster care after the local county children and youth agency determines that out-of-home placement is necessary and brings the case before the local dependency court. Placement can be with either kin or with a certified/licensed un-related caregiver. Effort is made to first place children with relatives before looking at other alternatives. While the majority of children are placed in traditional, non-relative foster homes, 30% of out-of-home placements nationally occur in kinship homes. The federal Adoption and Safe Families Act limits the amount of time that children should remain in foster care so that children do not languish in a temporary setting without a permanent plan for their future. Although this legislation has done much to limit the length of time in care, too many children's futures remain in limbo as a permanent connection to family is never realized.

Research tells us that, while children in traditional foster care are more likely than those placed with kin to achieve legal permanence and receive services and financial support, children in kinship care have more stable placements and fewer behavioral problems, mental health diagnoses, and lower rates of re-abuse while in care (Winokur, Holtan, & Batchelder, 2015). Models such as *Family Finding* have been utilized to identify alternative kinship resources for children and have contributed to an increase in relative placements.

According to the federal 2018 AFCARS report, as of September 30, 2017, there were 442,995 children residing in foster care in the United States. These numbers have been increasing steadily over the past five years (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2018). A total of 25,441 Pennsylvania children were in foster care placement in 2018. Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children reports an 18.5% increase in the number of children placed in foster care in Pennsylvania from 2013 to 2017; this slowed to a 13% increase for the most recent 5-year period. Historically, there have been a shortage of foster families to meet the needs of the number of children in the system (Bass, Shields, & Behrman, 2004), causing an imbalance in supply and demand.

## **Solutions**

What can we do to address the inadequacies of the foster care system? We know that the need for foster care, as currently defined, outweighs the supply of foster homes. The first step is to acknowledge that the solution is far beyond the construct of our current system of out-of-home placement. I would suggest that three simultaneous strategies are necessary.

## I. A New Focus on Prevention

The first strategy is to decrease the need by focusing on preventing out-of-home placement. By limiting the number of children who enter care so that only those that are truly in need are placed will allow the child welfare system to best use the limited resources at hand. Traditionally, prevention efforts have been defined as in-home or other interventions to keep families together. What we need to do is divert families from involvement in the child welfare system in the first place.

1. **We must invest in anti-poverty efforts.** Poverty is one of the strongest and most consistent predictors of child maltreatment. In a study examining the effect of seven different variables on specific types of child maltreatment, only poverty and age of the mother were predictors of all types of child abuse and neglect. Numerous studies found that low socioeconomic status (SES) families have the highest rates of child maltreatment. Although child maltreatment is found in families at all income levels, there is a significantly higher level of child abuse and neglect of children living in homes classified as low SES. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services found in its 4th National Incidence Study of Child Abuse and Neglect (NIS-4) that children living in homes with annual incomes of \$15,000 or less were five times more likely to be at risk of child maltreatment than those with incomes of \$30,000 or more. The vast majority of reports of child maltreatment, approximately 80% in any given year, are for child neglect. The child welfare system focuses far too many of its limited resources on the outcomes of poverty. No child should be removed from his or her parent's care because of poverty, yet this happens each and every day. If we could spend money, for example, on helping a

family to fix their home rather than placing their children in foster care, we would reduce family trauma while also saving taxpayer dollars. There needs to be a shift in priorities to help lower SES families meet their own basic needs. An investment in reducing poverty is an investment in reducing child maltreatment.

2. **All too often, when there is a tragic death of a child known to the child welfare system, there is a spike in the number of placements as a response.** When one works in a system where fingers are constantly pointed and society looks for someone to blame, it is not surprising that agency staff revert to a self-preservation mode. It is human nature. Society does not look to blame physicians, law enforcement, firefighters, or other professionals when a tragedy happens in their line of work, but that is the first response when a child dies due to abuse or neglect. We need to view and treat child protective services as a professional role and support these first responders with the tools they need. If we change the narrative, caseworkers and administrators will be empowered to make good decisions rather than merely react to the fear of liability and remove children because it is safer for the agency and its staff.
3. **We need to reframe how we deliver services.** Children and families do not live within individual silos or systems. They reside in the real world and are touched by the health, education, drug and alcohol, mental health, and other systems of care. We need to focus our planning and funding on cross-system solutions that divert families and children from the child welfare system by instead offering community-based prevention services that cut across traditional boundaries.

## **II. Reimagine Recruitment**

The second strategy is to develop new and innovative recruiting strategies to increase the number of trained and qualified foster parents. Despite the recent focus, or “solution du jour,” of recruiting relatives to provide foster care, there remains a significant need for non-relative homes that will not be met by efforts such as Family Finding. Recruitment of foster parents is an ongoing challenge for a variety of reasons. Foster parents must navigate complex systems of care and develop relationships with both birth parents and professionals, often with little support (Geiger, Piel, and Julien-Chinn, 2016). Many do not remain as foster parents long-term (Gibbs & Wildfire, 2007), creating the need to develop new homes on an ongoing basis. Foster parents have historically been treated as “second class citizens” by the child welfare system. We must start looking at foster parents as part of the professional team and recruit them as such. A multi-pronged approach for recruiting and retaining foster parents is critical to address systemic needs for a robust pool of foster homes. An effective recruitment strategy requires a conscious effort to promote positive messaging and branding about the role of foster parenting, such as the national *Quality Parenting Initiative* model which has recently been adopted in Philadelphia. Targeted recruitment toward specific professions, ethnic groups, faith-based institutions, and geographies is also a promising recruitment approach.

## **III. Focus on Retention of Quality Foster Homes**

The third strategy is retention of foster homes. Foster parents cease to remain active for a variety of reasons, including burnout, frustration with the child welfare and court systems, negative impact on their own families, finances, and adoption of their own foster children. Clearly defining

the role and expectations of foster parents and providing an opportunity to reflect on their role promotes higher satisfaction with the demands of foster parenting and increases retention rates (Piescher et al., 2008). Children who enter foster care bring with them a myriad of challenges. We need to support foster parents with adequate training, resources, and supports if we expect them to be successful and continue to do this difficult work. Building social support through connections with other foster parents and support from agency workers promotes a sense of community and belief in individual capacity and increases satisfaction (Rodger, Cummings, & Leschied, 2006; Piescher et al., 2008). Group-based trainings that build behavior management skills and parenting strategies also show promise in increasing retention rates (Macdonald & Turner, 2005; Pacifici, Delaney, White, Cummings & Nelson, 2005; Turner, Macdonald, & Dennis, 2007; Piescher et al. 2008). One innovative approach, the *Mockingbird Family Model*, creates an extended family community designed to support, develop, and retain quality foster families with an experienced foster “hub home” as a resource for a group of foster homes.

We will only be able to address the foster care crisis if we are willing to think outside the box and re-examine old assumptions. Many of the recommendations I have offered rely upon culture change, something that does not happen overnight. But if we are to move forward as a field, we cannot rest on the policies and practices of yesterday. We need to invest in tomorrow. Children’s lives depend upon it.

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