



Oregon's Child Welfare System: Rebuilding the Home

A Broken Home

For years, Oregonians have been attuned to the dire challenges surrounding our state's child welfare system. The issues are as diverse as they are acute, and our legislative leaders have often approached them as one would make repairs to an ailing home: a coat of paint here, a patch in the roof there.

To most anyone in the child welfare system, be they foster parent, child, or caseworker, it's become painfully clear that the problems in the system have gone beyond the point of one-off policy repair work, and demand systemic change. It's time to stop making ad hoc repairs and additions to Oregon's house of child welfare. It's time to rebuild the home from the foundation up.

That's not to say that our legislative and policy leaders haven't been addressing issues that have been brought to light. After multiple audits and numerous high-profile incidents in which children were found to be in unsafe environments, the Legislature has tried to address child welfare challenges through greater transparency, comprehensive reporting, and increased resources.

Through the passage of SB 1515 in 2016, the Department of Human Services (DHS) moved to change its internal practices and reporting structures to address these problems. These were important and appropriate first steps; yet as the need for quality placements remains consistently high, options to find children safe and stable homes has been steadily decreasing.

The challenges facing the system can be overwhelming:

- **Children are suffering from inappropriate permanency placements and sibling separation;**
- **Foster parents are aging out or burning out of the system, and new recruitment of foster parents is lacking;**
- **Caseworkers are overburdened and lack the support needed for the work they do;**
- **Foster parents experience a lack of support and guidance, often accepting children with needs beyond the parents ability to provide care;**
- **The entire system is inadequately funded to meet the outcomes that children need.**

These issues are leaving children left behind by the very programs designed to help them.

There is no one solution to these problems. Funding to better support foster families, expand staff, and increase support systems is essential to making sure foster children have a chance at a loving home. But we must also address how we can build a better support system for families at risk in order to help them succeed and stay together in a safe and nurturing environment. It's encouraging to see the State of Oregon's leadership shifting focus toward child welfare services and determining ways to provide some short-term relief to the placement crisis, but without additional resources it will be impossible to consider the long-term systemic issues that overburden our foster system.

By the State's own funding model, DHS's budget falls short by nearly 15 percent. We know that there are many reasons to raise revenue, but the need to make sure Oregon's most vulnerable children have safe and secure homes should be a top priority for the Legislature as they deliberate the next budget. Our legislative leaders must come together to address the immediate crisis in foster care, while still investing in the long-term fixes needed to support families and prevent future crises.

Needed Repairs on a Shaky Foundation

Following years of documented abuse and neglect at foster care provider Give Us This Day, Governor Kate Brown called for an independent review of the foster care program, resulting in the legislature passing SB 1515 in 2016. The bill was designed to implement higher standards in provider licensing. As a result, foster care providers throughout the state came under heightened scrutiny from state licensing officials.

SB 1515 was a necessary step in the right direction; children entering the system are some of our state's most vulnerable, and providers need to be held to a high standard of care.

Despite the necessity of this bill, an unfortunate consequence was the increased number foster youth facing displacement. Combining the influx of children needing placement with the lack of funds necessary to fully staff the department, has created a perfect storm: An increase in needed placements, a decrease

in available homes, and no resources available to recruit providers to fill the void.

The impact this has on children is significant and long lasting.

In late 2016, there were 60 reported cases over the course of three months in which foster youth were "hoteled" (a term used to describe foster youth having no placement options other than spending the night in a DHS office or hotel with DHS staff). There were multiple reports of children observing caseworkers making placement phone calls on their behalf, only to be rejected by the home. The independent review finalized by the firm Public Knowledge in September 2016 notes that the stress of such circumstances can "contribute to psychological harm, placement instability, and even further trauma," for the youth in foster care.

An Unstable Structure

Similar to the economic crisis that sent Wall Street crashing in 2008, the complex network of programs and agencies working within child welfare has created a web of risk within the system—only at child welfare, it's not just dollars at stake; it's children's lives.

In SEIU Local 503's statewide survey of child welfare employees at DHS in August 2016, **57 percent of respondents reported that their caseloads are over the recommended allotment.** Some respondents reported nearly 28 cases, which is higher than the US DHHS Council on Accreditation's recommendation of "no more than 15 children in foster care or kinship care, and no more than 8 children in treatment foster care." DHS employees noted that caseload burnout has led to staffing shortages, increasing the burden among remaining caseworkers. New employees enter a system so strained that over 30 percent of survey respondents admit receiving little to no training, basing the majority of their work on observing experienced co-workers. Many offices reported an inefficient or complete lack of oversight.

The fact that DHS is understaffed is especially problematic when taking into consideration that 2016's federally funded Child and Family Services Review (CFSR) of the child welfare program states:

"Oregon is trending in wrong direction. One factor influencing this measure may be that Oregon

has seen an increase of over 1250 assessments between the calendar years 2014 and 2015."

This has a rippling effect that stretches well beyond the walls of DHS offices. CFSR states that 50 percent of Oregon foster parents reported not receiving adequate training to provide a safe environment in which to foster a child. That same report found that Oregon relies on certification staff in local branch offices to ensure that all department-certified foster homes meet initial and ongoing training requirements. Currently, there is no ongoing training schedule developed for certification staff to conduct, essentially leaving foster parents unsupported beyond the initial required training—a training that many found to be inadequate.

Even if there were a developed program, it is questionable whether DHS certifiers have the capacity to establish and sustain effective training schedules. One part-time certifier in Beaverton describes their caseload:

"I have between 20 and 25 foster homes that I 'manage,' which I believe is more than the caseload calculation, and equal to some of my full-time counterparts. I take case notes home so that I am not as far behind, but am still not caught up on home studies. We have a mandatory work Saturday coming up to finish home studies. I am thankful for the time, but I won't get overtime because I am part-time. I rarely attend training because I don't have time. If I take a day for training I get further behind."

Rebuilding the Foundation

Solutions to this crisis fall into two categories: budgetary and policy-driven. The two categories are intertwined, as the necessary policy changes will require significant investment from the state's General Fund (GF).

To adequately recruit and retain foster care providers, the state must establish more support for providers by way of training, development and investment. Minimally increasing provider payments for family foster care would require \$22.9 million from the GF combined with \$2.1 million for Behavioral Rehabilitation Services to pay for cost increases above inflation. The state could increase support for foster parents by offering low-cost child care, respite care, and a 24-hour hotline for foster parent assistance.

In its own budget report, DHS states, "Without additional capacity [in child welfare services], there is greater risk of a federally mandated Program Improvement Plan and the potential for federal penalties." Currently, child welfare caseworkers are staffed to 86.5 percent of the workload model. We believe that reaching 90 percent of the workload model is an attainable goal that would only require a 3.5 percent increase over the current staffing model. The additional \$11.1 million investment could increase staff capacity at all levels of the child welfare system.

As of late February 2017, there were over 40 bills related to child welfare introduced this legislative session, and more are expected to be introduced in the coming weeks of the legislative session. The legislature should consider each policy bill on its own merits and pass the bills that move the agency forward toward much needed long-term, systemic

change.

There is a saying in health care that the best hospital bed is an empty one: for every empty hospital bed, there's a would-be patient in the world who received less invasive, less expensive care. The same is true for child welfare. While we know that it is unlikely that there will be a time when DHS offices will be empty, we do believe that reducing the number of families who come through our doors is a worthy and possible goal.

Here are just a few examples of how to achieve that goal:

- **Expand Employment Related Day Care to the thousands of families that qualify;**
- **Invest in early learning prevention programs like home visits for at-risk families;**
- **Protect families against no-cause evictions;**
- **Pass legislation to stabilize rents;**
- **Pass paid family and medical leave;**
- **Protect and expand resources for TANF, which provides cash assistance to the most vulnerable families.**

Our state must come together around a unified prevention agenda that will reduce the number of children who come into care, while at the same time improving services for children in the system. Oregon has a responsibility to provide a safe and nurturing environment for children whose families are not able to do so. Only after the State begins addressing all aspects of child welfare as a whole will we begin to see real reform.

Sources

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