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**Capitol View
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**Don’t Skimp on Child Welfare in Nebraska**

It appears that under the guise of government efficiency, Nebraska’s at-risk children could be headed for a crisis.

Experts say kids are better off when they can remain in their family homes when help is needed and it’s safe. Only children who aren't safe should be removed and placed in out-of-home care, at least until things can be improved at home.

The Department of Health and Human Services, child advocates and those overseeing child welfare in the Legislature and in courtrooms are keeping track of that safety. Yet, Inspector General Julie Rogers investigated the deaths of four children connected to the system between July 1, 2018 and June 30 of this year, in addition to 52 suicide attempts (flat from the prior year) and 41 allegations of sexual abuse (four fewer), even though Nebraska has fewer state wards.

What’s possibly more troubling is that the state has awarded the contract for child welfare services in Douglas and Sarpy counties to the lowest bidder, which has proposed cutting the number of case managers in the area responsible for 40% of Nebraska’s caseload, and has also proposed eliminating most child welfare regulations. That’s government efficiency at its finest, eh?

Numbers of Nebraska kids in out-of-home care have dropped steadily in the past two years with 3,166 children in such placement right now. The Nebraska Foster Care Review Office reports that from June 2018 to June 2019, the number of state wards decreased 10%, following a nearly 9% drop the previous fiscal year.

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Though the number of critical-incident reports will never fall to zero, the number of traumatic events reported — such as sexual assault and suicide attempts — remains largely unchanged. Nebraska’s most vulnerable youth need a system that ensures their safety and well-being.

While DHHS is reducing its reliance on out-of-home care, it's using more non-court solutions, which may allow a family to work with the department and avoid the traditional court process and its oversight.

When a caseworker has determined there is a safety risk, the department can choose to informally connect parents with services and supports to improve their ability to protect their children. Kids could be placed with parents, relatives or family friends who are assigned a safety plan.

Kim Hawekotte, executive director of the Foster Care Review Office, said it is unclear if the families in the non-court and voluntary cases are faring better, because her office does not have authority to provide oversight when courts are not involved. And there is no other independent oversight.

In a recent report to the Legislature's Health and Human Services Committee, Hawekotte said her office learned last summer the department was using so-called "approved informal living arrangements" for some non-court and voluntary cases.

In reviewing incomplete and sometimes inaccurate data on the cases, the Foster Care Review Office found some children were moved among several relatives multiple times. Several had returned to their parents' care. In some cases, records were incomplete. The review office knows of about 156 children from 99 families who are in these informal living arrangements, she said.

From just six months of reviews, Hawekotte said, it found a lack of cooperation by parents in the voluntary cases. Of 30 mothers reviewed, 18 were either minimally or not at all engaged with the services provided by the state. It was the same for six of six fathers.

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Safety in these living arrangements is also a serious concern, she said. Of 34 families reviewed in August, 19 were assessed to be high-risk and 12 very-high risk. And with just the slightest progress, she said, cases move quickly toward reunification, sometimes in just a few weeks.

In some cases, provided services are not sufficient to support sobriety, with a lack of drug testing by the department and reliance on the parents' word, she said. Eighty-four percent of children were placed because of parents' drug use; the most common being methamphetamine.

Hawekotte also reported concerns about the lack of due process, legal support and advice to parents. Informal placements do not follow the same rigorous standards as foster care placements. There is a lack of financial support and training.

Doing things efficiently is laudable for government. But child welfare is one of those areas in which the state mustn’t skimp, given the importance of its impact on the future of its children.

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