



REDUCING THE NEED FOR FOSTER CARE

An Artifact from Workshops at
The Kansas Leadership Center



**KANSAS
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CENTER**



THE FOSTER CARE PROGRAM IN SEDGWICK COUNTY IS IN CRISIS.

As of mid-September, nearly 1,300 children in Sedgwick County were in the custody of the Kansas Department for Children and Families (DCF) — about 20% for the statewide total — although Sedgwick County only accounts for 18% of the state's population. While admissions into the system are dropping across Kansas, they are climbing steadily in Sedgwick County, growing by an average of six children a month.

Recognizing the need to reverse that trend, more than 50 people, including elected officials and representatives from nonprofit organizations and government agencies, met at the Kansas Leadership Center to discuss what is driving this upturn and to explore ways to reduce the need for foster care.

The diverse group of participants shared interpretations for potential reasons for the steady increase in admissions. Interpretations are not facts, but perceptions that are helpful to make explicit, so they can be explored and tested for their accuracy.

Among the interpretations surfaced were:

- That because case management providers follow a policy of “eject no one, reject no one,” the foster care program has become the default landing spot for children with behavioral or mental health issues, and those who may have suffered abuse or abandonment.
- Outdated mandatory report requirements dictate the notification of DCF in many cases that could be addressed in other ways.
- Whether low pay and turnover results in caseworkers who are overworked or lack experience, and who may struggle to understand distinctions between poverty, which is not a reason to separate children from their families, and neglect, which is. Physical neglect and lack of supervision were the two most frequent reasons

why children were removed from homes. Concerns were also expressed whether caseworkers have the life experiences necessary to draw conclusions about situations that could be handled outside foster care.

- Haunted by recent child deaths, caseworkers are taking a better-safe-than-sorry approach to what could be marginal cases.



Historically as the number of children needing foster care increased, the response was to recruit more foster parents. But those gathered for the workshop acknowledged that's not enough. New approaches to meeting the needs of children in foster care are necessary, as well as finding ways to help families in crisis before children are removed from their homes.

Dialogues during the summit revealed that many entities working in foster care operate in virtual silos. There is limited collaboration and information sharing, contributing to inefficiencies and gaps in services. One example is that children in foster care struggle academically more than children living at home, at least in part because they often change foster homes — and schools — frequently. Records indicating any special academic needs can be slow

to keep pace. Children in foster care also struggle to leave the juvenile justice system.

Participants were encouraged to explore ideas to reduce the need for foster care, workshoping to help flesh out their proposals. These are to be considered experiments, not settled solutions. Not all the experiments will succeed, and those involved were urged not to view those efforts as failures.

As they discussed the proposed experiments, several participants discovered that others had similar ideas. Even before leaving the summit, they began making plans to work together. Early skepticism that the discussions would result in well-meaning aspirations but little actual progress gave way to a belief that genuine progress is possible.

Participants whittled their initial list of experiments to three favorites. Some of their ideas stressed communication and collaboration, while others focused on ways to aid children and families in need before foster care is required. As one participant put it: “Support, don’t just report.”

A sampling of the proposed experiments sheds light on what participants consider priorities:

- Become a “community of prevention” first through collaboration before placing children in foster care.
- Reduce out-of-home placements by increasing the number of families enrolled in home visit services.
- Help families on the margin by offering micro-loans for home improvement projects or making home purchases financially feasible.
- Provide a continuum of care for post-adoptive families, thus reducing reentry into the foster care system.
- Equip and empower children aging out of foster care.
- Tap into assets and services families need to be healthy and strong.
- Provide education, resources and access to mental health and substance abuse services.
- Connect faith communities to families, allowing them to be served with ongoing support in the neighborhoods where they live.
- Allow more families to access prevention services

without having to go through DCF.

- Allow children to have a voice in what is happening to them.
- Make family preservation services available through a community entity instead of DCF intake.
- Acquire data to identify struggles within the home that result in children being placed in foster care, allowing for specific long-term preventative services.
- Understand how racism shapes child and family services.
- Offer resources to children and families in cases involving runaways.
- Improve the community-based understanding of child abuse/neglect prevention and why it is important.

To achieve the goal of reducing the number of children in foster care, resources may need to be redistributed, with more money going toward various forms of family assistance. The current budget for foster care in Sedgwick County is \$21 million, while the budget for family preservation is \$2 million.

Those involved in the two-day summit selected an initial experiment from their shortened list to upload to the KLC software program, Actioneer. Actioneer provides a single site for monitoring progress, results and accountability. More experiments will be added to the site over time as this foster care effort continues and expands. This report was produced using an approach developed by the Kansas Leadership Center to foster impactful civic engagement efforts.

The process has allowed community partners to make authentic progress on daunting challenges by mobilizing people to engage in the work of building trust and discover new ways forward.

Civic engagement is guided by the following principles:

1. Communities guide the process:
Engagements are designed with communities.
2. Establish a common foundation for dialogue:
Provide groups with a common text and a common language.
3. Orchestrate conversations between multiple factions: Highlight areas both of cohesion and friction.
4. Learn through experimentation: Learn through action with opposing sides.
5. Create a learning artifact: Help share info with others to build trust.

A special thank you to the Champion Team who worked along KLC to design and recruit participants for these engagements:

Oletha Faust-Goudeau, Kansas State Senate, 29th District; Ryan Baty, Sedgwick County Commissioner-4th District; Pastor Nina Shaw-Woody, Kansas Family Advocacy Network - Executive Director Lori Alvarado, DCCCA, Inc.- CEO; LeDetra Jones, Kansas Department for Children and Families - Wichita Region Attorney; Dee E. Nighswonger, Kansas Department for Children and Families - Wichita Regional Director

More than 70 people from different agencies, institutions and organizations took part in the two-day summit to discuss foster care in Sedgwick County. The participants came from the following organizations:

University of Kansas
Culture Creations Inc
Safe Families for Children
New Life Covenant
Community Solutions, Inc
Mental Health Association
of South Central Kansas
Wichita State University
McAdams Academy
FosterAdopt Connect
Kansas Legislature
ThumbScore
COMCARE
Family Promise of Greater Wichita
Wichita Children's Home
Child Advocacy Center of
Sedgwick County
Kansas Department for Children
and Families
DCCCA Wichita Behavioral Health

Kansas Health Foundation
Saint Francis Ministries
IRC Wichita
Prex Consulting
Sedgwick County
Health Department
USD 259
Stand Together Foundation
Kansas Children's Service League
EmberHope Youthville
CASA
The Ministry of KFAN
CarePortal
Kansas Nonprofit Chamber
Kansas Big Brothers Big Sisters
TFI Family Services
Destination Innovation
Hinkle Law Firm
18th Judicial District -
Office of the District Attorney

18th Judicial District -
Juvenile Court
Sacrifice for Liberation, Inc
Sedgwick County Commission
Sedgwick County Department
of Corrections
Sedgwick County District Attorney
Urban League of Kansas
Mental Health & Substance
Abuse Coalition
Morris Laing Law Firm
Parents As Teachers
Sedgwick County Community
Developmental Disability
Organization
Sedgwick County Sheriff's
Department
United Way of the Plains
Wichita City Council



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