



## Child Protective Services

House Human Services Committee

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Organization: Texans Care For Children  
Contact: Eileen Garcia-Matthews  
Phone Number: 512-473-2274  
Email: [egarcia-matthews@texanscareforchildren.org](mailto:egarcia-matthews@texanscareforchildren.org)

Chairman Rose and members, I am Eileen Garcia-Matthews, Executive Director of Texans Care For Children. Thank you for this opportunity to provide testimony today. Texans Care for Children is a statewide nonpartisan, nonprofit advocacy organization dedicated exclusively to the children of Texas. We look to our broad base of community-based experts—our partners who together represent thousands of Texas children—to inform our work and help us in developing our legislative agenda. These partners have empowered Texans Care to mobilize coalition groups to work together towards common solutions to the difficult conditions many Texas children and youth face and to assist local communities in advocating for their own children's needs. Our areas of focus are: family economic security; infant, child and maternal health; children's mental health; child welfare; and juvenile justice and at-risk youth.

Texas ranks 42<sup>nd</sup> amongst states in child welfare spending and, not without correlation, 45<sup>th</sup> amongst states in terms of prevention of child fatalities due to abuse and neglect.<sup>i</sup> We applaud our Legislature for steps taken in our previous two sessions to improve our child welfare system, and we ask for continued attention and dedication that will allow our state to move forward in protecting its youngest members, acknowledging that there is no sounder policy decision our state can make than early investment in our populace.

In particular, we ask that you give consideration this legislative session to these recommendations that Texans Care has developed in conjunction with our state-level and regional partners:

**1. Reduce CPS caseworker caseloads to national standards by increasing retention of workers and hiring more workers, including a salary increase and "hire ahead" practices.**

DFPS projects that conservatorship caseloads will decrease to 32 by the end of FY 2009, which is a significant and positive decline from conservatorship caseloads of 45-47 going into the last legislative session. This ratio remains, however, well above the national average of 24, and nationally recommended standards of 12-15. Our current case ratios are also preventing caseworkers from meeting with children at least monthly, as required by federal guidelines and as

needed to ensure that caseworkers have the information they need to make good decisions for these children. As the committee is aware, our state's failure to meet the federal standard of 90% of children receiving monthly visits has resulted in federal fines during our last two review periods.

The problem of high caseloads is also self-perpetuating. High caseload burdens result in caseworker burn-out, which leads to high turnover, which results in higher caseloads for those workers remaining. The turnover rate in 2007 was almost 41%<sup>ii</sup> -- meaning 41% of workers left the Department for reasons other than death or intradepartmental transfer -- and is much higher in some parts of the state. High turnover also results in a less experienced workforce and greater stress on remaining workers, potentially compromising decision-making.

**2. Invest in improved transitional services for youth aging out of foster care by allocating state funds to match community funds for local youth transition centers and by developing an array of supportive housing options for youth in transition.**

In 2007, 8.7 percent of foster children left state care by “aging out” rather than by being permanently placed with a family or returning home.<sup>iii</sup> These 1,411 emancipated teens had an average of 8.3 different foster home placements and were in the system for more than five years.<sup>iv</sup> This means that many of them enter adulthood without the stability and support that teens need. As a result, 1 in 4 will likely be incarcerated within their first two years of leaving the system,<sup>v</sup> nearly as many will be homeless at some point after age 18,<sup>vi</sup> nearly half will not have a high school diploma by age 19,<sup>vii</sup> and fewer than 3 percent will earn a college degree.<sup>viii</sup>

Texans Care is currently collaborating with former foster youth and other stakeholders who work with youth aging out of care to determine the most pressing areas of need for this population. Two key areas of need expressed by this group are stable housing options and a means for accessing available services. Transition centers serve as a “one-stop shop” where youth can learn about the array of services available to them. Texans Care For Children supports matching community funding for these centers with state funding to ensure that youth are able to navigate the spectrum of available services and achieve better outcomes.

**3. Invest in research-based and best practice prevention programs, including in-home visitation programs, STAR (Services to At-Risk Youth), and CYD (Community Youth Development), with additional funding for rigorous evaluation of effectiveness and return on investment for all state-funded programs.**

As another strategy to prevent child abuse and neglect and promote healthy child development, Texans Care urges the Texas Legislature to invest heavily in home visitation programs. Home visitation programs, such as Parents as Teachers, the Nurse-Family Partnership, Healthy Families America, Early Head Start, Home Instruction for Parents of Preschool Youngsters (HIPPPY), and the Parent-Child Home Program, provide in-home visits to targeted vulnerable or new families and have proven effective within our state and nationwide.

Home visiting programs are a wise public investment because they influence family dynamics during the critical, formative early years of a child's life. These programs have proven successful in improving parenting practices, increasing family members' health and economic self-sufficiency, promoting healthy child development, and reducing child maltreatment. Studies also demonstrate the effectiveness of home visiting programs in promoting prenatal care, health insurance, child immunizations, early literacy and school attendance, and reducing juvenile delinquency. In addition we support prevention programs that target at-risk youth. The Services To At-Risk Youth (STAR) program is a proven prevention program that reduces family conflict and truancy and is available through the state.<sup>ix</sup> The Community Youth Development Program (CYD) serves youth in 15 targeted zip codes with mentoring and youth leadership development. In the interest of promoting the wellbeing of the whole child and the family system – preventing abuse and promoting success -- Texas should support prevention programs so that they are available to families in every community in the state.

#### **4. Provide more resources for kinship care placements.**

Kin placement, when evaluated to be safe for a child, is a best practice, and we support its use for both youth in Permanent Managing Conservatorship (PMC) and Temporary Managing Conservatorship (TMC). The Department of Family and Protective Services has made great strides to place children with family when possible. Kinship care is also a pillar of CPS' disproportionality initiative. While no statutory change appears necessary at this time, we wish to touch briefly on two important ways that Texas can benefit from kin placements.

In order to make this option viable for more families, we support administrative changes to create a subsidized guardianship program for children in PMC whose parental rights have not been terminated. These are children and youth who would otherwise be in long-term foster care, turning 18 and leaving the state's care with no legal family and significantly decreased chances for success. Creating this program at this time would be particularly advantageous given the federal funds recently made available.

We also support kin placement for children in TMC, who would otherwise be placed with strangers -- a foster family, in a shelter, or in a residential treatment while the court determines the best long-term placement for the child. The relative caregiver currently receives a one-time \$1000 payment to get the child or children settled in the home, and \$500/year/child for basic needs. The Department will only be able to maximize these placements to the extent that it has sufficient funding to keep up with population growth and inflation.

#### **5. Increase in-home Family-Based Safety Services for poverty-related neglect and Intensive Family Preservation Services.**

Particularly as we face a time of economic uncertainty for many families, our state should ensure that conditions of poverty be addressed for what they are, rather than needlessly remove children from their families. We support the Department's Enhanced In-Home Support Program, which tangibly addresses poverty-related neglect by allowing caseworkers to provide goods and services that will serve as individualized interventions in preventing the removal of children from their families. This program was phased in during the 2008-09 biennium and needs continued support in order to prevent children from needlessly entering the foster care

system. The 81<sup>st</sup> Legislature should also expand the Department's in-home poverty-related neglect program to include housing support in the services available to biological parents. The Legislature should also support the creation of an Intensive Family Preservation Services (IFPS) program, which would couple services geared towards successful family functioning (like parent education) with critical, functioning supports, such as home repairs that have been identified by the family as key obstacles to success.

Thank you again for your time and commitment. If you have any questions, please feel free to contact me or the staff of Texans Care For Children at 512.473.2274.

Respectfully,

Eileen Garcia-Matthews  
Executive Director  
Texans Care For Children

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<sup>i</sup> Every Child Matters

<http://www.everychildmatters.org/National/Resources/Geography-Matters-Child-Welfare-Spending.html>

<sup>ii</sup> DFPS 2007 Data Book, page 27

[http://www.dfps.state.tx.us/Documents/about/Data\\_Books\\_and\\_Annual\\_Reports/2007/databook/CPS\\_FY07.pdf](http://www.dfps.state.tx.us/Documents/about/Data_Books_and_Annual_Reports/2007/databook/CPS_FY07.pdf)  
Accessed 12.16.08

<sup>iii</sup> Texas. Department of Family and Protective Services. Health and Human Services Commission. 2007 Data Book. <[http://www.dfps.state.tx.us/About/Data\\_Books\\_and\\_Annual\\_Reports/2007/databook/default.asp](http://www.dfps.state.tx.us/About/Data_Books_and_Annual_Reports/2007/databook/default.asp)>.

<sup>iv</sup> Texas. Department of Family and Protective Services. Health and Human Services Commission. 2007 Data Book. <[http://www.dfps.state.tx.us/About/Data\\_Books\\_and\\_Annual\\_Reports/2007/databook/default.asp](http://www.dfps.state.tx.us/About/Data_Books_and_Annual_Reports/2007/databook/default.asp)>.

<sup>v</sup> Mark E. Courtney, Amy Dworsky, & Harold Pollack, "When Should the State Cease Parenting? Evidence from the Midwest Study," *Chapin Hall Center for Children*, Issue Brief #115, University of Chicago, December 2007.

<sup>vi</sup> Research Services at Casey Family Programs. (2005). *Improving Family Foster Care: Findings from the Northwest Foster Care Alumni Study*. Seattle: Casey Family Programs.

<sup>vii</sup> Mark E. Courtney, Amy Dworsky, & Harold Pollack, "When Should the State Cease Parenting? Evidence from the Midwest Study," *Chapin Hall Center for Children*, Issue Brief #115, University of Chicago, December 2007.

<sup>viii</sup> Research Services at Casey Family Programs. (2005). *Improving Family Foster Care: Findings from the Northwest Foster Care Alumni Study*. Seattle: Casey Family Programs.

<sup>ix</sup> Texas Network of Youth Services. "Services to At-Risk Youth "STAR" Program." Handout. Received: October 21, 2004.