

Changes reshape Northeast Florida foster care

Redesign means taking kids less often, but is that the best option?

- **BY DEIRDRE CONNER**
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It was a staggering statistic that child welfare leaders had to confront: Children in Northeast Florida were removed from their homes and placed in foster care at double the rate of children in the rest of the state.

Worst of all, so many kids were coming into foster care that workers were running out of places to put them.

It was late 2006, and new research was indicating foster care could be more emotionally damaging for kids than staying home with neglectful parents.

By 2007, the Florida Department of Children and Families and Family Support Services, the lead foster care agency in Duval and Nassau counties, were embarking on something they call "foster care redesign." The plan: Remove kids from their homes less often, more quickly decide whether to reunify families or adopt out kids who did go into foster care, and beef up prevention services - everything from parenting classes to employment help - for all families.

It worked: In two years, the number of kids in foster care in Northeast Florida has been cut in half. Adoptions surged, to 578 in one year, a record.

"This is a huge cultural change for the Department of Children and Families and for the case managing entities," said Nancy Dreicer, who oversees the local DCF region. "We're coming at it from the standpoint of strengthening families rather than yanking kids out."

New flexibility

Using a special federal waiver - granted only to Florida and Los Angeles County in California - agencies got a lump sum of money to use flexibly. Before, the federal government doled out cash based on a head count of kids in foster care, making it costly to help families stay together.

"That waiver," said Jim Adams, CEO of Family Support Services, "has allowed us to step in and get that flexibility to reduce the number of kids in foster care."

Now, instead of having to keep tabs on 35 kids, case workers now have about 17, Adams said. The number of runaways has gone down dramatically, because case workers can keep a better eye on kids in care, he said. The new system saves money, too. But, primarily, the DCF says, it is better for kids.

"Kids that go into foster care have worse outcomes, believe it or not, than kids that stay with maltreating parents," Dreicer said.

The research they cite, however, is not universally accepted by professionals in the field.

"It's promising but not proven," said Bruce McIntosh, director of the First Coast Child Protection Team, which is a medical unit that evaluates the area's most serious cases of child abuse.

Pendulum swings too far?

McIntosh said the research has promise for older children and teens, but there's nothing to prove the new strategy works with kids younger than 5. And it's a risk: Children younger than 5 make up more than 80 percent of abuse-related child deaths in the state. Physically, it's easier to harm a 1-year-old than a 12-year-old.

"The younger, more vulnerable children still need to be managed with the traditional protections," McIntosh said. The protection team has expressed its concerns to DCF, he said, and has received a positive response.

So if the pendulum previously had swung too far in the direction of taking kids away from their parents, is there a chance that it could now go too far in the opposite direction, leading to tragedy? Dreicer said there is a constant discussion about getting it right.

Perhaps it's even greater since the death of Kyla Hall, a 22-month-old killed in November. She had been abused before but was ultimately reunited with her father, who is awaiting trial for murder.

Finding the best option

Foster care workers say they are certain of one thing: The changes weren't responsible for Kyla's death.

Those changes are intended to address less severe cases, such as families with substance-abuse problems, inadequate supervision or economic circumstances such as homelessness that can lead kids to go into foster care, Dreicer said. In those situations, it can be better to help the family instead of tearing it apart.

For others, she said, foster care is the safest and best option.

When asked about Kyla - she was evaluated by the CPT the first time she was hurt - McIntosh said he couldn't comment on individual cases.

Dreicer said the agency is seeking a grant to bring an independent researcher in to study the plan's results. But there's a chance some of those changes could be wiped out before there's a chance to study them.

Legislative budget wrangling was threatening to cut so much from the budget that it might violate the state's agreement with the federal government, said Mike Cusick, president of the Florida Children's Coalition. It has to do with the agreement made to get the waiver in the first place.

"We went to the feds and said, 'we'll agree to cap the amount of money you give us every year ... and in exchange we get the flexibility to spend money on other things, so we can show you that other things work,' " Cusick said. But part of that agreement was that the state had to pitch in a certain amount. If the state violates that, the federal government could take away the waiver.

New budget information released Monday has Cusick feeling much more optimistic that the waiver will be preserved.

If it is, it's certain to be a relief for Adams, who worried that such a move would undo the work done to reform the system and halt the ongoing changes.

"Do we still have leaps and bounds to go?" Adams said "Of course."