

Viewpoints, Outlook

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OVERBURDENED

Fix Texas' foster care fix

What's next for children in system?

By **STEWART GAGNON** and **RON LEWIS**
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As the state labors to find "the best temporary placements" for the 463 children recently removed from the Eldorado polygamist compound, Texas' overburdened foster care system is under scrutiny once again.

The influx of so many children at one time is straining a foster care system already struggling with funding shortages, high staff turnover and a patchwork approach to advocating for children already in the system.

The Department of Family and Protective Services (DFPS) reports that roughly a quarter of its completed investigations in 2007 resulted in confirmed cases of abuse or neglect involving 71,344 Texas children.

Today, about 31,000 are the legal responsibility of DFPS and reside in temporary or permanent foster care or other supervised living arrangements. About half, almost 15,000 children, are in the permanent care of the state. As a practical matter, the state must now "parent" these children who, on average, will spend almost four years in foster care and experience multiple foster care placements. Many of them will not leave foster care until they are considered adults by the system at age 18.

In 2005, state lawmakers tried to address the front end of the crisis facing Texas children by providing another \$250 million to Texas Child Protective Services to hire more than 3,200 new investigative caseworkers, supervisors and support staff to better handle mushrooming investigative caseloads.

As a result, the number of children removed from dangerous situations increased by 4,000 between 2004 and 2006. Unfortunately, there was no corresponding increase in the number of caseworkers to check on children's progress once in foster care. Texas CPS caseworkers monitor, on average, more than 40 children in foster care, while the national average caseload is closer to 25.

As a state, Texas is accountable for ensuring that the children in our foster care system receive the services they need. Already victims of family separation and trauma, these children face a host of other problems:

- Disruption due to multiple foster care placements — with one young woman reporting as many as 15 placements and 11 caseworkers during her four years in Texas foster care.
- A corresponding increase in school transfers for foster children, with greater potential for learning disabilities to go undiagnosed and special education needs to go unmet.
- Greater likelihood of disciplinary referrals at school — 37 percent of Texas' foster children are disciplined at school compared with 15 percent of the general school population. If unaddressed, these behavioral issues can lead to later involvement in the juvenile justice system.
- Inadequate services and insufficient advocacy for foster children around medical treatment, visitation with separately placed siblings, mental health issues and living environments.
- Inadequate support services once they "age out" of the foster care system at age 18.

Texas' foster care system faces critical challenges — including inadequate funding, a shortage of caseworkers to advocate for children in the foster care system, caseworker turnover rates approaching 35 percent and lack of support for foster children once they "age out" of the system.

In coming months, the newly created Supreme Court Permanent Judicial Commission for Children, Youth and Families and its collaborative council of experts from state and nonprofit child welfare agencies and advocacy groups will examine ways to better serve children in the state's foster care system.

The Eldorado case presents an unprecedented, one-time challenge to find foster care placements for hundreds of children. However, the 463 children removed represent only 1.5 percent of the total number of children in the legal custody of DFPS in 2007. Foster care in Texas has ongoing, systemic challenges that must be addressed if we are to ensure that no child is forgotten.

We must ask ourselves, is the state doing as good a job as we would expect of ourselves in parenting our own children? If the answer is no, we need to ask, "Why not?"

If we don't speak up to improve the lives of foster children, we are failing in our most basic of responsibilities — and these children do not have anyone else.

Gagnon, a Houston-based attorney, is a member of the Texas Supreme Court Permanent Judicial Commission for Children, Youth and Families. Lewis, also an attorney, is chair of Texas Appleseed, a nonprofit, public-interest law organization based in Austin.

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chattycathy54 wrote:

It's sunday morning. everyone must be sleeping in. I am going to mass soon (Episcopal). Seriously, in every city the churches would be on call to take a child on an emergency basis. If it is long term care,I have no upfront answer. the systems have put people through hell long enough, destroyed childhoods ,wrecked families...I know.

5/18/2008 7:54:29 AM

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chattycathy54 wrote:

I agree. You and Rosewith thorns are doing that.I truthfully believe these stae agencies should be abolished and churches appointed on rotating baiss to care for children like they do homeless(or should) on a rotating basis.

5/18/2008 7:50:27 AM

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