

Testimony of Katherine Marquart

U.S. House of Representatives, Committee on Ways and Means hearing titled "Falling through the Cracks: Modernizing Child Welfare to Protect America's Most Vulnerable Children"

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Subcommittee Chairman LaHood and Ranking member Davis and members of the Committee, thank you for allowing me the opportunity to testify in regards to America's Most Vulnerable Children.

My name is Katherine Marquart, I was an employee of the State of Missouri, Department of Social Services, Children's Division for five years. Three of those years were devoted solely to providing case management for children in foster care. I held a few other positions at Children's Division, but after my position as an Adoption Specialist at Children's Division was eliminated in response to budget restrictions, I made my way to FosterAdopt Connect to work in the Recruitment Programs, including both 30 Days to Family and Extreme Family Finding.

When first arriving at Children's Division, fresh out of college, I sat through the same 6-week training that everyone else did. I probably caught more than some, but no matter how much training you have, you never go into the child welfare system knowing everything. Nor do you feel prepared to handle what is going to be thrown at you and sometimes that includes literal items being thrown at you. I would love to say that I went into my position as a frontline case worker with the knowledge and the wherewithal to make positive changes in my family's lives, but that is just not the case. There are many things that you can't be prepared for, every case is unique, but there are definitely some things that could have been improved including manageable caseloads as well as additional mental health services for those experiencing secondary trauma.

As a caseworker, I held upwards of 30 cases and when I left the State, workers were holding more than 50. This number is unreasonable and unrealistic for anyone to safely care for the lives of children. There aren't even enough days in the month to see a child much less verify their safety and provide the appropriate amount of guidance to their parents to see them return home in a timely manner. Not to mention the completion of additional responsibilities such as attending and facilitating Family Support Team Meetings, writing a very detailed court report and attending the hearing, and in some cases supervising the visits for the family.

There were many situations in my time as a caseworker that I was not prepared to handle, including the expectation of being on call 24 hours a day. This was not explained to me upfront and it puts everyone in this field at high risk for burnout. Yes, there is an Employee Assistance Program (EAP), and although I think this has put us miles ahead of where we used to be, 6 or 8 therapy sessions are not enough to keep someone on the verge of burnout from quitting the field or lacking empathy with the children on their caseload because they're pouring from an empty cup. Secondary trauma is a term that is used all over the social work field and many know what it means, but unless you have done the work, specifically frontline work, you will not understand the intensity and hold that secondary trauma can have on your life. You're hearing the worst of the worst when it comes to child abuse and neglect and although many agencies try to do a preemptive "self-care plan" for days like this, there are these cases that will haunt you for years, sometimes forever.

I also wasn't prepared for having a child on my caseload who would require surgery and to have no one appropriate familial support during such a scary time in their young life. Something that my family has always done, is when someone is in pain or at the hospital, they are never alone, with this in mind, I couldn't in good conscience allow this child to go through this procedure without some support. So for this specific child who had major spinal surgery, I slept at the hospital because he had no one else. Many caseworkers would have chosen to check on the child here and there but my heart was breaking for this child in pain and in need of someone who cared about him. I didn't plan on being that person, but when it came down to it, this child needed someone more than ever and his caseworker was the best he could get. I was thankful when I woke, exhausted from a night of half-sleep in a hospital chair, to the child's friend and their family coming to visit him in the hospital. He was still tired and in pain, but was still his witty self when they visited. During this visit, the parents asked me about why no one had come to visit this child and how he had nowhere to go after discharge from the hospital. I explained that was the current reality and that he needed someone, anyone who was willing to take a chance on him. It was especially dire as our best option was a shelter that would not provide the care needed for this child to appropriately recover from the extensive surgery. As I sat there, explaining this and casually hinting at the thought of them looking into becoming a kinship placement for this child, they decided they needed some time to discuss it. I didn't have the time or energy to seek out a kinship or relative placement on that day and by some miracle, a kinship family walked into that hospital room and proved to me that kinship will almost always be better than foster.

I wasn't prepared to work with foster families who cared so little about the children they were caring for that when the child moved placements, the foster parent put all of their things in the yard and told the worker to "come and get it". These physical possessions were all this child had in the world that were truly theirs and they were thrown out like trash. I'm thankful that at the time I went to pick up these items, the child wasn't present to see them like that.

I wasn't prepared to have to attend the trial of a rapist of a 12-year-old child on my caseload and have to hear her describe the attack in detail to a room of strangers, nor was I prepared for her to ask that her father stay out of the courtroom because she didn't want him to look at her differently.

I wasn't prepared to hear a young man explain to me that he owned 3 pairs of underwear and he would just turn them inside out every day to make it last a week until he was allowed to do laundry. I went to the store that very minute and allowed him to pick out three packs of underwear that I paid for with my own money.

I wasn't prepared to be subpoenaed to be a witness in a criminal trial for a child on my caseload. Nor, was I prepared to be subpoenaed on the same case 5 years later, three years after I had no longer worked on the case.

I wasn't prepared to shoulder the immense responsibility of being the legal guardian of 30 children.

I wasn't prepared to have the sex talk with the teenagers on my caseload because no one else had or would.

I wasn't prepared to have a mother on my caseload die of an overdose or to help deliver that news to her children.

I wasn't prepared to genuinely like a parent on my caseload and still have to ask for their rights to be terminated because they weren't a fit parent.

I wasn't prepared to have that conversation with a parent and explain to them that I was walking into court and was going to ask them to no longer have legal rights to their child.

I wasn't prepared to appropriately provide comfort and support to a caregiver who was caring for a child with high behavioral and medical needs.

I wasn't prepared to have to go into the home of a suspected murderer, much less reunite him with his children.

There were many, many things I wasn't prepared for as a caseworker.

When I was a caseworker, I remember having nightmares about various parents wanting to hurt me, threaten me, and sue me. This is a major sign of secondary trauma and for some people who have done this work, even the words "secondary trauma" are traumatic. Many of us use humor as a deflection and have a skewed sense of humor. You have to, to be able to deal with the horrors that you see on a daily basis. Personally, I think a skewed sense of humor and good coworkers were one of the few reasons why I could manage to be a case manager as long as I did. There are many case managers who have been doing it for 10+ years in frontline work and they seem to either really know how to keep a work-life balance or work has completely taken over their lives leaving them jaded.

Just about everyone who is going into social services is an empathetic, passionate person with a good heart, but because of these many examples and the lack of support, the turnover rate for Jackson County, Missouri specifically, is much higher than average. According to an article from the Kansas City Beacon entitled "Turnover among child protection workers in Kansas City region far outpacing Missouri's average, deputy says", in 2022-Kansas City was at an all-time high with 88% turnover compared to a 37% turnover rate statewide. With this high turnover rate, it is commonplace for the children in foster care to linger in state custody due in part to the new caseworker simply not knowing the background of the case and not having time to really learn it. Maintaining staff is crucial to getting children safely back in the home with their parents and out of foster care.

From what I understand, the state has made positive strides towards improving turnover by giving higher pay and outsourcing many of its cases to contract agencies around the Kansas City area. Even with these strides, social work is now and always will be a stressful job that requires much more mental health services for its workers than is currently provided.

Managing that many children leaves no time for anything other than putting out the biggest fires. Although I was provided the statutes and the Child Welfare Manual, there was no time to give critical thought, much less action toward kinship care. Most of the time my focus was surviving the week without having a disruption and the threat of sleeping in the office with the child because I wasn't able to locate a suitable placement option in time. On more than one occasion, I called FosterAdopt Connect, my current employer who previously had a shelter, and begged, pleaded, and cried, for them to take one of my children just for the night, just so I could go home, shower and get a few hours' sleep before I had to do it all over again the next day.

Kinship care is when a child is placed in the home of a relative/kin or "family friend." This is an extremely underutilized service, but it is a gap 30 Days to Family can help fill. As a case manager, I didn't know these programs existed for many years, nor did I have the time or knowledge to look for family myself in most cases.

30 Days to Family is a program designed to come in at the very start of a case and provide intensive, short-term services to increase the number of children placed in a relative/kinship home within the first 30 days of entering foster care. 30 Days to Family is a highly beneficial program that really supports the current legislation in Missouri ((Sections 210.305 & 210.565)) regarding diligent search for relatives.

This act requires Missouri Children's Division to complete the following and provide to the court within 30 days of the child coming into care: a detailed narrative explaining the division's efforts to find and consider each potential placement and the specific outcome, the names of relevant information of grandparents and other relatives, steps taken by the division to locate and contact grandparents and relatives, the responses received from the grandparents and relatives, dates of the attempts to contact grandparents and relatives, reasons why a grandparent or relative was not considered and all efforts to place with a grandparent or relative via the interstate compact on the placement of children. 30 Days to Family does every one of these tasks within the allotted time frame as part of their program, this takes a huge weight off the shoulders of the case manager.

Before this act, the Families First Prevention Services Act was put in place in 2018. This opened many doors for many programs including 30 Days to Family and hammered home the need for children to be in the least restrictive setting so long as it is safe and appropriate. This act put in place many Prevention Services to keep children safely in their homes. In addition to this, it also highlighted the need for children to be with family i.e. the least restrictive setting. Families First provided the opportunity for reimbursement of state funds from the federal dollars to provide access to many things such as mental health services and substance use treatment. This also heavily influenced the government agencies to look harder at their non-profit Family Resource Center counterparts such as FosterAdopt Connect which had many prevention programs including family location services via 30 Days to Family.

30 Days to Family has proven that the children served in this program are likely to have fewer moves between placements, fewer behavioral challenges, higher satisfaction with their living situation, better relationships with their families, faster reunification with parents, and a lower chance of reentering foster care. In addition to these outcomes, the children are also less likely to require services such as Extreme Family Finding (another family location service offered by FosterAdopt Connect for children that have lingered in care) later in the family's case. At FosterAdopt Connect, the whole referral process for 30 Days to Family has changed, we understand the chaos that occurs when children enter care and therefore, we have no formal referral. We have done our best to eliminate any red tape that would keep a child or family from being referred to our service. We simply request an invitation to the initial meeting and the documents already provided to other members of the family's professional team.

I work alongside my staff on many cases and on multiple occasions, I have chosen to work an additional 30 Days to Family case when my staff didn't have the capacity. Seeing these families at their most vulnerable and in their darkest days always reminds me of why I chose Social Services in the first place. Being able to harness those raw emotions into locating relatives and kinship resources that I know my counterparts at the Children's Division don't have the time, energy, or resources to do. The whole idea of our programs, specifically 30 Days to Family is to take something off the plate of the case manager.

We know that they are overworked and often carrying more cases than they can safely handle. We like to make sure that locating a family member is as easy as reading an email and agreeing on a placement date.

On more than one occasion, a family member who was interested in placement attended the first meeting when a child comes into care and Children's Division just doesn't have the capacity to complete the necessary background checks, home walkthrough, and home assessment. That's where 30 Days to Family has often intervened and completed all of these items to get a child placed quickly. On the other hand, there are many cases where no one has expressed interest in taking placement of a child prior to them coming into foster care and that's really where we can dig in and find a family member or kinship resource. In one case, we looked and looked and although we had many relatives interested, there were minimal appropriate options within the family. We then looked at the broader scope of kinship and were able to locate a before and after-school provider with an existing relationship with the child and a desire to care for them as long as needed. As a 30 Days to Family Specialist, one of the most important traits is the ability to think outside the box and that's exactly what our specialist did to make sure this child was in an appropriate, safe, and loving home until he could return to his parents.

All this to say, it has been proven time and time again that by and large relatives and kin placements are the best practice for when children must enter foster care. Entering foster care always means major change in the lives of children, but kin can help ease that discomfort, especially when the home and the kin in the home are already familiar to the child.

Locating relatives and kinship is an arduous process, one that many agencies don't have the time or resources to devote but we do. 30 Days to Family is an amazing program that really takes tasks off the plates of our state counterparts and puts relatives and kinship as "Plan A" for those children in care who cannot safely remain with their parents.

Thank you for allowing the opportunity for me to provide testimony on this issue.