

Kansas Child Welfare System: Understanding the Real Challenges and Best Solutions



**39% More Children
in Foster Care**



**Fewer Placement Options
and Soaring Costs**



**Severe, Persistent
Workforce Challenges**

LOW SPENDING ON PREVENTION

Kansas spends 3% of its state and local child welfare dollars on prevention compared to the national average of 17%.¹ Over the last 5 years, Kansas increased foster care spending 100x more than prevention spending.² We must do both with a balanced approach.

NEED FOR COMMUNITY SUPPORTS

Physical neglect of children has been growing and is the most common reason for removing a child from his/her home. The Kansas-based Children's Alliance recommends helping families manage known risk factors for child maltreatment by increasing their access to a variety of community services and supports.

NEED FOR MENTAL HEALTH FUNDING

Mental health providers say recent funding cuts were "devastating." While funding was partially restored in 2017, more resources will strengthen families and prevent child welfare involvement. Unaddressed mental health challenges can escalate to youth behavior challenges, family problems, and out-of-home removal.

NEED FOR SUBSTANCE USE TREATMENT

Substance use by both youth and parents, coupled with lack of substance use treatment services, has led to more children in foster care in Kansas and nationally.

MORE JUVENILE OFFENDERS IN CARE

A 2016 juvenile justice reform bill intended to shift juveniles from detention to treatment. Due to lack of community resources, many of these youth entered foster care.

SAFETY & RISK ASSESSMENT

Whenever safely possible, youth are served best in their home settings. A statewide, evidence-based safety and risk assessment like Structured Decision-Making (SDM) would help to streamline the process.

VOLUME OVERLOAD

Children must be cared for by licensed foster families or residential care providers, and more licensed options cannot be added quickly. The state has appx. 2,700 foster families and 272 PRTF beds for over 7,000 youth. In some areas, this has led to exponential cost increases. For example, many children who need care in a family home have had to be placed in specialized environments that cost 12x more per night.

PRTFs CLOSED

The number of licensed beds at youth psychiatric residential treatment facilities (PRTFs) decreased 65% during 2011-2017 from an original 780 to just 272. Many are serving youth with more serious mental health issues during much shorter lengths of stay than historically seen.

FOSTER HOMES CLOSING

Foster families help children in heroic ways, but their role is difficult. Increased youth mental health/behavior challenges and substance use have led many caring foster families to let their provider licenses expire. The time to train and license new foster families is 6-9 months, making it difficult to quickly add new homes.

Number of Children in Foster Care

	Avg. Children in Foster Care	Cumulative Increase
SFY12	5,182	—
SFY13	5,572	+7.5%
SFY14	5,921	+14.2%
SFY15	6,257	+20.7%
SFY16	6,625	+27.8%
SFY17	6,896	+33.1%
SFY18	7,210	+39.1%

NATIONAL SOCIAL WORKER SHORTAGE

Like all states, Kansas needs more social workers. By 2030, 30 states will experience a social worker shortage ratio more severe than the current national ratio and the nation will experience a shortfall of over 195,000 social workers.³ This is exacerbated by requirements for child welfare workers to have a specific type of bachelor's degree; most states allow other types of four-year degrees to meet workforce needs.

CHILD WELFARE CAN'T COMPETE

Many social workers have left to practice social work outside of child welfare in primary healthcare, managed care organizations (MCOs), schools and veteran's services. Workers leave child welfare for other settings because child welfare tends to involve significantly less pay, little to no pay differential for experience, public scrutiny, longer hours on evenings/weekends, and increased stress and secondary trauma.

HIGH CASELOADS & TURNOVER

The difficulty in attracting and retaining licensed social workers has led to high job vacancies, especially in rural areas. This means high caseloads and increased turnover, making it harder to provide high-quality services to children and families.

1. Child Trends, "Child Welfare Financing SFY14"

2. \$28 million vs. \$264,000

3. U.S. Social Worker Workforce Report Card



Top Solutions to Safely Prevent & Reduce the Number of Children in Foster Care:

- 1. Strengthen community-based mental health and substance use treatment.** Map out community resources across the state for both children and adults to understand gaps. Ensure there are specialized in-home treatment options that address the links between trauma, addiction and child abuse.
- 2. Increase funding for prevention programs like family preservation.** These are better for children and families and cost much less than foster care. As the number of children in foster care decreases, reallocate existing child welfare dollars from out-of-home care to prevention.
- 3. Create a new “Rapid Reunification Program.”** Help youth from low- or moderate-risk environments or who are in care for non-abuse/neglect reasons to get them home as quickly as is safely possible.
- 4. Implement evidence-based assessment.** Leverage resources to support the statewide implementation of Structured Decision-Making (SDM) or another evidence-based safety and risk assessment paired with collaborative case planning.



Top Solutions to Increase Placement Options and Reduce Costs:

These strategies not only reduce costs; they are proven better for children. They allow youth to be cared for in the most appropriate, stable environment: typically a family-based setting.

- 1. Prevent and reduce the number of children in foster care.** See above for how.
- 2. Prioritize and expand kinship care of children.** This is proven better for children & less costly.
- 3. Expedite and expand family-based placement options.** KVC Kansas is advocating for a range of ideas including allowing temporary permits, allowing licensed daycares to do short-term/weekend care, allowing NRKIN/Approved Home exceptions, providing first aid training by video/test, creating protective homes based on successful pilot, improve the accuracy of and enhance the information included in the Global Information System and allow the contractors access to make the best possible placements, and more.
- 4. Continue innovative KVC foster family recruitment and FosterKSKids** to expand pool of licensed families throughout the state.



Top Solutions to Strengthen Child Welfare Workforce:

- 1. Allow professionals who have related degrees.** Fully staff child welfare services by allowing professionals with bachelor's and master's degrees related to social work. Most other states made this change, and the medical field made similar shifts. Individuals would be hired in chronically understaffed regions where no licensed social work applicants are available. This would reduce licensed position vacancies by 75% in 90 days, improving retention, caseloads and quality. Throughout this, continue working with local universities to increase licensed social work candidates.
- 2. Increase Salaries of Licensed Staff.** Increase child welfare workers' pay by 15–20% to attract and retain talented staff.