



OHIO
CHILDREN'S
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ISSUE BRIEF

ISSUE: Children Services - Foster Hope for Ohio's Children

Every child deserves a safe, stable and permanent family. But on any given day, over 15,900 Ohio children live in foster care because it is not safe for them to live at home. Compared to state fiscal year (SFY) 2013, 3,500 more Ohio children—a 28 percent increase—are in foster care and living away from their families. The trauma of being removed from all that is familiar places children at risk for a lifetime of poor outcomes. These traumatized children have been ignored for too long in Ohio. With such an increase of children in care, *Ohio's children services system is in a severe crisis*. Committed state leadership and reform action are needed now for Ohio's children, families, and the children services system.

Policy

Few systems compare to children services when it comes to complexity and risk. Protecting children from abuse and neglect while stabilizing families remains one of the most challenging jobs in social services. Ohio government ceded authority for day-to-day oversight of the child protection function to county government. The public children services agencies (PCSAs) designated by each county are given responsibility under Ohio Revised Code (ORC) Chapter 5103 and 5153 to provide for prevention or remedy of the dependency, neglect, abuse, or exploitation of children unable to protect their own interests.

County PCSA directors, therefore, work for elected county commissioners, either directly or through a commissioner-appointed children services board, and in this way, counties have assumed the administration, risk, liability, and ultimately funding of what in most states is a state government function.

In addition to ensuring implementation of and compliance with federal and state laws pertaining to protecting children, county PCSAs are ultimately responsible for funding services by leveraging federal funding when possible, using limited state dollars, and securing local funding through county general revenue funds and/or a dedicated property tax levy. In SFY 2018, 48 percent of all children services expenditures were



paid with local funding, 42 percent with federal funding, and 10 percent with state dollars. Meanwhile, only 51 out of 88 counties have a dedicated children services levy.

Over time, through steep cuts to or elimination of the Local Government Fund, the Tangible Personal Property Tax, the estate tax, the managed care tax, and other revenue sources, the state has sharply reduced its share of funding available to counties for carrying out this delegated responsibility and service. At the same time, the state has dramatically increased the level of oversight, rules, audits, and practice expectations of PCSAs, partly in response to federal government initiatives and new federal laws. The result over the past 10 years for county PCSAs is drastically higher state requirements combined with devastating cuts in state resources while there has been a significant increase of children entering foster care due to the opioid epidemic. These factors have created the serious crisis in children services.

Challenges

While the number of children coming into care has drastically increased, state funding to county public children services agencies has essentially returned to 2008 levels due to the increased state GRF investments in the 2018-2019 biennium budget. Positive, long-term policy solutions have been limited. The availability, accessibility, and affordability of community-based services and supports for families is insufficient and oftentimes, nonexistent in some areas of the state.

Consequently, Ohio's children, families, and the children services system are in crisis from:

- More children coming into foster care and staying longer;
- More complex needs of children because of their trauma and challenging circumstances;
- More kinship caregivers needing support;
- More overburdened workforce; and
- Rising placement costs

Without leadership and reform, county PCSAs are at risk of being unable to find foster families where children can live safely, pay foster care and residential placement costs, provide necessary supports so kinship caregivers can provide a familiar home, appropriately ensure children's safety and permanency, and support the overburdened, traumatized workforce.

Opportunities

The Public Children Services Association of Ohio is calling for reform of Ohio's children services system. This reform, called the Children's Continuum of Care, is supported by national and state groups, and has

specific policy solutions that will put Ohio on the right path to strengthen the children services system and improve outcomes for children and families. Key policy solutions are:

Address today's severe crisis in Ohio's children services system by increasing the state investment for county public children services agencies. Nationally on average, the state's share of children services expenditures is 42%; whereas, Ohio's share is at 10%. The state needs to become a better partner with county PCSAs to protect Ohio's children and families.

Reform the children services system by establishing a children's continuum of care to:

- Increase prevention, intervention, crisis and diversion services so more children remain with their families;
- Create a robust foster care system that can meet the variety of challenging needs of children while focusing on reunification efforts;
- Increase availability and accessibility of aftercare and reunification services so that children can safely return to their families and not come back into foster care; and
- Decrease use of congregate care, but when needed, ensure that high-quality, short-term residential facilities can meet the needs of children and they are available in proximity of family.

Support kinship caregivers:

- Support kinship caregivers so they can provide a stable home for kin children, including child care assistance; and
- Connect kinship caregivers to services and supports, including establishing a statewide kinship navigator program

Support Child Well-Being: Recommendations

Foster Hope for Ohio's Kids: The number of Ohio children entering foster care has increased at unprecedented rates, largely attributed to the drug epidemic. County Public Children Services Agencies (PCSAs) are in a severe crisis, with more children in foster care, who have more trauma and complex needs, requiring more expensive placements and treatment services. Ohio needs strategic investments in the 2020-2021 biennium in order to meet today's needs and reform for tomorrow.

Ohio's abused and neglected children deserve better. Ohio must:

- **Invest more funding for PCSAs through the State Child Protection Allocation (SCPA)** to address the severe crisis in Ohio's children services system today. Ohio remains last in the nation for the state share of children services funding and projections show that annual placement costs alone will increase an additional \$44M by 2020.
 - **Improve Ohio's foster care placement and service options.**
 - Reform Ohio's foster care structure so that there is an adequate supply of foster homes available to meet and support the complex needs of foster children and prevent unnecessary placement into residential facilities.
 - Launch an aggressive foster parent recruitment campaign, driven at the local level.
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- **Implement multi-system solutions for families in crisis to divert them from foster care.**
 - Preserve families by funding the Multi-System youth Crisis Stabilization Fund with state GRF rather than TANF funds.
 - Leverage Medicaid to prevent foster care placements by including High-Fidelity Wraparound and Psychiatric Residential Treatment Facilities, with reasonable guardrails, in Ohio’s Medicaid plan for children.
 - Expand Ohio START (Sobriety, Treatment, and Reducing Trauma) to additional counties to support the entire family through recovery and keep children with their families.
 - Establish a Center of Excellence as a consortium with PCSAs, universities, and other experts that would cultivate children services best practices, monitor fidelity, provide training and technical assistance to the field, and evaluate outcomes for children and families.

- **Support kinship caregivers so they can provide a stable home for their kin children.**
 - Provide child care assistance by maintaining the Kinship Caregiver Support Program in TANF and by establishing categorical eligibility for Ohio’s publicly funded child care program for children living with targeted kinship caregivers and children in foster care.
 - Establish a robust kinship navigator program that meets criteria for federal matching funds.

These strategic investments will help address the current crisis facing Ohio’s children services system and put Ohio on the path to reform tomorrow. We must #FosterHope4OHKids.

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