



Preventing Harmful “Hoteling” Displacement in Foster Care

In Ohio and in other states across the country, strain on the child welfare system has led to desperate situations related to how foster youth are housed. When homes or facilities aren’t available, sometimes foster youth are temporarily housed in child welfare agency offices for a night, a week, or even for months. These settings are typically unsecured and unlicensed. The term “hoteling” has come to be used to describe reserving office space for foster children to live and sleep in during these unfortunate situations.¹

Ohio foster children faced with these temporary housing accommodations have often already experienced numerous challenges in life, including being a victim of abuse, neglect, and abandonment, which can lead to significant mental health conditions. All children deserve safe, comfortable, and normal housing arrangements while in the custody of the child welfare system. Ohio foster children are hotelled for many reasons, including a shortage of foster homes with the training and support to serve high-needs children, a lack of community-based support services for families, and a woefully understaffed health and human services workforce.

In this brief we assess “hoteling” in Ohio, describe the challenges that result from this practice, and share comprehensive solutions to address this crisis and enhance the child welfare system as a whole.

Policy

There are approximately 15,000 children and young adults in Ohio child welfare custody on a given day.² In contrast, there are just over 7,600 licensed foster homes, a decrease of roughly 500 homes from 2021, and 282 congregate care facilities.³ There is a stark disparity between the amount foster youth who need homes, and the amount of available licensed foster care placement settings. In recent years, desperation has forced children services staff to temporarily house some foster youth in a hotel or at county children services office buildings. Hoteling occurs as a last resort and temporary solution when there are no other safe options for these youth. One Cleveland news source asserts that 91 kids in Cuyahoga County spent at

¹ <https://thrivepenobscot.org/hoteling-the-new-term-in-the-crisis-in-foster-care/>

² <https://data.ifs.ohio.gov/FamChild/ChildWelfare.stm>

³ <https://www.fostercarecapacity.com/states/ohio>

least one night in a children services office between the months of July and November, 2022 alone.⁴

While Ohio struggles to place kids in appropriate settings, other states are battling lawsuits over the same issue. Texas is embroiled in a lawsuit originally filed in a U.S. District Court in 2011. The court initially found the state failed to protect foster children from "an unreasonable risk of harm" by hoteling them and banned the practice. Since then, Texas' child welfare department has been held in contempt of court and fined multiple times, and in 2022 again faced significant fines for non-compliance.⁵ A 2021 federal lawsuit filed in the state of Washington also ordered the state to end the practice of hoteling foster children in settings which included hotels, child welfare agency offices, and even cars. The matter was recently settled by Washington's Department of Children, Youth, and Families which promised to address the reasons foster youth end up in unlicensed settings and out-of-state placements, and provide more options for children and foster parents.⁶

Challenge

We know that hoteling kids in foster care is untenable for many reasons. Legal precedent, trauma-informed care research, child welfare best practices, and common sense dictate that this hasty solution unintentionally makes a bad situation worse. Research validates what we already know: experiences of trauma are extremely prevalent among foster youth. High-needs youth require stability and secure attachments to grow and lead healthy, productive lives.

Hoteling is not only damaging to foster youth, but it is likely bleeding state resources. In Georgia, fiscal research revealed that temporary hotel placements created "staggering costs" of \$1,200 a day per child.⁷ In comparison, residential treatment care costs approximately \$225 a day per child and foster care costs \$45 per day per child in Ohio.⁸ Regardless of location, there are known costs associated with hoteling, including wages for social workers or law enforcement personnel providing care and supervision including overnight with these displaced children. There are direct and indirect expenses associated with this, because requiring this of already-overworked public servants costs additional taxpayer dollars in the short-term and can intensify existing workforce shortages in the child welfare and criminal justice systems long-term.

Four in ten social workers anticipate quitting the profession within five years due to high stress and caseloads

⁴ <https://www.cleveland19.com/2022/11/19/children-staying-fewer-nights-cuyahoga-county-office-building-officials-still-face-huge-placement-gap/>

⁵ <https://www.texastribune.org/2022/06/06/texas-foster-care-sanctions/>

⁶ <https://crosscut.com/news/2022/06/wa-settles-lawsuit-over-practices-housing-foster-kids>

⁷ <https://khn.org/news/article/foster-care-hoteling-temporary-placement/>

⁸ <https://medicaid.ohio.gov/about-us/budget/2022-2023-budget/sfy-2022-2023-ohiorise-realigned-service-delivery>

Additionally, evidence suggests that foster youth are more susceptible to out-of-state placements following sleeping in a county children services office or hotel. This leads to more costly and disruptive care for vulnerable youth. In fact, a 15-year-old foster youth who was hoteled in the Cuyahoga County children services office during 2021 was eventually placed in a Tennessee residential facility because there were no local congregate care placements available.⁹ This placement, which is costing Ohio taxpayer dollars to fund, is also likely taking an emotional toll on this child and his family who must be separated so he can receive care.

Finally, we believe that this problem is likely to worsen, not go away. Montgomery County Children Services has noted that a contributing factor of hoteling kids is that they “have exhibited delinquent behaviors, including violence and sex crimes, as well as behavioral health concerns.”¹⁰ The Public Children Services Association of Ohio released a report earlier this year showing that nearly 1 in 4 kids who came into children services custody last year did so primarily due to significant mental health needs, developmental intellectual disabilities, or as a diversion from juvenile corrections.¹¹

Opportunity

Governor DeWine and the Children Services Transformation Advisory Council has made incredible progress in the child welfare system improvement. Through their work, the rights of children and the resource families that care for them have been reaffirmed, a Youth and Family Ombudsmen Office has been created which establishes an independent review of youth, family, and community concerns within the system, a consistent onboarding process has been established for caseworkers, and so much more. Addressing the hoteling practice of foster youth is a necessary next step in achieving child welfare transformation in Ohio.

We must address the systemic underlying issues that lead to hoteling, while also investing in safer, community-based housing solutions in the interim. There are many policy and practice levers at our disposal to address the underlying problems and prevent it from ever happening. This tragic circumstance provides us an opportunity and a responsibility to enhance our efforts across the child welfare landscape in increasing collaboration, supporting foster care prevention services, adding to the pool of foster care workforce and foster parents, and investing in trauma-focused, evidence-based foster care programs. In all the work that we do, we should ensure that we make data-driven decisions that are reached through stakeholder and policy maker partnership to improve children services delivery.

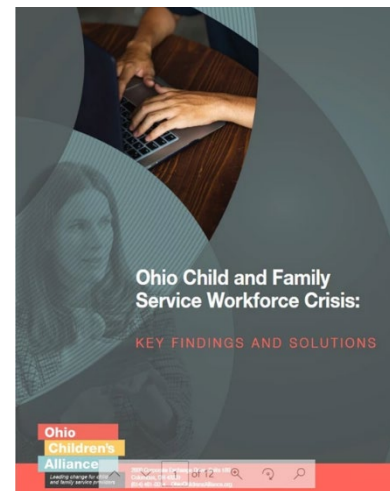
Key to keeping kids out of foster care is equipping families with resources to preserve and strengthen their household. A foster care prevention approach addresses trauma experienced by children and parents, provides mental health treatment, and connects families with

⁹ <https://www.cleveland19.com/2022/11/19/children-staying-fewer-nights-cuyahoga-county-office-building-officials-still-face-huge-placement-gap/>

¹⁰ <https://www.daytondailynews.com/local/foster-home-shortage-leaves-kids-sleeping-in-agency-offices/YOGPRFLF2FHLNJ47MIXUYJG5HU/>

¹¹ <https://www.pcsao.org/news/151>

community resources. Empowering families with high-quality and evidence-based services promotes stability and safety. Keeping kids with their families whenever safe and possible leads to improved family outcomes and less government resources expended. We know approximately 1 out of 5 kids and families in our state lack access to sufficient and timely mental health services.¹² The mental health workforce crisis is a contributing factor to the access gap. Like in other health and human services fields, community mental health agencies face serious provider shortages, especially among employers that serve lower income families. Survey results we gathered from a recent Ohio Children’s Alliance report shows a staggering 44% of child welfare and mental health agencies halted accepting new referrals altogether.¹³ We need to expand Ohio’s workforce capacity with a particular focus on employers that serve lower income families who are at greater likelihood of coming into contact with the children services system.



In addition to the health and human services workforce shortage, Ohio lacks a sufficient supply of trained and licensed foster homes. It is estimated that between 30% to 50% of foster families quit within their first year, citing lack of support and feeling ill-equipped to meet the needs of the kids they care for as major reasons.¹⁴ The workforce crisis compounds the foster home shortage, since without an adequate workforce, including social workers, home assessors, and treatment staff, foster homes take longer to approve, children take longer to place, and families don’t receive timely access to the supports they need. We are hopeful that Ohio’s *It Takes Heart* caregiver recruitment and home study support program will adequately address this challenge. We must continue to think creatively to address the shortages of caregivers and providers by investing in proven workforce recruitment and retention initiatives and in fair salaries and benefits for community agencies.

For some foster children with intensive behavioral health needs, residential treatment facility or group home placement may be the most appropriate placement settings. However, congregate care facilities face their own workforce challenges which have crippled their ability to accept placements. In 2018, Congressional passage of the Family First Prevention Services Act placed new restrictions on the use of foster care dollars for congregate care. The legislation also codified best practices and higher standards for these facilities, but not enough funding has been dedicated to help agencies meet them. In addition, new background check requirements

¹² <https://www.nami.org/NAMI/media/NAMI-Media/StateFactSheets/OhioStateFactSheet.pdf>

¹³ <https://www.ohiochildrensalliance.org/post/ohio-children-s-alliance-announces-release-of-workforce-report>

¹⁴ https://www.ncsl.org/Portals/1/Documents/cyf/Support-Foster-Families_32702.pdf

have caused significant barriers in hiring residential care staff. We have a critical opportunity to implement support structures and dollars to address these challenges.

Support Child Well-Being: Budget Recommendation

Task Force:

- ❖ Establish robust, publicly facing SACWIS reporting requirements for children services staff in state statute which will include the following information when a child is placed in an unlicensed setting:
 - What that setting is (i.e. children services building, hotel, or other location)
 - How long they were there
 - Why they were placed there
 - Their age
 - Where they transitioned to
- ❖ Develop a task force charged with producing policy and infrastructure improvements aimed at ending the use of hoteling in Ohio's child welfare system. Task force members should include, at minimum, child advocates, county and state children services, housing advocates, foster care and mental health agencies, former and current foster youth and alumni, foster parents, and primary families who have experienced the children services system.

Prevention:

- ❖ Require that at least half of the Ohio Department of Education's Student Wellness and Success Funds are spent on mental health treatment, prevention, or education.
- ❖ Invest in resources that connects families with timely access to community-based mental health and family preservation resources.
- ❖ Enhance Medicaid reimbursement rates for mental health services provided by community mental health agencies.

Foster Care:

- ❖ Establish a \$10 million dollar grant program for foster care and adoption agencies to enhance workforce recruitment and retention efforts.
- ❖ Allocate \$5 million to expand access to treatment-level foster caregiver training; funds to be used to pay caregivers (and applicants) and agencies for training above and beyond state hour minimums, to pay for child care for foster caregivers (and applicants), and to support peer mentorship opportunities among foster caregivers.
- ❖ Streamline regulatory environment of foster care agencies by recognizing their national accreditation as evidence of compliance with applicable state regulations.

Congregate Care Facilities:

- ❖ Require increased accountability and expediency in staff background check processes in state statute, and create clearer guidelines on whom checks are required (staff, contractors, volunteers, visitors, etc.)
- ❖ Allocate \$10 million to support congregate care facilities to achieve state Qualified Residential Treatment Provider certification and national accreditation/re-accreditation costs.

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