

Harris County Protective Services for Children and Adults

Testimony for Interim Hearing

House Human Services Committee

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Good morning Chair Raymond, Vice Chair Frank and members of the Committee. I am Joel Levine, Executive Director of Harris County Protective Services for Children and Adults. Harris County Protective Services for Children and Adults (HCPS) was created in 1966 as a County Child Welfare Board with one purpose and has expanded over the past fifty-two years into a county department with more than a dozen programs serving children and families involved in the state child protective services system, youth at-risk and vulnerable adults. Today, I am going to highlight some of the ways HCPS partners with DFPS to provide services, programs and resources to enhance the safety and wellbeing of children in Harris County. This is a partnership of programs, services and funds. I acknowledge that the investment Harris County makes and the partnership with the state is unique, but with 12% of the state's children living in Harris County, we feel a responsibility to support our families.

Integrated Health Care Clinic:

Knowing that this committee is very aware of the complex healthcare needs of children in foster care, I want to share that HCPS operates the only county funded medical clinic in the state dedicated solely to children involved with state child protective services. The Clinic, a Foster Care Center of Excellence, has implemented an integrated health care program to provide coordinated physical and behavioral health care. Through partnerships with the UT Medical School, Harris Center for Mental Health and IDD, and Superior Health Plan the clinic provides pediatric medical and dental services, psychiatry, care management, therapy, psychological and developmental assessments and kinship navigation. The Clinic has partnered with DFPS to take the lead on receiving referrals for the 3 for 30 Initiative. This community partnership offers accessibility for caregivers to have children's physical and behavioral health needs met in one setting with support from the kinship navigators for the relative/kinship providers that utilize the clinic for the child's medical home. This is an example for what can be accomplished at the county level to maximize resources and have more coordinated care.

Kinder Emergency Shelter:

We are also a provider of foster care services. HCPS administers a 24 bed, emergency shelter at the County Youth Services Center for youth, ages 12-17, who are in need of short-term placement. The shelter serves youth in the custody of DFPS, and juvenile probation in addition to voluntary crisis respite placements from youth in the DFPS Investigation and FBSS Stages of

Services and youth in the agency's school and community based prevention programs. Like many shelter providers, our shelter is a safety net. In recent years we have taken many children with high levels of behavioral needs. To address these needs, HCPS has added a full time position for a Licensed Master Therapist as well as a Case Manager to the shelter staffing and maintains childcare staff ratios below the minimum standards on all shifts. These staffing decisions have required an investment in the Shelter Program that is more than twice the daily reimbursement rate that shelters receive from the state. We have been fortunate that staffing levels can be maintained despite a census that tends to fluctuate due to our ability to subsidize the shelter program with county general funds as a public shelter. Most shelter providers do not have this luxury. And, we continue to invest in quality programs such as TBRI - , Training through the TCU Karen Purvis Institute. HCPS was able to obtain this expensive resource through grant funds. Shelters did not receive an increase in state rates during the last legislative session. I understand that children need to be in family settings, but shelters are an essential resource as safety nets for emergency placements due to placement breakdowns, temporary placement needs and emergency removals when family cannot be immediately located. This safety net must be funded as an important part of the continuum.

#### Houston Alumni and Youth (HAY) Center:

We also maintain a focus on serving youth transitioning out of child welfare to independent living.

The HAY Center provides one stop transitional services for current and former foster youth ages 16-25 with an emphasis on education, employment and housing resources. The HAY Center was setup by HCPS as a public-private partnership with the community. HCPS administers the Center which receives state funding through the DFPS PAL Aftercare Room and Board and Life Skills Training Contracts and the Texas Workforce Commission for employment support, county general funds and private foundation dollars and corporate and individual giving through the HAY Center Foundation, a private non-profit group established in 2015 to support the youth and young adults that receive services at the Center with resources that the state and county are unable to provide. Services include housing programs, employment opportunities, including our successful annual summer employment program for youth in care with a network of local businesses, parenting classes, educational services, college tours, and a host of other activities to help youth with their transition to adulthood.

The Center works to develop and implement programs based on the expressed needs of the youth and young adults served who are instrumental in the Center's governance. Based on formal and informal surveys and focus groups we learned that the main concern youth have as they age out is around housing, in terms of where are they going to live, and the need for relational permanency in terms of a caring adult in their life who is not paid to care about them.

With this in mind the Center has established the Transition Coach and the Bridge Housing Programs.

Essentially we recruit and train volunteers that are matched with a youth to help them navigate their own course to adulthood. It looks different for every youth and this person is with them along the journey. Whether it's applying for college, finding a job, finding an apartment or figuring out healthy lifestyles. The coach is there for them. We have plenty of success stories and we have an evaluation underway with the University of Houston Graduate College Of Social Work.

The staff at the HAY Center report that foster youth that participate in life skills classes and other services at the Center while still in care live with anxiety and uncertainty about where they will live after exiting care. To address this issue the HAY Center Foundation provided initial funding to start a bridge housing program at a local apartment complex in December of 2017. The Center will lease up to 25 apartment units and one additional apartment for the office for the case manager and group meetings and events. This program is innovative because it does not have a lot of the requirements that restrict residents – it's more accommodating for youth we serve.

The development of a comprehensive continuum of housing and supports designed to guide youth aging out of care in the achievement of their educational and occupational goals, while developing a system of natural supports in the community is needed. The Bridge Housing Program followed by support through Housing vouchers through a collaboration with the Houston Housing Authority can address the middle and back end of the Housing continuum for youth aging out. However, there are many youth, such as those aging out of RTC's, who need more structure and support than moving immediately to their own apartment in a private complex can provide. What is missing is the front end of this continuum. More dedicated resources to prepare youth for housing while still in care could include a start followed by a structured SRO or similar facility with intensive on site twenty-four hour wrap around support.

#### Nurturing Parent Program:

We also feel like the best way to serve families is to prevent abuse and neglect and to help the family stay together.

In 2016 HCPS subcontracted with the DePelchin Children's Center as part of the HOPES Grant to provide the Nurturing Parent Program for placement prevention. The Nurturing Parent Program is a comprehensive evidence based program designed to engage high risk families in the Family Based Safety Services (FBSS) stages of DFPS services to promote child safety, lower parental risk and increase family functioning. The Nurturing Parent Program is an in-home parenting program that combines 14 parenting sessions developed to increase parenting understanding of child development and parenting skills. The program is administered by master's level staff offering parents the opportunity to engage in family therapy, which encourages understanding and reconciliation of early childhood traumas.

Early findings based on the 90 families served in FY 2017 referred from FBSS Units in Region 6A suggest that for parents completing the program, children in child safety placements are returned home faster, there is an increase in parental empathy, parental understanding and knowledge of child development increases, while child risk decreases. Considering these very promising results. Currently we have three clinicians with two funded through the DePelchin Children's Center on the HOPES Grant and one through the HCPS general fund. Funding is needed to expand this resource.

The Programs highlighted above (Integrated Health Care Clinic, Kinder Emergency Shelter, HAY Center and Nurturing Parent Program) are examples of the partnership between DFPS and HCPS to meet the needs of children, youth and families in Harris County. The partnership has enabled the state and county to facilitate collaborative problem-solving and promote resource development from county, state, city, and private sources.

What's happening in Harris Co is true public/private partnership and I hope that other counties will see the value of local collaboration and investment. And, we hope that the State recognizes the need for ongoing support which will further innovative programs, incorporation of best practices and more partnerships.

Thank you for your focus on child welfare and I'm happy to answer any questions.

