crb network news

august 2014

newsletter of the citizen review board

For the state's foster youth, a helping hand

Darin Mancuso, Oregon's first foster care ombudsman, hopes to educate, empower and assist children living in the system.

When the "Oregon Foster Children's Bill of Rights" passed in 2013, proponents celebrated the potential impact it could have on youth in substitute care; it offers a tangible guarantee of receiving the kind of information and support needed to give a child a voice in the quality of her or his care.

Implementation started earlier this year. Training and education about the bill for child welfare professionals and stakeholders is underway, while **POSTERS** displaying a list of individual rights will soon end up in foster homes, residences and licensed agencies. The foster care hotline, which provides confidential contact for complaints and alleged violations of rights in foster care, went live on May 12.

Overseeing this effort is Darin Mancuso, hired in March by the Department of Human Services as the state's first ever foster care ombudsman – another component of the bill. The ombudsman ensures youth in DHS care have information about their rights and an avenue for addressing their issues and concerns. Mancuso, 46, manages the program's hotline and grievance process for youth.

Mancuso's 23-year professional history includes tenures with Marion County Juvenile Detention and Clackamas County Juvenile Department. He was involved with the NW Gang Investigators Association, and was a board member and past president of the Oregon Adolescent Sexual Offender Treatment Network. A former Army military police officer, Mancuso also worked as Clackamas's juvenile drug court coordinator. Mancuso participated in a Q&A with Citizen Review Board director Leola McKenzie on July 28. What follows is a portion of that presentation:

Darin Mancuso

What attracted you to the job of foster care ombudsman?

One of the things that really drew me to this position is that I have a lot of experience working with kids and placing them in programs and foster homes throughout the state. Some of these have been wonderful, great placements. And on the flip side, there have been some homes where we've turned around and walked out. Those elements

See "Ombudsman," p. 5

in this issue:

P. 2 Security of Family

P. 3 In the news

P. 4 Suggestions for better foster care outcomes

new volunteers

DESCHUTES COUNTY
April Flacco
Michele McCrea
Jeffrey White

LAKE COUNTY
Georgeann Lasley
Judy Springer

LANE COUNTY
Brittany Haley
Michelle Karshneski-Flagg
Alissa Stoops

MARION COUNTY
Anna Kraemer
Marilyn McClellan

WASHINGTON COUNTY
Kevin Carroll

CRB Network News Editor:
Craig Coleman
Craig.D.Coleman@ojd.state.or.us

"Security of family" critical for foster child success

"In every conceivable manner, the family is a link to our past and a bridge to our future." ~ Alex Haley.

We know from years of research that children do best when they can be with their family. In a **VIDEO** by AdoptUsKids — a national organization that raises public awareness about the need for foster and adoptive families — entitled *"Stories of Aging Out,"* a former foster youth reflects on his experience aging out of the foster care system, without the security of family. The subject of the piece, Shane, notes "It's something every child deserves. It's a basic human right for children to have childhoods, to not have to worry and wonder why don't they have family . . . why don't they have a mom and dad or an aunt and uncle, and some kind of security of family so that they can thrive and grow up to be the best kind of people that they can be."

Sandy Berger

CRB

Field Manager

While foster care is important to keep children safe, Oregon's Partnership to Achieve Safe Foster Care Reduction recognizes that children who grow up in foster care do not do as well as children who are raised in their own homes. Through a number of Oregon initiatives, such as Permanency Roundtables, Strengthening, Preserving and Reunifying Families, Safely and Equitably Reducing the Number of Oregon Children in Foster Care, and the Governor's commitment to implement Differential Response, the state is working on several strategies to help children stay connected to their families.

The top two reasons for children entering foster care in Oregon are Neglect — 63% — and Parental Drug Abuse — 43.9% — according to Oregon DHS' *2012 Foster Care Data Book*. Often parents who become involved with the Child Welfare system have issues related to poverty, substance abuse, mental health, housing instability, domestic violence, or a combination of these issues requiring a multifaceted response and agency coordination.

Many of the following family reunification best practices identified by Casey Family Programs and other research match the same areas repeatedly noted by parents as key factors in helping them succeed. Parents also note they need someone who believes in them: "You can do this; you can get your kids back."

Placement with Relatives. Helping a child stay connected to family reduces trauma and promotes a child's stability, sense of identity, and self-esteem.

Regular visitation. Frequent and regular parent-child and sibling visits help families stay connected as they work toward reunification.

Clarity of Expectation. Clear information about expectations from beginning to end, what needs to change, how well they are doing.

The Helping Relationship. "Experience has demonstrated that successful intervention and treatment depend heavily on the quality of the caseworker's relationship with the children and family." The caseworker's "helping relationship" with child welfare families is critical to changing the conditions or patterns of behavior that contributed to the risk of maltreatment. *Child Welfare Information Gateway.*

Concrete Services. Concrete services such as food, transportation, assistance with housing and utilities, and help with family reunification.

Foster Parent-Birth Parent Partnerships. "Foster parents play an important role in family reunification as they provide information, compassion, mentoring and other supports to birth parents." ~ *Irene Clements, President, National Foster Parent Association*

Parent Education. Parent education programs that enhance the parent-child relationship and teach both specific parenting and general problem-solving skills.

Support Groups. Clients can give each other support in ways that we can't, but can also stay very realistic about what is happening.

Therapeutic Supports. Addressing the psychological needs of families is critical. As we know, the needs frequently include mental health issues, substance abuse, and domestic violence.

Intensive Family Reunification Services. Intensive family reunification services have been linked to timely, stable reunification.

Aftercare Services. Continued services after the child or youth returns home and a safety net to help prevent reentry. For youth who have health, mental health, educational, behavioral, or substance abuse issues, it is helpful for a family to have ongoing access to intensive, coordinated services.

See "Best practices," p. 3

Best practices: preserve families whenever possible

Cont. from p. 2

The CRB addresses parent progress in Finding 6. Board members know that sufficient progress does not mean the child can immediately return home. The board determines if the parent has made enough progress over the first six months that, if sustained over the 12 month period, would address the safety threats outlined in the basis of jurisdiction. The parent only has to meet a "minimally adequate" standard to ensure the child's safety. Examples of questions the board may ask for Finding 6 are:

- Are the parents making sufficient progress to make it possible for the child to safely return home?
- Is parental progress addressing the jurisdictional issues within ASFA timeline?
- What are the circumstances or conditions causing the child to continue to be separated from his or her family; e.g., what is the specific reason the child cannot be adequately protected at home?
- Can the parents verbalize what they need to do before the child can be returned home?

For Finding 10, the CRB documents whether placement in substitute care is still necessary and in the best interests of the child. There is a presumption that it is in the best interests of a child to be with a parent, if a child can be safe. Examples of questions a board may ask for Finding 10 are:

- Have the safety threats been alleviated so the child can be returned home at this time?
- Is continued placement still necessary to meet the child's needs?
- If ICWA, is the tribe in agreement with the continuing need for placement?
- What is the likely date for the child to return home?

The CRB's vision is to promote policy that ensures every child lives in a safe, secure, healthy, and permanent home, preserving families whenever possible.

"Having a place to go is a home. Having someone to love is a family. Having both is a blessing." ~ Donna Hedges

SOURCES:
*** Family Reunification: What the Evidence Shows, Child Welfare Information Gateway (2011)**
*** Supporting Reunification and Preventing Reentry into Out-Of-Home Care, Child Welfare Information Gateway (2012)**
*** Successful Family Reunifications, Washington State Improvement Program 2012 Foster Care Data Book, Oregon DHS**

In the news: data sharing project may help at-risk children

Several state agencies have begun sharing and pooling data in an effort to help predict the life outcomes for children, according to a story recently published by the ***Statesman Journal*** newspaper.

The project could allow agencies to predict the likelihood of certain outcomes, such as which youth are more likely to end up committing crimes or dropping out of school. Ultimately, the participants want to analyze the system that works with children and families and develop a list of risk and protective factors "that could inform earlier interventions for children at risk for bad life outcomes," according to the July 6 ***Statesman*** article.

Agencies taking part in the endeavor include the Department of Corrections, Oregon Youth Authority, Department of Human Services, Oregon Health Authority and Oregon Department of Education. The parties have signed agreements to share data, which is something they're typically not able to do, due to confidentiality laws.

The project won't allow the state to analyze an individual child. However, what the effort can do is "operate like the creation of medical diagnostics. Doctors have analyzed thousands of heart attack patients and created a list of factors that show a high probability a person will have a heart attack and list of factors highly likely to prevent one," the article said.

It continues: "State officials want to do the same thing for children. They will never be able to say, `This child will drop out of high school,' but they want to be able to say, `this child is exhibiting three crucial behaviors that make him likely to drop out of school. Here is a solution that is likely to keep him on track to graduate.'"

You can find the full story on the ***Statesman Journal*** website or click **HERE.**

Youth offer suggestions for better foster care outcomes

On July 21, 2014, Oregon Foster Youth Connection (OFYC) arranged a policy luncheon at the conclusion of a four-day conference entitled "**From Surviving, To Success**," for current and former foster youth. During the conference, which was held at Pacific University in Forest Grove, the youth focused on one of three issue areas and developed recommendations for improvements in each area. The youth presented their recommendations to legislators and their staff, DHS administrators, service providers and others involved in the Oregon foster care system.

The three areas of focus at the conference were: housing, removing barriers to independence, and health education.

David Smith

CRB Field Manager

In the area of housing, the problems identified were:

1) Youth aging out of foster care are not financially prepared to be on their own.
2) Foster youth are not given information about housing options when leaving foster care.
3) The "productive time" requirements for housing grants are not flexible enough for foster youth and are often a barrier to accessing the grant.

Regarding housing, the youth recommended:

1) That beginning at age 12, all foster youth should be required to open a savings account.
2) That "DHS hire a DHS or Independent Living Program liaison to improve communication between agencies regarding transitional housing."
3) That the legislature pass a law allowing community service and volunteer work to count toward the required 40 hours a week of "productive time" for housing grants.

In the area of removing barriers, the youth identified six problem areas:

1) Foster youth are viewed as statistics rather than individuals.
2) Foster youth believe they do not have access to normal activities.
3) DHS workers have too many youth on their caseloads and sometimes overlook older or "well behaved" youth.
4) Some youth face additional barriers because they are undocumented.
5) There is a general lack of "understanding, commitment and quality" throughout the foster care system.
6) The foster care system lacks accountability and consistency.

To address these problems, the youth recommended that:

1) DHS institute a compatibility survey for both youth and foster parents to complete to help with placement matching.
2) DHS develop a contract for foster parents to sign requiring youth to be allowed to participate and be supported in at least one extracurricular activity a year.
3) DHS should limit the number of cases a caseworker can carry, and also to develop specialized caseloads to work with specific age groups.
4) When children are placed in foster care, they should automatically receive residency.
5) DHS develop a placement commitment contract to be signed by DHS, foster parents and youth so that expectations are clear for all parties.
6) DHS develop a debit card system for foster care payments so that spending can be monitored and evaluated annually to verify compliance with DHS policy.

Finally, in the area of health education, the youth identified the following problems:

1) Only about half of Oregon's eligible foster youth receive Independent Living Program services, and this results in youth failing to receive health related resources or services.
2) Youth are moved from home to home, which causes stress and other health issues.
3) Foster youth often are unable to participate in extracurricular activities because they are in foster care.

Policy recommendations to address these problems include:

1) The Oregon Legislature should allocate more funds to the Independent Living Program.

   Develop and use questionnaires for foster parents and youth to help better match youth and foster parents, and also allow youth to interview prospective

See "Suggestions," p. 6

Ombudsman: "kids really appreciate honesty and integrity."

Cont. from p. 1

drew me to this as well: I'm concerned about the conditions of some homes and programs.

What about your juvenile justice and drug court experience do you believe has prepared you for this position?

Specifically, I think my work in program design. In Clackamas County, I did a lot of program design in developing our sex offender unit, working on policy procedures, and measuring recidivism rates and the overall success of our programs. And working in drug court … it's a team effort. It's a defense attorney, a prosecutor, treatment folks, probation, therapists, the family … it's a broad collaborative approach that looks for the best interest of the youth. People bring their experiences, talents and skills, and that approach is what makes it successful.

The foster care hotline has been live since May. Can you describe what a typical interaction with a youth seeking answers to questions and concerns has been like?

Because the foster care bill of rights has not yet been distributed to foster homes or residential programs, youth out there generally don't know a lot about it, yet — unless they've been involved in (helping create it). So the calls have been trickling in. (Regarding those calls), there's no typical case. There's been everything under the sun. Examples of a situation range from "My foster parent won't let me have a cell phone" to "they won't allow me to visit." One thing I talk about with caseworkers and foster parents is to let the kids vent and to not hinder it. Let them have access to me. I was a kid one time and I would test systems like this. So from the child's perspective, they might be thinking, "I heard there's this confidential guy I can talk to. Maybe one day I can call … and if it goes OK, maybe the next time, I'll call about something serious that I haven't talked to anybody about."

How are you able to help children who call in?

The first thing I can do is be an ear. I can listen to kids, I've done it for years. I can help them problem-solve some situations. If it's something serious, I take the reins from them because I'm a mandatory reporter. But a lot of this is "poking the bear" and making phone calls. If, for example, a caseworker isn't returning phone calls or hasn't signed them up for a service, I'm on the phone with a supervisor, or manager and up the food chain. Helping youth understand the system is a big piece of this; It's a crazy system and there are a lot of variables.

What kind of data are you collecting and how will you make it available?

I will be putting out an annual report kind of detailing who's calling, what the complaints are about and the most significant situations we've been dealing with over the year. That will come out annually, sometime in July.

How do you communicate and relate to kids?

I work with a lot of kids and one of the things that I know is that you have to be honest and straight forward with them. Those are really key elements they appreciate, especially the older kids — they really appreciate honesty, integrity and doing what you say and saying what you do. Don't make promises if you can't keep them because they've already had those situations their entire life. Have the courage to speak up and say this is right or wrong, because the kids appreciate that.

A new tool for volunteer board members has been added to the CRB website. *The CRB Volunteer Board Member Handbook* is a collection of information on many of the topics that come up during CRB reviews. Each topic is organized under the relevant finding and most have links to other websites where the reader can find additional information. The handbook was written entirely by CRB field staff. A special thank you is owed to Robin de Alicante, Sandy Berger, Amy Church, Walt Gullett, Megan Hassen, Molly Johnson, Steven Lindeman, and Rakeem Washington for their contributions.

Suggestions: extracurricular activities, more role models

Cont. from p. 4

foster parents before being placed there.

3) Require foster parents to transport youth to and from healthy activities.

At the conclusion of the presentations, the audience was very impressed with the thoughtful, specific and practical recommendations that were presented at the luncheon. Several of the youth, for example, spoke about how their ability to participate in extracurricular activities such as sports or arts and music, helped support their success by giving them confidence and linking them with positive role models.

One of the conference participants wrote a play, *The Lookers,* about his experience of being placed in foster care. Several other youth at the conference participated in a staging of the play for the audience.

The play demonstrated the uncertainty and trauma the children experience, as well as the difficulty in getting attention and answers from those working with the children and youth.

OFYC is a program within Children First for Oregon. The Executive Director of Children First, Tonia Hunt, spoke at the luncheon and congratulated the youth on their hard work and on their history of successful advocacy.

She noted that at a similar conference in 2012, a group of former and current foster youth worked on what eventually became the "Foster Children's Bill of Rights"; the foster care ombudsman position was also created in response to the work of the Oregon Foster Youth Connection (OFYC) group.

For more information on both Children First for Oregon and Oregon Foster Youth Connection, visit their website at **http://www.cffo.org**

Thanks to OFYC and especially Pamela Butler, program director. Their summary of the policy luncheon is the source for much of the information contained in this article.

Project addresses improving youth transitions from foster care

Youth on track to age out of the foster system face a host of unique and specific challenges. Earlier this year, Oregon's Juvenile Court Improvement Program (JCIP) sponsored an Improving Youth Transitions Project to assess how the state's juvenile courts and Citizen Review Boards (CRB) understand and exercise their role in supporting youth through a successful transition from foster care.

The project was developed and implemented by Pamela Butler, a graduate student at Portland State University, to fulfill her requirements for a master of public administration degree. Butler is a former foster youth and has 10 years of experience advocating for child welfare reform in Oregon. She is the founder of Oregon Foster Youth Connection, a very successful foster youth-led program.

By asking the right questions, at the right times, and by setting the standard for youth engagement in their own cases, judges and CRBs can be the drivers of better transition planning, and better outcomes for youth that leave the system at or after age 18. The following five inquiries, based on findings from court observations, stakeholder interviews, and youth focus groups, will provide immediate and practical solutions to the current challenges of teens and young adults trying to navigate the difficult transitions through a complex legal system.

At every hearing or review that involves a teen 15 years of age or older, judges and CRBs should:

1. If the youth is not present, ask why. Did the youth receive notice?
2. Ask the youth if they are getting the help they need from their attorney.
3. Ask about permanent connections to supportive adults that will continue beyond foster care.
4. Ask about the plan for post-foster care housing and financial stability.
5. Ask what is being done to help the youth learn daily living skills beyond what is provided by the Independent Living Program (ILP).

Pamela Butler's full report can be viewed on the training materials section of the **JCIP website** or by clicking **HERE.**

CRB BULLETIN BOARD

Officials in the Portland area have announced plans to construct the **Native American Youth and Family Center**, (NAYA), a 40-unit housing development, community center and early education school called "Generations," according to a story in ***The Oregonian.***

A quarter of the units will be designated for families adopting or providing long-term foster care for Native American children.

A 2011 study by the Coalition of Communities of Color and Portland State University showed that one in five children who are Native American in Multnomah County are placed in foster care.

The remaining NAYA units will be for "elders" – individuals 60 years old or older – who are willing to mentor and support the foster children and their families. Read the entire story **HERE.**

From the ***KPTV News*** website: A Portland nurse launched a special project to help foster kids who leave the hospital with no clothes, shoes or any belongings to call their own.

Lyndsee Wunn is a children's cancer nurse at Randall Children's Hospital, which cares for about 500 youth in foster care a year. Wunn is also a foster parent herself. Recognizing that not all kids wind up being adopted into a home like her own, she's trying to make sure every child leaves the hospital with something special, according to the story.

Wunn started a project called "The Boxes of Love" to make sure foster babies get brand new clothes, shoes, blankets and toys. Wunn has started a **Facebook page** for the endeavor and is seeking to turn it into a nonprofit organization. To read the entire story, click **HERE.**

California is embarking on a first-of-its-kind attempt to improve the academic lives of foster youth by giving schools more money to meet their special learning and emotional needs, and holding educators and administrators accountable, reports ***The Christian Science Monitor.***

But first, officials must figure out how many school-age foster children they have and where they are enrolled in a state that's home to nearly one fifth of the nation's foster children. The moves are significant for an estimated 42,000 school-age foster children, less than 1 percent of the state's 6.2 million public school students. To read the entire ***CS Monitor*** story, click **HERE.**

Citizen Review Board

1163 State Street

Salem, OR 97301

503-986-5861

www.ojd.state.or.us/crb