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Texas CASA Comments on the DFPS Sunset Advisory Commission Staff Report

Testimony by Metoyer Ellis, Program Director, CASA of Fort Bend - June 25, 2014

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Texas CASA Comments and Suggestions on Recommendations in the Report

Issue 1: Recommendations 1.1, 1.2, 1.8

Texas CASA appreciates the consideration given to how management and the agency's internal system structure contribute to caseworker turnover and we agree with recommendations made, especially those regarding ensuring proper training of and mentoring by seasoned staff.

Issue 2: Recommendations 2.3, 2.5, 2.7

Texas CASA previously questioned whether the department has effectively implemented policy changes at the ground level across the state. We agree with the recommendations. In particular, we support recommendations to direct the department to establish a communication plan for policy changes, to incorporate a more transparent method of sharing that information and process with the public, and to follow up and evaluate the implementation of major changes to better ensure significant changes made at the state level actually serve to benefit children in state custody.

Texas CASA would also suggest that recommendations made under Issue 2 include not only CPS Regional Offices but also the CPS Centralized Placement Unit.

Issue 8: Recommendations 8.1 and 8.3

Texas CASA raised the issue of CPS' difficulty communicating and collaborating with stakeholders and partners in our original Sunset input. While we appreciate the Sunset staff acknowledging this as an important issue, their recommendations could be stronger. While strengthening the rules and policies governing the department's advisory committees and workgroups will undoubtedly be beneficial, Texas CASA believes consideration should specifically be made for those organizations that work collaboratively with local CPS offices and directly with children in their custody. CASA volunteers are appointed by a court to a child's case and provide a unique and invaluable perspective into the life and needs of that child or sibling group. However, our network reports that a CASA volunteer's input may not be valued nor their insight to the child utilized by CPS throughout the course of a child's case.

Therefore the issue is less about advisory committees and more about how well CPS utilizes invaluable assets when working a child's case. Texas CASA would support a requirement that CPS respond to major concerns raised by a CASA volunteer within an agreed upon time period.

Texas CASA Believes Other Issues Require Additional Consideration

Problems with Child Placement and Achieving Permanency

DFPS does capture data on the number of placements children are subject to prior to leaving state custody. What is not adequately captured are the negative impacts this has on numerous indicators of child wellbeing, particularly educational progress.

Similarly, DFPS and its contractors need better ways to assess provider quality and suitability for individual placements.

In response to these problems related to placement, Texas CASA recommends the Sunset Commission and staff consider the following:

- An "all of the above", "more of what's working" approach by DFPS. DFPS has been successful in expanding kinship placements, so that roughly 40 percent of children in state custody are placed with extended family or friends who have a relationship with the child or youth. Many CASA volunteers believe that with sufficient training and time significantly more kinship placements are possible. CASA volunteers can provide assistance in this process.

- Placements at high cost (and often distant) residential treatment facilities may be avoided by providing foster and kinship families with training and tools that explain how trauma affects behaviors and enables them to more effectively parent children and youth in their care.

- Use every resource and technique available to expedite appropriate, permanent placements for children and youth in PMC. Because they stay in the system longer and often have significant behavioral issues, children in PMC consume a disproportionate share of resources. Extended PMC stays also effectively block access to placements that may be most appropriate (and local) for other children needing care. DFPS claims that permanency roundtables improve and expedite permanency outcomes. Similarly, legislation from the 83rd session that did not pass (SB 1789 and HB 3399) would require a "placement stability conference" after the second placement disruption. Currently, permanency planning meetings are only held three months after PMC is established and annually thereafter. More frequent meetings or other changes should help achieve permanency more diligently. Casey Family Programs recently assessed problems with length of stay in PMC in Harris County and recommended essentially a "surge" type effort to move 600 children to permanency by the end of this year.

- When the foster care and substitute care systems are fully utilized or near capacity it is difficult to "reset" the system to reduce the number of placements outside home communities. Given that it is unlikely that available resources will enable a significant overall expansion of system capacity, concerted efforts to expand kinship placements and to decrease the length of stay in PMC will have similar effects to capacity expansion and should, theoretically, enable a decrease in placements outside children's local communities.

Recognize and Target Problems of Foster Youth Who Age Out of the System

- Despite efforts by DFPS, foster youth who age out of the system are generally unprepared for adult living, self-sufficiency, and lack solid supports to be successful. Consequently, these youth are disproportionally prone to homelessness and major health and mental health problems, are often victims of trafficking, and generally face severely diminished life prospects.
- Texas CASA recommends policies that ensure young people are allowed access to all normalcy activities as these enhance independence and self-worth and have been shown to improve mental health outcomes.
- The best solution for this cohort is prevention, this means working towards achieving permanency more diligently. Texas CASA believes that every child deserves and can have a family, but this requires diverse approaches including family engagement, case mining, family finding, and diligent recruitment for adoptive families.
- Local CASA programs and entities have begun developing preparation for adult living programs that help foster youth develop self-sufficiency skills, progress normally in high school, and enter the higher education system. DFPS should study such model programs and the legislature should fund pilot projects.
- As foster children mature they should be given a voice and allowed more participation in permanency planning, medication management and other life decisions.