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To The Members Of The Sunset Commission,

On behalf of B.R.A.V.E I would like to say “Thank You” to you and your tireless staff for taking the time to read our written testimonies in regards to the Sunset Commission’s evaluation of DFPS and CPS. Our feedback and recommendations not only come from years of professional experience, but also from living in the child welfare system, and/or working very closely with those who have. We believe that our solutions will most importantly improve outcomes for youth and can be implemented in a way that makes the Department better for the children and families that they serve.

A very small part of this testimony includes feedback on the staff report, but overall we believe that they are well thought out and address the issues that they highlight. However, we do believe that what is missing are the type of recommendations that will immediately start ensuring the safety of those in foster care and improving outcomes for youth aging out of care. The Sunset Commission is the ultimate decision maker for state agencies and you have an opportunity to do what no one else in the state can do. And what you don’t do we have to wait another 10-12 years for the opportunity to try again. Or the actual 17 years it took to evaluate DFPS again so that it could fall in line with HHSC; children are suffering today. Young people are being harmed and coming out of foster care traumatized and unable to do almost anything for themselves, much less get an education or pick up a skill or vocation and become contributing members of society. Right now success for young people coming out of foster care is considered a miracle and abuse for young people in foster care is happening at an astronomical rate, yet the same agency that produces these results is empowered to remove children and set the standard for what is a “healthy family”. As someone who has worked and/or been in school very consistently since I was 15, frankly I am tired of my tax dollars going to an agency that sometimes operates as a business, sometimes as a child welfare agency, but really is unsuccessful at both. And all the while children and families are suffering from their overall ineffectiveness. Families are being torn

hired which increased removals, but there still is not enough caseworkers to meet the caseload needs, and children, who at no fault of their own entered the foster care system, are suffering for it. Good families who love their children and really just need some support, but “fall through the cracks” are suffering. The budget has increased but there’s still not enough money. Foster

Care Redesign still has not been fully implemented after 4 years and that ends up being a blessing in disguise because now we find out that’s a bad idea too. All while children and families are suffering. And you, as well as the other commission members, have the ability to do something about it immediately.

I respectfully urge you to read and consider our recommendations, and allow us the opportunity to work with you to address these issues that face our brothers and sisters still in the foster care system. Even when the Sunset Commission has issued it’s decision, B.R.A.V.E would like to continue to be a part of the conversation and the solution with your office this upcoming session. I remember in 2007 when the Sunset Commission made sweeping changes to the juvenile justice system, many of my friends who had been in TYC could not believe that someone had finally exposed them and someone was going to do something about it. People I knew who never discussed or even knew about politics, had heard about the changes at TYC and TJPC and it had made it to their conversations. That may not seem like a pretty big deal to you, but trust me, it’s a big deal. And we can do it again with foster care.

### **Recommendations:**

#### **1. Creation of 2 oversight offices:**

**Ombudsman’s office:** This office would handle public complaints and evaluate current programs and services offered by DFPS. At this time DFPS utilizes the Office of Consumer Affairs to address public complaints, but this office is a department within DFPS and adheres to their policies and decisions. This is paramount to asking the department to investigate and regulate itself during a consumer or public complaint. This internalized process creates a lack of transparency, a lack of trust with the community, and

youth.

**3. Creation of a streamlined process to handle youth records with an emphasis places on securing HIPPA related confidential documents.**

All youth records should be stored on encrypted servers or in secure areas. Additional security measures should be taken to protect documents that fall under HIPPA such as doctors notes, prescriptions, etc. A copy of all records should be given to the youth upon discharge from foster care, either in digital or physical form. The department should no longer have authority to access any protected records after the youth turns 18, and protected records in its possession should be turned over to youth's insurance provider. The department should no longer have access to notes that would violate HIPPA policies without the youth's written consent after being discharged from foster care.

**4. Direct the department to optimize it's current technology.**

IMPACT, the current software of DFPS, could be utilized in a manner that helped minimize caseworker stress. For example, a "reminder" could be built in to go off when a youth that is in IMPACT as a TMC or PMC client of CPS turns 16. This reminder could ask the caseworker if they have obtained the youth's ID and birth certificate first. If the caseworker says yes, and they are taken to a screen to document how/when they obtained the birth certificate and/or ID. If they say no, a reminder will be set for 14 or 28 days. If at that time the caseworker says the documents still have not been requested, an alert would be sent to the supervisor to follow up as to why it hasn't happened and the reminder would be set for another 30 days. If at the end of that time it still is not done, an alert would be sent to the person to requests documents such as birth certificates for CPS to reach out to the case worker and get it taken care of.

This is just one very small example of how IMPACT can be optimized to help caseworkers and supervisors. If the department underwent some technology optimization, it is extremely probable that many other improvements would be made.

**5. Require the department to explore non-traditional solutions to issues families and children face with the foster care system.**

with DFPS and improve outcomes for those who will ultimately age out of the system. This testimony is focused on a review and evaluation of DFPS, and there are severe changes needed to the agency and the services they provide, but they cannot do it alone. DFPS will need the help of us as individuals, the legislature, our communities, our faith-based community, our educational systems, families, and everyone to make the changes really needed to help our state's most vulnerable children and families. And you can start carving the path. I urge you to consider my recommendations and keep myself, as well as B.R.A.V.E in this conversation to improve our state's Child Protection and Foster Care system.

Thank you,

Trista Miller

Co-Founder B.R.A.V.E