

A New Vision for DFPS

from
Commissioner Jaime Masters



TEXAS
Department of Family
and Protective Services

Family Preservation and the Family First Prevention Services Act

It is critically important that we support families and prevent abuse and neglect *before* it occurs. This requires intense intervention – especially now, with many families under stress and isolated. To elevate and strengthen DFPS' focus on family preservation, the Prevention and Early Intervention division (PEI) is being tasked with building a more extensive network of services and supports. This bright spotlight on the value of family preservation builds upon the innovation and success of PEI's community-based prevention programs to maximize the potential of families and promote resilient communities in Texas.

The passage of the Family First Prevention Services Act (FFPSA) followed this approach and signaled the federal government's clear intent to increase opportunities for States to prevent children from entering the foster care system. This monumental shift in the child welfare landscape provides excellent opportunities for States.

The Legislature required DFPS to produce a strategic plan by Sept. 1, 2020 that is informative and provided options as well as recommendations for Texas' implementation of the legislation. The FFPSA is an extremely important law, and clear and concise information about its benefits and the risks must be fully developed and understood.

Children thrive in safe, stable, nurturing families and communities, and I will work to ensure that DFPS does everything possible to preserve the parent-child bond by keeping families together.

Investigations and Entries to Care

A child abuse investigation is uniquely traumatic for any family, and we must clearly explain what is

involved and what is at stake. As each investigation begins, it is my clear and absolute expectation that our caseworker and managers make extensive efforts to engage parents and caregivers in the process. We must pursue every opportunity to help families stay intact.

However, if our investigation finds abuse or neglect that necessitates strong action, we must – and we will – continue to act swiftly and get that child out of harm's way. I believe DFPS should seek a court order to remove children from their families *only when absolutely necessary*.

DFPS will work to strengthen family engagement efforts to ensure that children are safe, and we want to be as least intrusive as possible. That is worth repeating: my goal is for our agency to match our efforts to each situation as precisely as possible.

We will work closely with families to *effectively* assess the level of safety and risk to the children in the home. And when children must enter the legal conservatorship of the state, DFPS will focus intense efforts on those cases in which children can safely be reunited with their families. In those cases, we will pursue reunification as quickly as possible – and, importantly, follow through in those efforts.

Community- Based Care

DFPS remains firmly dedicated to working with Texas providers and communities to help ensure that Community-Based Care (CBC) will succeed as it expands across the state. The singular goal of CBC is improved outcomes for Texas families and children, and we are committed to statewide implementation.

DFPS will continue to revisit the components of the CBC model to reinforce its continued viability and, as needed, make recommendations to State leadership. Continuous quality improvement will remain in place throughout implementation of CBC and we will maintain strong oversight of critical performance areas.

It is imperative that the partnership we forge and maintain with providers exists not only in the CBC realm, but in our traditional legacy system as well. Providers are on the front lines of child welfare, serving children and families alongside our agency and other community partners. We must support providers as we strive together to improve our work.

Finally, and most importantly, the safety of children in care will remain a top priority. And we want each of them, from the youngest child to oldest youth, to receive exactly the treatment and services they need while they are in the conservatorship of the state.

Supports for Kinship Caregivers

When children must be removed from their homes, DFPS works hard to find appropriate family members to care for them and try to limit the inevitable trauma children may experience when away from their parents. DFPS has success in this area and is often able to place siblings together when children are placed with their own kin.

In fiscal year 2019, more than 40 percent of children in substitute care were placed with kin, and more than half of the children adopted were by a family member. The Legislature has consistently supported the agency's efforts to place children with kin and has authorized DFPS to provide a daily stipend to kin caregivers to promote stable placements. Continual improvement is always our goal, and DFPS will continue to make these familial placements a top priority.

Support for Older Foster Youth

In fiscal year 2019, nearly 7,000 youth ages 14 to 17 remained in the legal conservatorship of the state. DFPS is firmly committed to make every effort to

help children, no matter the age, find a safe and appropriate permanent home. Children must have family connections to be successful, and DFPS will continue to help children find permanent homes with their own relatives whenever possible.

Older youth often tell DFPS caseworkers that they feel ill-prepared for the decisions that will face them once they are independent. We hear them and will improve the quality of services to better support youth as they grow toward adulthood.

While foster parents and residential providers are responsible for ensuring that older youth in their care begin receiving independent living skills, youth often express that they don't feel the information is presented to them effectively in a classroom setting. DFPS will work with the provider community to encourage foster parents to include foster youth in family decisions and model real-life scenarios so youth can experience meaningful activities and difficult life decisions – while still having the safety net of a caregiver.

For those young people who transition out of traditional foster care seeking independence, stable housing is perhaps the biggest challenge. DFPS has expanded its Supervised Independent Living Program (SIL) and partnered with the Texas A&M System and several other universities to expand opportunities for former foster youth who choose to take advantage of their Tuition Fee Waiver. But there is still much to do. The agency will work to expand SIL opportunities at community and technical colleges for those youth who are not yet ready to earn a four-year degree. We will also improve relationships with traditional colleges to ensure that youth experience no administrative barriers to receiving a higher education.

And because the former foster youth/housing issue is so daunting, we've recently partnered with the federal Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) for the first time to attack this problem with federal dollars.

The Foster Youth to Independence (FYI) program provides young people with a child welfare history who are experiencing homelessness – or are at risk of homelessness – with safe, affordable housing and support. So far, HUD has awarded FYI housing vouchers or family unification funds to public housing authorities serving Fort Worth, Harris County, El Paso, San Marcos, and Bryan/College Station.

Protecting the Elderly and Disabled

As the population of Texas grows, Texas inevitably gains more residents over age 65 and residents who live with a disability. Texas keeps a close watch on the aging Baby Boomer population, and estimates that in the next 10 years, the population over age 65 will grow by 43 percent. It's crucial that Adult Protective Services (APS) continues its focus on increasing the quality of investigations and services provided to the Texans it serves.

Thanks to pay raises given by the Texas Legislature, and a mentorship program for new caseworkers, more employees are staying. APS is seeking to improve and supplement caseworker skills to conduct more thorough investigations and increase positive outcomes for its clients.

And APS is committed to using the least restrictive interventions, including supportive family members, that protect clients and still support the individual's right to self-determination.

Statewide Recruitment and Retention of Staff

Our continuing efforts to serve fellow Texans will be limited without a stable, passionate, and unified workforce. With more than 12,000 employees, DFPS is constantly evolving its efforts to recruit, train, and keep qualified and dedicated staff. This has become even more important because of the devastating impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. Our staff are working nonstop to continue serving vulnerable Texans. We have learned through this crisis and have become better at our mission, in part with innovation and ingenuity. We've used more technology and reduced our physical footprint.

DFPS is dependent on specialized staff who ensure the agency's continuity of services, and the agency is exploring new ways to reach highly qualified candidates to continually breathe new life into the agency. DFPS has also revamped its supervisor hiring process so that candidates must show not only command of the subject matter, but that they are qualified to manage caseworkers.

We cannot keep employees unless we have excellent supervisors. Peer mentors are an important puzzle piece, supervisors help us to retain staff through the culture they create in their individual units.

When I arrived at DFPS, my first item of business was to hear directly from my caseworkers – those who directly serve our vulnerable Texans. Caseworkers experience extreme stress in their jobs and were leaving the agency because they didn't feel supported in their roles. We will do more for caseworkers and supervisors to give them the best foundation we can to perform their jobs. DFPS will explore expanding mentorship opportunities to other divisions of the agency. The agency will continue to focus on ensuring that we hire the right people for the right jobs.

The entire chain of command has the responsibility to create an environment that hires the right people, equips them for the job, supports their development and helps them understand how they contribute to our success by protecting children, vulnerable adults, and advocating for families.

Faith-Based and Community Engagement

Faith-based and community engagement work are critical to our success. DFPS is just one agency, and we need the faith and secular communities to stand with us. We must be where the vulnerable children are, not wait for them to come into the child welfare system. There are families in every Texas community who feel isolated and unseen. Until we are all willing to see them and take ownership, we cannot effectively show up in their lives and reduce the number of children entering our care.

While the agency's efforts to grow our partnerships around the state have been stellar, the work and coordination must be increased. DFPS will work together across all programs to ensure that we are maximizing our resources and leveraging valuable relationships to meet the needs of vulnerable Texans. Our consolidated team will deploy throughout the state to continue their mission of engaging faith leaders and organizations to help support families working to *not* enter the system and remain whole. We want to support family engagement and

reunification, recruit quality foster and adoptive homes, encourage the adoption of older youth in foster care, and inform the public about the availability of services.

Because some children and older youth who interact with DFPS have never had a meaningful, healthy relationship with an adult, the value of a positive adult role model and mentor cannot be overstated. DFPS has worked to connect volunteers who are interested in becoming a mentor with community partners in their area. These partnerships allow children to experience, perhaps for the first time, a relationship with a healthy and safe adult. These relationships can be long-lasting and follow the child through adulthood. DFPS will continue to increase our efforts to recruit volunteers and partner with organizations that can help them fulfill their desire to serve.

Human Trafficking

DFPS has made the fight against human trafficking a priority – it must be eradicated. Foster youth who age out of state care face many challenges and can be at a higher risk of human trafficking because of homelessness.

Despite our very limited jurisdiction, the agency is an enthusiastic partner in the statewide anti-trafficking effort. DFPS has well-functioning ties to law enforcement, local city and county governments, state agencies, advocacy agencies, and faith organizations to leverage resources and coordinate efforts. DFPS will continue this work around the clock to identify, report, recover, and support victims of trafficking in their restoration journey.

DFPS can only investigate cases of trafficking by family members, and firmly believes that protective parents should have the right to advocate for their children who have been victimized.

Foster Care Lawsuit

I have extremely high expectations of my staff and am confident we will make great strides in improving outcomes and services for the people we serve. But

I must acknowledge and recognize the importance of the foster care litigation. It is imperative that we comply with the Court's orders while we continue to strengthen and improve the agency's operations. Accordingly, to oversee this important work, I have created a division that will focus on coordinating the agency's ongoing compliance efforts. The Compliance, Coordination and Strategy division works closely with the DFPS General Counsel and our Associate Commissioners to oversee the day-to-day efforts and interaction with the Court's monitors.

We need to sharpen our focus and bear down on this case. We want to be successful in making the changes necessary for the Court to bring this lawsuit to a close. This division will centralize and oversee our efforts to do just that.

Thank you,



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