

**THE PUBLIC - PRIVATE PARTNERSHIP  
FOSTER CARE AND FAMILY-CENTERED, NEIGHBORHOOD-BASED SERVICES**

Ohio has approximately 32, 643 children who have been removed from their homes and are in an out-of-home care setting on any given day. Forty-seven percent of these placements are purchased from private sources by public child protection agencies. While we are unable to secure any concrete data from the state Department of Human Services as to where children are being placed in relation to their county of origin, we do know that a high percentage of these children are placed in homes outside of their counties let alone their neighborhoods.

The public child protection system understands that it needs to recruit more local foster homes and develop alternative local placement options for children who require more structured, clinically intense support than traditional foster homes can provide. The public system also recognizes that local dollars are being used to fund out-of-county placements for children whose needs exceed local placement options. The expenditure of these funds on high cost, out-of-county placements is crushing local systems. Recognizing that these children are the responsibility of the local community and not just one local public system, the community must draw together to identify ways to support their children and their families so that removal is avoided but when necessary, a local response is provided rather than long distance, expensive, out-of-county placements. The public system has taken, and continues to take steps to shift the way it partners with foster parents and supports; recruits; and maintains local foster homes. We have a long way to go. Integration of a family-centered, neighborhood-based approach to service delivery is a critical strategy that public and private systems across the state and the nation are beginning to embrace. We are, and continue to do so in Ohio.

The private foster care industry is a part of local communities, or at least, should be seen and included as such. Since approximately 47% of Ohio's children are placed in these private networks, do we not have an obligation to ask what the level of commitment is of these networks in embracing a family-centered and neighborhood-based approach to care? To what extent are Ohio's private networks working to recruit, support and maintain foster homes in the neighborhoods where the greatest number of child referrals come from and the highest number of child removals occur?

The public child protection system and the private foster care system need to join together to affirm that their missions are aligned, their values are in sync and their goals are one. We should all be working to keep children safely in their communities when in their best interest to do so; working to stabilize families and assisting families to parent responsibly upon reunification. However, whether our missions are aligned, values are in sync and goals are the same is yet to be determined.

All of us want to do the right thing however, assuring that we are takes information. For interventions to be designed for maximum effectiveness requires data. Family-centered, neighborhood-based services requires the use and availability of timely and accurate data for targeted problem solving and effective decision-making.

Both the public and private systems need data on the county of origin for all children who are removed from their homes; the counties where these children are being placed; the number and location of private and public foster home beds throughout the state and whether or not the location of the foster homes are in close proximity to the neighborhoods where the highest number of child removals occur. This data is critical if we are to truly embrace a neighborhood-based approach to serving our most vulnerable children and families. After all, is it not the responsibility of the citizens of the local communities and counties of origin to work together to PREVENT child abuse and neglect amongst their children and to INTERVENE collectively when it does occur?

Until we have the answers to the data-related questions we cannot know the extent of the situation or partner to create strategies to enhance the services we provide to children who must be removed from their homes. Until we can secure this information, many of Ohio's children will continue to be placed in homes and alternative out-of-home care placements far away from their families, communities, schools, churches and friends.

Can we afford to dismiss our mutual obligation to enhance Ohio's child protection service system by reducing child trauma that is exasperated by long distance placements and impact the length of time in care and increase the rate of reunification as a result of keeping families more closely connected and communities more involved with the health and well-being of their citizens? I think not. What do you think? If you have something to say, submit your comments to PCSAO HeartBeat - Commentary. ■