



## Community Support for Children and Families

### *Testimony before the House Human Services Committee in support of HB 871 and HB 1620*

by Brandon Logan, J.D., CWLS

One artifact of the centralization of child welfare services has been the crowding out and detachment of community involvement with vulnerable children and fragile families ([Daro & Dodge, 73](#)). Although community-based foster care is a crucial step, shifting to single-source contractors dispersed among communities does not necessarily restore the civic commitment to children in foster care and their parents. Rather, the engagement of communities should be intentional ([Flaherty et al., 815-16](#)).

Community child welfare services currently lack coordination. Programs exist in isolated silos, which prevents a comprehensive understanding of community need and capacity, and planning to link the two. Community partnerships have been implemented successfully to:

- Prevent child maltreatment and reduce its recurrence
- Offer a network of support and a range of services for families in which maltreatment has occurred or is at risk of occurring
- Provide individualized responses tailored to a family's strengths and needs
- Encourage shared responsibility for ensuring safety, permanency, and well-being ([HHS 2010, 7](#)).

In the current system, barriers to participation hinder community members and groups from providing meaningful support to biological and foster parents and children in the system ([Brown, 12](#)). For example, those willing to babysit, take children on an outing, or keep them for short periods of time encounter substantial bureaucratic obstacles to participation. These impediments significantly limit the options of full-time caregivers. Engaged stakeholders and community supports enhance permanency for children by filling gaps in care and service delivery ([Crampton et al., 74-75](#)).

The most frequent cause of CPS involvement is not abuse but parental unemployment, housing instability, and substance abuse—conditions worsened, rather than solved, by removing children. Oftentimes, at-risk families need minimal, targeted assistance to ensure child safety. Civic, faith, and cultural communities are in the best position to support families through periods of difficulty while keeping children in or near their homes.

#### **HB 871: Nonprofits Providing Child and Family Services**

When parents reach out for help and information, that request should not be used against them. Rather than a state investigation, parents need help from local nonprofits and faith groups that will prevent family separation.

For example, the Safe Families Program allows families to care for children on a temporary basis and provide support and mentorship to natural parents, without the formalities and legal proceedings of paid foster care ([Brown, 5-6](#); [Eckholm](#)).

HB 871 will clear the way for local nonprofits to provide assistance to families who need it, while allowing families to reach out for help without fear of losing their children.

#### **HB 1620: Voluntary Temporary Caregiver Program**

Although the Family Code contemplates children being returned to their parents within 14 days of removal (Tex. Fam Code 262.201(a)), children spend an average of over 13 months in CPS care before being returned home ([DFPS 2015, 56](#)). Over 600

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children are placed in emergency shelters immediately after removal where they remain for up to 90 days, while they await a foster home ([DFPS 2015, 48](#)).

Ideally, the community resources made available under HB 871 would prevent removal. However, where removal is necessary, children should remain in care only until there is no longer an immediate threat to physical health or safety in their home (Tex. Fam. Code 262.201).

Because over 70 percent of children enter care for lack of adequate supervision, reasonable efforts of the department should ensure return of most children within 14 days. However, because most placements are intermediate-term, no incentive exists to ensure family reunification before the 14-day hearing.

HB 1620 fills an important gap in service that is currently being filled by housing children in emergency shelters and agency offices in the days and weeks after separation from their families. HB 1620 also provides an option for community members who want to provide short-term care for children but cannot commit to paid fostering.

Both HB 871 and HB 1620 expand community involvement and support in child welfare services and provide overburdened CPS workers with additional tools to use in providing the best service to children and their parents. ★

## Bibliography

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