

On June 25, the Indiana Department of Child Services became the latest state to be targeted in a lawsuit alleging we are failing the children in our foster care system. The timing of this filing is puzzling, considering the significant strides our agency has made since we publicly took responsibility for our shortcomings one year ago. I want Hoosiers to know I take the concerns of all the children and families we serve very seriously.

It is easy to cherry-pick our most challenging cases to support a narrative suggesting this is every child's experience, when in reality, the average number of homes a foster child lives in while in DCS care is 2.

And we will continue to work toward permanency for every child. While I cannot comment on the details of pending litigation, I feel it is important to assure our communities of our commitment to protecting Indiana's most vulnerable children. In that vein, there are some recent changes in our agency that are critical to highlight – and keep in mind this is hardly an all-inclusive list. Our agency has undergone a transformation since I stepped into this position 18 months ago.

Put frankly, DCS is simply not the agency it used to be. And continuing to rely on an outdated inflammatory account is misleading and harmful to children and their families.

The child welfare system is far from perfect, but Indiana is steadfastly moving in the right direction. As people who work tirelessly every day to protect children, we assure you we understand the frustration that change is not instantaneous. We, too, would like to see things change overnight. The complete turnaround of a 4,600-person agency currently serving more than 22,000 children takes deliberate and persistent effort. Anything less would suggest superficial change – and that's not the promise we made to Hoosier children and their families.

One year ago, Gov. Eric Holcomb commissioned the Child Welfare Policy and Practice Group (CWG) – highly respected experts in the field of child welfare reform – to help us define exactly what was limiting our agency's potential. CWG combed through our records, interviewed our staff and stakeholders and took every step to understand the inner workings of our agency.

CWG then issued a comprehensive report that outlined a number of recommendations for DCS to improve. Those recommendations took aim at some of the system's biggest challenges – not enough staff, high turnover and insufficient training tailored to the special kind of advocacy work that we do.

We have embraced all of the recommendations, even those that significantly changed the way we do business. Along the way, we felt encouraged by the support of Governor Holcomb and the Indiana General Assembly, whose investment in child welfare reform over a two-year budget cycle totals more than half a billion dollars. It's clear they share our commitment to helping Hoosier children and families.

In the last year, significant progress has been made. We remain committed to transparency on that progress every step of the way.

Among the highlights:

- A downward trend in the number of children in foster care and residential placements as we focus on providing the right care to the right child at the right time;
- The extension of services for older youth from 21 years of age to 23;

- Better support for foster families, including new staff members dedicated to connecting those caregivers to much-needed resources, and the creation of a web portal to funnel information to foster parents about the children in their care;
- A change in policy allowing staff the necessary time they need to complete thorough assessments of allegations of abuse or neglect;
- Improvement of our supervisor to family case manager ratio from 1:7.3 to a more manageable 1:5.5, which ensures that the decision-making is collaborative and the best for the families we serve;
- A more manageable caseload for our family case managers and attorneys, so each child receives the individualized attention they deserve;
- An increase in salaries for employees that better recognizes the complex work they perform on a daily basis;
- An 18 percent drop in staff turnover, which over time will lead to fewer disruptions in child placements and a decreased rate of repeat maltreatment and consistency in case management from family case managers who are focused on building trust-based relationships;
- A positive workplace environment recognized by the National Child Welfare Workforce Institute for the agency's shift from the culture of fear to one of support and safety; and, finally,
- The creation of a robust training division for our courtroom lawyers to ensure we represent children to the best of our ability.

Had the advocacy groups behind this lawsuit approached our agency leadership, we would have shared these successes, including our plans for the months to come. But to my knowledge, no significant effort to reach out with their concerns was ever made. Instead, we are surprised with public allegations that demoralize our employees just as they have begun to feel hopeful about the positive changes we are making.

Every day, DCS is called to help families in crisis. Despite a 20 percent rise in the number of calls to our child abuse and neglect hotline since 2015, we continue to answer the more than 240,000 calls we receive annually and answer them quickly; on average, within 15 seconds of a call being placed.

These are far more than statistics. Behind each number is a child who is receiving better care than we provided even 12 months ago.

To those who have stood behind us, have shared our commitment to change – our legislators, judge, court-appointed special advocates, guardians ad litem, our community and provider partners and especially our foster parents – I thank you. And I acknowledge that some challenges remain. It is my greatest wish to see every child who is taken into foster care placed in a home that suits their unique needs. Not every foster parent is equipped to help every child. Included in the children we serve are large sibling groups, LGBTQIA+ youth and those with severe special needs – all who been severely traumatized when they come into our care. The greater our network of foster parents, the better we can serve them. If you feel called to help, I welcome your support.

This is my promise to you: Every day, we will continue to improve. Yes, there is still work to be done. I don't doubt we will continue to be criticized for past mistakes, but we are on the road to success. We cannot – and will not – allow this to distract us from our mission. And that's to keep our children safe.