



To: Texas Department of Family and Protective Services
Presented by: Kerrie Judice
Subject: Public Hearing on the Family First Prevention Services Act
Date: January 30, 2020

Good morning! My name is Kerrie Judice, and I am the CPS Research and Policy Analyst for TexProtects. We are a research and advocacy organization and the Texas chapter of Prevent Child Abuse America. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today.

The strategies included in FFPSA address key drivers of child abuse and neglect: substance use, mental health, and lack of parenting skills. Considering 2/3 of removals are related to substance abuse, which is often accompanied with a mental health issue, we have the potential to keep more families together and prevent removals by offering evidence-driven services for families who are candidates for foster care.

According to the working definition of the agency, this would include families who are participating in FxcBSS. Historically, Texas' FBSS services have not proven effective if we look at our recurrence data. More than 19% of these families had another substantiated case of child maltreatment one year after ending services. This number jumps to 43% within five years. We are optimistic that Family First can offer the quality array of services families need to stay safe and would like to see a few items taken into consideration during continued planning efforts:

- 1) **Ensure the definition of children who are at risk of entering care is not written in such a way that we are limiting access to services.** Out of the 171,228 completed investigations in 2018, only 19,169 families were referred to FBSS. FFPSA services could certainly reduce the recurrence and removal rate in that population; however, many of the remaining 152,000 families may also be at high risk - including those who are moving toward removal as a result of the investigative phase. While it may be convenient to limit access to FBSS families, this definition will not capture many of our highest risk families.
- 2) **Look to the infrastructure and programs already in place so we don't duplicate efforts.** Many of the programs and services currently listed as eligible for FFPSA already exist in 56+ counties through the community-based prevention program at PEI, known as Project HOPES, which was established by the Legislature in 2013 with a purpose of **primary prevention** - serving high risk families with programs like those offered under FFPSA to prevent them from entering the CPS system. Of the families currently served, only 2% had a new substantiated case of child maltreatment after one year of completing services. While HOPES is most known for primary prevention, they have been used successfully in some areas of the state for secondary prevention - meaning families who are engaged in CPS. Programs like Nurse-Family Partnership, Healthy Families America, and Parents as Teachers have been approved by the Clearinghouse and can be used with families at risk of entering care.
- 3) **Ensure we are not unintentionally compromising another population in which we have made such great strides.** The state will need to put in its own dollars to draw down federal matching funds for programs to prevent entry into foster care. When considering how much to allocate, we need to ensure

that we are protecting primary prevention dollars at PEI, which served 12,036 families in 2018. From 2015 to 2018, 50% of the caregivers participating in Project HOPES reported a mental health concern and 32% had four or more Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs), an indication of their own childhood trauma. We will not get ahead of the problem by leaving more at-risk families without needed supports.

- 4) **Analyze the feasibility and benefits of the Chafee funding provisions.** Family First offers opportunities to better support older youth who are in care and transitioning into adulthood by continuing to serve youth in extended foster care up to age 23 and extending eligibility for Education and Training Vouchers up to age 26. There is no explicit mention of this in the Agency's current Action Plan. As we know, youth often struggle upon leaving care and need assistance, so we want to ensure this opportunity has been fully explored with stakeholders and youth.
- 5) **Prioritize the kinship navigator provisions to ensure kinship families are well supported.** Placement with family is most appropriate when safe for a child. According to the most recent Foster Care Needs Assessment, more than 40% of children in substitute care are placed in a kinship home across most catchment areas. Texas is really only starting to catch up to support kinship caregivers the way we have historically supported foster families. Kinship navigator programs are another step in the right direction to support these families.

There's a lot of discussions to have, information to collect, and decisions to make in order to develop necessary legislation and any appropriation requests to maximize the benefits of Family First by October 2021. The families and children in Texas benefit from us getting this right. TexProtects looks forward to serving as a resource and partner as you continue your work. Thank you for your commitment to these issues and to the families and children of Texas.