

Oklahoma Institute for Child Advocacy

2005 Legislative Agenda for Children and Youth

Background Information

Child Welfare: Preparing Youth for Adult Living

Issue #8:

On any given day, over 10,000 in Oklahoma are in out-of-home care as a result of child abuse and neglect, with the majority placed in foster care. Currently, 11,078 children are in DHS custody. Out of those, 8,184 are siblings, with fewer than half of those siblings placed together. State law mandates that every reasonable attempt should be made to place siblings in the same home, but a myriad of issues may prevent this from happening:

- Too few foster families with the capacity to accept large sibling groups. Those with a large capacity usually already have several children from different families.
- The differing rules that govern the placement of children of varying ages, varying levels of care, such as therapeutic foster care (TFC). Due to the significant difference in the reimbursement rate between TFC and regular foster care, some TFC choose not accept siblings at a lower rate.
- Once siblings have been placed in separate homes, reunification can be difficult. Foster parents become attached to children in their homes and visitation and other efforts to maintain sibling ties may become more complex. Foster parents may object to the child's removal from their home, even if the reason is to reunite siblings.

Another issue of concern is helping young people to transition out of foster care at age 18 through the Independent Living Program, which provides supportive services for youth up to 21 years of age. Yet children as young as 14 are being identified with challenges that could be addressed through similar services. These are children with a high rate of dropping out of school, often becoming absent without leave (AWOL), and need to acquire skills and become self-reliant. By coordination of educational and supportive services for these younger children, the Department of Human Services could assist them to increase their skills and competencies for living on their own. DHS could achieve this goal through administrative means, requiring no new legislation and no increase in federal or state dollars.

Fiscal Note:

DHS is requesting \$901,020 to increase adoption assistance to match the foster care increase of FY 05. DHS is further requesting \$1,888,000 to fund an additional foster care rate increase of \$1.00 per child per day, and \$1,800,000 for a corresponding increase of \$0.90 per child per day for adoption assistance. *Total request: \$4,589,020.*

Recommendation:

The Children's Agenda supports increasing the support and incentives for foster, kinship and adoptive families for keeping siblings together, and coordinating with community-based services to provide training for foster youth and their families.