



KU RESEARCHER WORKING TO TRANSFORM THE KANSAS FOSTER CARE SYSTEM



Years ago, Becci Akin was a foster parent for three children when she lived in another state. Although she has a BSW, MSW, and Ph.D. in social welfare, it was eye opening for her to witness the workings of the foster care system from the inside. She saw how the system that was designed to help children can also create barriers for them, along with their parents, foster families, and even the social workers that manage the cases.

“It was a difficult situation that led me to see how the system is broken in a number of ways,” she recollects. Ever since, Akin, associate professor and Ph.D. program director at the University of Kansas School of Social Welfare, has thrown herself into transforming the foster care system for the better. “It’s about the children and youth - they deserve families and stability in their families,” she says.

Now, Akin is working to make that a reality for children and youth in Kansas through Kansas Strong for Children and Families. This public-private-university collaborative effort is focused on improving the service array and resource development of the foster care system, keeping children in their homes whenever possible or appropriate, and striving to give children permanency and stability in their living situations.

The five-year initiative kicked off in 2018, fueled by an \$8 million grant from the Administration for Children and Families Children’s Bureau, which is part of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Kansas was only one of five states to win this award.

Kansas Strong has pulled together a diverse set of collaborators to develop, implement, and evaluate strategies for enhancing both agency and court and legal practices, and reducing the barriers that result in children being ill-served by the system.

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“It’s an opportunity for us to create collaboration between the child welfare system and legal system in a positive way, working together to address problems,” Akin says.

The grant couldn’t have come at a better time, Akin says, because she’s seeing growing energy and enthusiasm across the state for improving child outcomes. She’s excited to connect with this wide array of stakeholders to address and reverse Kansas’ troubling national rankings when it comes to children and youth in the foster care system.

For example, since 2011, the number of Kansas children in foster care increased by 47%, making Kansas the 13th highest state in the nation for removing children from their homes. Kansas ranks 7th worst in the nation for the time it takes for children to exit foster care and become adopted, and the state is the 5th worst in non-permanent discharges from foster care.

Kansas Strong has some innovative strategies in place to change this story in Kansas. First, it is developing an interagency advisory board to facilitate cross-system collaboration to identify needs and service gaps. It came up with a plan to give youth and parents the support and resources they need to solve problems before they result in the child being removed from the home. And it created a new adoption tracking tool to help agencies and the legal system speed children along to adoption more quickly.

They are also developing KanCoach, a coaching program that will help case management supervisors in every area of the child welfare system -- from investigators to adoption agents -- develop practices that better serve children. “Many studies say that supervision of child welfare workers predicts the outcomes that families experience,” Akin says. “We are pinpointing how we can strengthen supervision so it can support workers on the front line.”

A core value of Kansas Strong is engaging youth and parents in the planning and implementation of the program, Akin adds. In addition to having parents and youth serve on the steering committee, Kansas Strong representatives will also work with the Kansas Youth Advisory Council to get input from middle school and high school students.

“This helps us make sure the services we develop are responsive to their needs,” she explains. “Hearing directly from them about their lived experience of the child welfare system is really critical to developing effective services.”

The input the team received from stakeholders has already promoted changes in the program, Akin shares. “The number one thing they said about the service system is that we don’t have services to prevent kids from going into the system. If we could build in more prevention services, that could keep more kids out of foster care.”

KANSAS STRONG TO FOCUS ON EQUITY AND INCLUSION

A community can only reach its potential when all of its children and families are able to thrive. So Kansas Strong will work to address racial disproportionality and disparity in the Kansas child welfare system. The coalition is collaborating with the Center for the Study of Social Policy, a national nonprofit policy organization that utilizes community action, public system reform, and policy change to create fair and just societies. The Center will work in Wyandotte County, alongside a local advisory committee, to develop a plan to reform the system so it’s equitable and inclusive for all.



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