



September 16, 2014

Dear Chairwoman Cool Rumsey, Chairman DiPalma and Members of the Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony to the *Senate Task Force on DCYF and Family Care Networks* on behalf of Foster Forward. Foster Forward is a statewide nonprofit organization dedicated to empowering lives impacted by foster care. We provide a comprehensive array of programming and services for children and youth in foster care, for young adults who were formerly in care and for the foster families and mentors who support them. Foster Forward is funded, in part, by DCYF but is not funded through the Family Care Networks.

The Task Force has heard from Governor Chafee's Resource Team, from the lead agencies of the Family Care Networks and from providers within those networks. It has been universally acknowledged that despite our best intentions and earnest efforts, we are not achieving the outcomes we had hoped to see when we launched the Family Care Networks a little over two years ago. Foster Forward appreciates the opportunity to be included in this conversation and share with you our thoughts on current challenges, their impact on children, youth and families and our recommendations for next steps.

Although several stakeholders have cited the lack of a "shared vision", we believe that there is broad based agreement on our core values and what we need to do as a System of Care in order to achieve our desired future state. That said, there are considerable flaws in the contract design that have the unintended effect of compartmentalizing our System of Care, impeding our ability to flexibly serve families in the least restrictive environment. Foster Forward would suggest that many points of disconnection appear to be more in the "how" (processes) and the "who" (roles and responsibilities) of the work. By way of example, in the case study that the two lead agency networks presented at the last hearing, DCYF needed to place two siblings, ages 4 and 13 into foster care because their mother died of an overdose. It was reported that CPS (Child Protective Services) looked for a generic foster home but that because of a lack of capacity and available resources the siblings needed to be placed separately in shelters that cost \$200 per day and \$275 per day. No mention was made of efforts (if any) to place the children together with relatives or "fictive kin" (neighbors, godparents, family friends, etc.) We all agree that placement with fit and willing relatives is a best practice. It keeps siblings together in the least restrictive environment and helps to preserve culture, language and family connections. We are also in agreement that there are industry recognized diligent search strategies to identify and engage kin and fictive kin. **What our System of Care hasn't done is to effectively align these values and competencies with the right processes, personnel and resources so that we have *more* and *better* options at key decision-making moments.**

Sometimes the lack of alignment isn't quite as obvious. It could be that despite their best efforts to collaborate together, a DCYF case worker and a Network Care Coordinator (NCC) aren't connecting because the NCC's level of access to information in RICHIST is preventing them from seeing new case notes that have been added by the DCYF worker. Another example: we agree appropriate assessment is critical to better serving children and families and we can point to the implementation of the CANS

assessment as important progress in that regard. Nonetheless, only about a quarter of the children in the networks are getting CANS assessments. Given the focus of CANS on family functioning, it is a tool that would really benefit children who are placed in relative or non-relative foster care (who are not being served in-network.) Having a better understanding of family functioning and needs could identify the right resources to help a grandmother providing kinship foster care to her grandson to get the community based services he needs to reduce his truancy. If we could achieve that kind of alignment, perhaps a judge won't decide that the only placement that could successfully ensure that her grandson would get to school daily is a residential program with a school component that removes him from family and costs over fifteen times more than the current placement.

These examples definitely cost us money and are inefficient. They also cost us time – time that we are borrowing from the childhoods of the children and youth we serve. It is essential that as we ask about the performance of “systems”, “networks” and “providers” that we ensure that we are looking closely and carefully listening to the voices of the children and families we serve. Imagine how these challenges affect them. We know that DCYF has a 25% vacancy rate and that turnover is high. Now consider how that feels for a 15 year old boy who in the past two years has had four different DCYF caseworkers, 3 different casework supervisors, and 3 different clinicians. We know that we can and must do better.

This *Senate Task Force* presents a critical opportunity for us to come together to make the changes necessary to achieve better outcomes. We need to revisit the contract structure of the System of Care to ensure that resources are appropriately aligned to incentivize and support community based programming. It is important to address the duplication of efforts and role confusion between DCYF workers and Network Care Coordinators. It is also essential to embed a permanency and well-being focus for every child. Family team meetings should be vehicles to dynamically engage youth and family voice, and lead family finding efforts to build natural supports. As stakeholders with children and families we do have a shared vision, but we need to have more shared input.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Lisa Guillette".

Lisa Guillette  
Executive Director