

DISCUSSION ON NEWBURY FACILITY
REPLACEMENT OF WOODSIDE JUVENILE REHABILITATION FACILITY
TESTIMONY OF TRISSIE CASANOVA

SENATE INSTITUTIONS COMMITTEE

January 13, 2022

Thank you, members of the committee, for taking the time to hear from me today. My name is Trissie Casanova, I am the chair of the DCF FSD Labor Management Committee. I want to start by acknowledging that this committee deals the physical buildings, my testimony is going to be a blend for need for physical space as well as policy implications that come with that. I worked for DCF Family Services Division for the last 19 years in a variety of roles. For the first 13 years I worked as a Family Services Worker in the St. Albans District Office as a CPS worker, a JS worker, and lastly an investigator. Currently I am the Deputy Compact Administrator for ICPC/ICJ and the Human Trafficking Consultant.

The State of Vermont's System of Care (often abbreviated as SOC) is in crisis and is in need of immediate intervention. This intervention needs to include a program where kids can physically be placed that is safe for them, the community, and staff. The System of Care (SOC) includes placements at home with parents, kinship foster placements, foster care, therapeutic foster care, short term stabilization (programs such as Depot), residential treatment programs, psychiatric hospitalizations, and detention. In order for DCF's SOC to operate we need placements that meet the specialized needs of the children in our care. We need all ends of the spectrum and all levels of care in between to be functioning (placements with family, foster care, RTP's and detention). Prior to COVID-19 pandemic and the closure of Woodside, DCF had more options for placements across this level of care spectrum. While there has always been a shortage of foster homes, it seems that right now this part of our system is also in crisis. There are many factors contributing as to why this could be happening- caregivers who are immunocompromised and cannot take the risk of accepting placements now, caregivers who lost their jobs or experienced hardship throughout the pandemic, caregivers who have been over tapped and become burn out or need a break, and the inconsistent access to school and community service providers contributing to foster parents saying no to placements. We do not have enough foster homes who can meet some of the special needs of youth we are serving as our children and youth are in crisis right now. Our community-based services that would normally serve these kids in the community (therapists, mental health providers, services through Designated Agencies, wrap around services, mentor programs for youth, respite, childcare, etc.) are also at a diminished capacity due to COVID.

When Woodside closed without another program ready to take the delinquent population, it created a significant gap in our system and bottleneck in other parts. Kids who previously would have been placed at Woodside are now being placed at Depot, and those who cannot be placed at Depot based on the severity of the behaviors and/or because of diminished capacity are being staffed at a variety of locations. There are youth in our care without placement, wondering where they are going to go in the same way we are scrambling to find solutions for where to place them, and they deserve better. That is causing a significant gap in our system and in our data reporting.

Depot has become our only staff secure placement for high end system of care children/youth. They are serving kids who have acute mental health problems and youth who have a significant history of

violence and criminal behavior. Their staff are being assaulted on a regular basis and COVID outbreaks have significantly diminished their capacity to the point that DCF has needed to send our own staff into Depot to help maintain the staffing ratios in order to keep the program open.

Last week you heard that only 4% of youth that DCF serves are delinquent. Unfortunately, that data does not fully capture the population we are serving. The population we are serving includes youth who are engaging in violent and delinquent acts not limited to the use of firearms and drug trafficking. Frequently, there are stipulations made in court that change a youth's status with the department. Sometimes those youth are kids in our system who are captured in our system as beyond the control of their parent/guardians based on stipulations made in court. Those stipulations don't change the behaviors they are exhibiting or risk those youth pose to themselves or others.

In January of 2020 an FSW from St. Albans was sexually assaulted by a youth in DCF custody who was being staffed at a hotel due to a lack of placement. After this assault, a team of FSD staff (formerly referred to as the Sweet 16) was formed their roles range from FSW's, supervisors, directors, and numerous central office staff (myself included) to help staff high end system of care youth who were without placement. DCF also created a process of High End System of Care Huddles/Meetings that include a minimum of 6 staff to include Central Office Consultants, Directors, Supervisors, Operations Managers, Director of Operations, our Deputy Commissioner and workers. This totals up to 15-20 staff per meeting in order to brainstorm out of the box ideas as to where these children/youth could be placed on an interim basis. One youth alone required 32 meetings. Safety for the youth, staff and community have to be taken into consideration and many times one of those entities' safety was compromised.

Since then, FSD staff have provided over 400 hours of staffing high end youth who did not have an identified placement. Those staffing's were taking placed at police departments, Yellow House in Hyde Park, hospitals, or Horizons Apartment in Bennington. Some of those staffing's would include law enforcement in order to increase safety, while some had two staff. Many of those youth had recently been assaultive, committed serious crimes, been discharged, or denied from in-state options due to their behaviors, or have been waiting for access to the Brattleboro Retreat. These 400 hours are on top of our staff working their 40 hours per week.

Our staffing of particularly violent or high risk youth require the support of law enforcement. Over the last year we have depended almost solely on the Lamoille and Windham County Sheriffs offices for these details. They have bent over backwards to try and assist and unfortunately many times don't have the staffing to continue to help us hold up our SOC as we have in essence been using them for safe and secure detention in alternative settings. At this time their capacity to continue to support us has been significantly diminished due to their staffing shortages.

In 2020 there were 187 times that DCF staff were called in after hours to staff youth and in 2021 DCF staff were called in after-hours 170 times to staff youth. Many times these youth were staffed by the High End Staffing Team; however when there was not capacity within that group for staffing these requests for staffing would go out to the Family Services All email alias. Even our Director of Operations has been called to help provide staffing.

When we have to sit with youth at police stations, hospitals, etc it puts further strain on other systems within the State of Vermont that we rely on. It also strains our relationships with community partners

when we are occupying a bed at a hospital that is likely needed for someone else or occupying space in a police department. For example, this past fall I agreed to staff a youth at a police department under the condition that LE would be present since that youth had recently been charged with assault with a deadly weapon. Within a few hours of being there, I was told that the PD did not have capacity to sit with us due to their own staff shortage and if they got a call we would be moved to the lobby to sit with this youth alone. I did not feel safe when that happened and requested that another worker be called out to sit with me so we could provide 2-1 staffing for this youth. This youth was later moved to the lobby conference room where he slept on the floor while we continued to work to find a placement for him.

Shortly after that staffing WCAX reported that on November 22, 2021 two 17 year old males who had run away from a group home were brought back to the police station. They were held in the conference room when a fight broke out between the two boys. According to the article the police intervened, and one of the teens became aggressive toward officers which prompted a call for back up. One of those youth had been staffed by our DCF staff earlier this summer.

This is the type of data that is missing. We are missing the data about how many kids in DCF custody have gone without a placement. The situations where we have youth in our care who have engaged in violent or assaultive behavior, or in mental health crisis and we have no place to put them. Those situations are not captured in the data previously provided and it is those situations that is creating the risk for these children and for our staff. While we are staffing a high number of these youth, we are also sending kids home prematurely when there have been no other alternative options or the risk is too great for our staff (some could say that the community is then at risk). Some of these kids/youth would have previously been placed at Woodside based on their delinquency status and risk to the community.

At this time, all ends of our system are compromised. Some of the programs that were previously listed are only long-term residential programs that require approval from the Case Review Committee, some of them are compromised due to COVID which has resulted in reduced capacity within their programs. While COVID has exacerbated the problem, it is certainly not the only cause. COVID has just further limited program and foster care capacity. We were lucky for a period of time that we had the ability to contract with Sununu in NH for detention beds. However, it was very difficult to place a youth in NH for the purposes of detention based on the need for a court order allowing out of state placement. Sununu is not a resource to us at this time, leaving us with zero options for secure detention beds.

While standing up a detention program now is not going to solve all of our problems, it will reduce some of the pressure to our system. What we know is that there seems to be a rise in youth committing violent crimes, there has been a significant increase in the number of youth coming into Vermont for the purposes of drug dealing and who are gang involved from other states. Over the last year we have detained 12 out of state youth a majority of whom were picked up for drug trafficking charges in that they were found with a high quantity of heroin and other narcotics. These youth were gang involved and has a history of violence.

The impact of COVID on our children/youth's mental health is at an all-time high. We have seen instances of youth coming into state custody for the purposes of placement, youth whose parents have begged for help, done all they could and the systems have not met them as they should

The bottom line is that our system is in crisis our children/youth, our staff and our communities are being negatively impacted with this lack of stability. Everyone has been saying that something bad is on the verge of happening. Something bad has already been happening. In the last year we had one of our staff sexually assaulted by a youth in custody, we have had kids try to commit attempt suicide after being moved from a secure placement. We have had numerous kids staffed at our offices due to foster home shortages, kids who are being staffed at police stations, hospitals, Horizon's Apartment and Yellow House. This is a disservice to our state's children and youth. DCF wants to be able to safely meet the treatment and placement needs of these children, but time and time again have to settle for less than what is indicated. We have placed kids at home after committing violent crimes or firearm related crimes because they are too dangerous to be staffed or placed in one of our staff secure programs. We have asked staff to transport youth who have violently assaulted foster parents and are hoping that nothing bad continues to happen. If something does not change now, bad things are going to continue to happen to the children/ youth that we are serving and to our staff and communities will not be safer.

Earlier this week an article that was published by KXAN reporter Avery Travis. This article was talking about the challenges within the Texas foster care system, a quote from this article summarizes the crisis we are currently faced here in Vermont with, "core failure is the absence of a fully developed system of care, including home and community-based resources, targeted and well-resourced treatment, and appropriate placement services matched to children's needs." We need a fully developed system of care which includes all of these pieces, as well as placements where kids who are engaging in violent behavior or crimes involving firearms can be placed safely.

<https://www.kxan.com/news/texas/panel-texas-foster-care-needs-more-mental-health-resources-support-for-families/>

What we need:

- Multiple programs that match risk level, safety issues and treatment needs.
- More crisis stabilization beds (mental health and behavioral)
- An in-state secure setting to place youth into on the date that the violent act occurs. Recognizing this takes time but we absolutely cannot carry on for another year under current circumstances
- stable and adequate location in the northern part of the state that can meet the most basic needs for storage, beds, clothing, shower, hygiene products and basic activities to pass the time
- Guaranteed afterhours transportation
- 25 temp staff for after-hours staffing, or 16 temp who can be allowed to be on standby status or contracted to be on standby to respond to high end staffing needs. These temps would be on a rotation, two at a time, to ensure adequate staffing
- "Advanced" sitters for hospital-based staffing
- A commitment to ending the utilization of FSWs and FSD staff to support high end placements
- Commissioner and Secretary holding a listening session with impacted staff
- The labor management committee would like to meet with Governor Scott so that we can share with him directly the crisis we are in and request his assistance.
- The Governor's involvement to help ensure an instate secure program is opened immediately to place youth when they engage in violent behaviors.

Thank you for your time.