

## Campaign for AZ Foster System Solutions—An Appeal to Arizonans for Foster Children

On September 11, 2015, an email went out to all licensed, Maricopa County, Arizona, foster parents (or just the ones they had current email addresses for) from Department of Child Safety (DCS) director, Gregory McKay. He was addressing the fact that the AZ foster care system is overwhelmed and in crisis. This crisis is evidenced by the fact that last Friday night, 9/11, there were at least 34 children, ages 0-10, housed in the DCS placement center, with at least 10 or more children waiting in other offices for a space to open up for them in the placement center, not to mention the number of teens being held in another DCS facility. McKay states in his email that there are “over 18000 [sic] dependent children relying on an overwhelmed system while societal ills continuously degrade their hope for healing.” Sadly, this is true, and unfortunately, DCS leadership has not been able to come up with worthwhile solutions to stop this degradation of hope for AZ children. In fact, through their actions this weekend, DCS leadership has instead put children coming in to the foster children at even further risk.

While his email is well-written and uses fantastic emotional appeal for we foster parents to step up and help more, his immediate reaction/solution to the current crisis was not an effective way to further AZ children’s “prosperity, growth, health, vitality, and safety” (McKay email). Alas, we foster parents know better than anyone the crisis that is at hand and the suffering our kids go through as a result of an inefficient child welfare system, and we know there often seems to be little we can do to help. Unfortunately, Director McKay chose to bypass licensing agencies’ after hours protocols this weekend in order to get children in homes more quickly. While his email did prompt calls from foster parents who were able to get in touch with their individual licensing workers in order to get permission to take a child from the placement center, this was merely a band-aid on the problem. What will he and DCS do to place children next weekend when the center fills again and most if not all of the beds that were on hold (by request from the foster parents) are already filled? He can’t just send the same email out each weekend and hope that beds will magically appear.

As foster parents, many of us have experienced and been frustrated by licensing agencies that put our beds on hold (often without telling us why or even without telling us about the hold), agencies who don’t trust us to decide ourselves how many kids we can parent well, agencies who are overly critical of us and how we follow the rules, and/or agencies who are way too lax about the rules and guidelines for foster homes. We have also seen how many agencies do not provide after hours workers to help place children at night and on weekends, or who have on-call after hours workers who never answer their phones or who claim (whether true or false) that they have no beds available. Thus, the placement center has been full or beyond full for almost every weekend since it opened at the beginning of summer 2015. As a result of the center finally filling far beyond capacity, the powers that be chose to skirt the foster licensing agencies’ after-hours requirements this weekend in order to get kids into foster homes more quickly.

At first, this may seem like a great plan because anyone who knew they had an open bed and who was able to contact their individual, ongoing licensing worker was able to call the placement center and ask for a placement, and many kids were placed in foster homes. However, when

evaluated more closely, this was a dangerous choice that McKay made. First, by listing the initials, sex, and age of 22 children aged 5 and under in a mass email, he broke privacy rules that we foster parents have been constantly reminded not to break. Second, he threw out safety protocols by going around the licensing agencies' after hours placement requirements. While I agree that licensing agencies have a lot of issues themselves and need better auditing and review by the state, they are still the only means of evaluating the qualifications and licenses of foster parents. By going around the after-hours list and by going through ongoing workers over a weekend when their agency is closed, some children may now be in homes that had their beds on hold due to legitimate safety concerns. This is not in the best interest of child safety. An experienced leader with the proper skill sets needs to understand how to get to the root of the problem of getting more beds opened up while ensuring the safety of the children long BEFORE it becomes a crisis situation.

In fact, it seems like this was initially attempted on July 17, 2015, when agencies were all required to send in a list of their beds—opened, filled, on hold—and they had to mark the “hold” beds as “per agency hold” or “per family request hold.” However, DCS did not bother to then audit that list to find out what was the root of the problem with beds not being available. Instead, they waited until crisis struck and then just went around many of the safety protocols. A better solution would have been for McKay to order DCS to hold licensing agencies more accountable by auditing them like any corporation would do with an agency it contracts.

The director of DCS should be putting in place processes to assess holds, suspensions, denials, etc., in an effort to regulate licensing agencies and to ensure that as many safe beds are open as possible. As it is, there are only 10,748 licensed beds in AZ, and kinship care is not available to fill all of the remaining 7500+ beds that are needed for kids in care (or kids are being placed in unsafe kinship care just to keep them out of the placement center). Thus, AZ children are truly in a crisis that surpasses anything and everything the media has tried to point out in the last year or two. Something needs to be done to curb this crisis NOW before more children are hurt or put at higher risk.

So, what can I do to help in this crisis, you ask? Well, here is where you can start. We all need to write letters to the powers that be. Here are some guidelines of topics you can touch on in your letters, followed by a link to the Fostering Rights page, which lists the contact information for the governor, the state legislature, etc. [FosteringRights.org](http://FosteringRights.org) put the referenced page together so that those interested could send feedback on the proposed new rules, but many of us feel that we need to go beyond just disputing new rules for foster families. If we all work together and write or call many of these people who are listed, and with the help of media attention, we can surely turn around the current crisis by having our voices heard in defense of Arizona's children, and thus create true change.

Main focus our letters need to have right now:

Getting the system some REAL changes and improvements through better leadership choices.

Some main points you can focus on (choose some or all):

1. The foster care crisis is getting worse, not better.
2. What people thought was a crisis a year or two years ago is nothing compared to how bad it's going to get very soon if things don't change.
3. If the system does not implode before the new currently proposed OLR (Office of Licensing and Regulation) rules go into effect, it will completely implode after they are in effect (unless OLR makes many, if not all, of the revisions suggested by the Foster Children's Rights Coalition, the FIRST Commission, etc.).
4. Many children are currently not in stable places, and if something is not done now, we will see more child deaths.
5. In the meantime, children are dying inside a little bit more every day because nothing is working right—EVERY STEP through the system is broken.
6. The governor and the legislature need to take immediate action.

Find links for people to contact at the bottom of this web page that I like to follow:

<http://www.fosteringrights.org/#!azdcs-rules-public-meetings/clav>

I am hoping together we can make the right changes for our foster kids and those children waiting for safe homes. If you would like to help with this Campaign for AZ Foster System Solutions beyond just contacting those listed above, please contact me at [lynetteaustin@cox.net](mailto:lynetteaustin@cox.net), and I will be happy to put you to work as things come up.

Thanks to all of you currently fostering or who support foster children and foster parents.

Sincerely,  
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Licensed Foster/Adoptive Parent for Nearly 11 Years