



October 6, 2016

From 2005 to 2015, the number of children in Arizona's foster care system grew by 95%. Arizona ranked worst in the nation by this distinction. But today, based on the intentionality and execution of prioritized plans, Arizona's foster care growth is 1 point better than the national average. That's promising news. Additionally, Arizona is experiencing more kids leaving the foster care system than entering the foster care system for eight of the last ten months. This has amounted to not only avoiding the historic 10% growth annually, it saw a reduction for the first time in seven years (*For instance: Based on trend data, the number of children in the foster care system should amount to over 20,200 today; but, the number as of August, 2016, was just over 18,100*). We have seen a 9% increase in children achieving permanency (reunification and adoption) over the prior year.

Much of this progress is due to the investigative backlog of cases dropping from an all-time-high of 16,200 in February, 2015, to less than 4700 today. This has allowed caseworkers to engage children and families more thoroughly leading to a 15% increase to In-Home services, and a massive reduction in the number of children being removed from their homes. (*For Instance: In the month of July, 2015; 1275 children were removed from their homes; this July, 2016, only 931 children were removed from their homes*). In addition to having investigative caseloads finally under control, the department has initiated the introduction of a revised safety assessment tool, targeted permanency teams, more prevention programs, and a family finding service to link kids in group care to extended family or distant relatives not previously identified. A totality of these initiatives accounts for Arizona's turnaround.

All of these proven initiatives take time and resources, something still tremendously lacking at the Department of Child Safety (DCS). We cannot and will not de-prioritize lucrative ventures for those suggested in highly anecdotal audit findings. Reviewing small samples of reports or talking to small samples of people does not form a justification to change course and adopt initiatives that haven't been scientifically proven to work. We require evidence to stop a current results driven trajectory and adopt a conceptual recommendation. This is not to say these shortcomings pointed out by credible sources are not important. To the contrary, we know they are important but they are symptoms of a larger problem. The root cause is, too much demand on too few social workers, service providers, healthcare providers, attorneys, judges, etc. For instance: creating a new court report template and training 1406 DCS staff, as well as Attorneys General, Defense Attorneys, and Judges will take time and resources away from current initiatives. Furthermore, no evidence was put forth to suggest this would impact permanency for a child. What does impact permanency however, is a caseworker's availability to engage families, collect information, assess needs, develop plans and then accurately relate all of those things to a judge. A judge who then can make prudent decisions based on effective engagements between social workers and families.

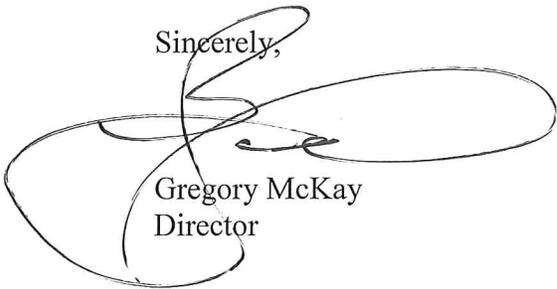
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For instance: creating a mechanism to ensure compliance at Foster Care Review Boards (FCRBs) is treating a symptom. It is common for a caseworker to be required in two different courts; even in two different counties, at the same time. And to compound this, they may be required at an FCRB during the same time as well. No evidence was brought forth to suggest that attendance at FCRBs reduces a child's time in foster care, although I would agree it is a beneficial augmentation. Court presence and preparedness however, has a huge impact on decreasing the time a child stays in foster care. For that reason, we will encourage and enforce that our staff are attending court hearings.

In conclusion, quality has been compromised over the past ten years due to extreme duress on the entire system. Arizona was not prepared for a 95% increase in demand; and for the prior ten years has been reactionary to tragic events, or areas of scrutiny deemed most beneficial to react. We have a plan, we are adhering to our plan, we require results, we are measuring progress and we are reacting when progress begins to lag. We appreciate our partnerships and are accountable to all with whom we interact. We are right sizing systems and that will take time. We continue to exceed in meeting legislative benchmarks and putting processes in place that are right for people and are sustainable. We appreciate everyone's understanding and commitment to making Arizona the safest and best place for children and families. And we encourage and welcome anyone to bring forth tangible products so we may implement all recommendations put forth by the Auditor General; so long as they increase our capacity to serve, and not diminish it.

Sincerely,

A large, stylized handwritten signature in black ink, consisting of several loops and a long horizontal stroke.

Gregory McKay
Director