**Fix foster care system**

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A pair of reports on Oregon's foster care system offer an urgent agenda item for the 2017 Legislature. The system is failing the children it is meant to serve, and processes for addressing the worst failures - those that result in reports of abuse - are unreliable. These are problems of long standing, and they demand the state's attention.

About 8,700 children, ranging from infants to near-adults, are in Oregon's foster care system and remain there for an average of 457 days. Usually they've been placed in foster homes because their biological families are unable to care for them. These troubled family histories sometimes mean that by the time children enter the foster care system, they have suffered neglect, trauma or abuse. The last thing they need is for the turmoil of their past lives to be compounded.

State officials have been warned for a decade or more that Oregon's foster care system is troubled. In April, an assessment by the federal Administration for Children and Families found that Oregon's child welfare programs fail to meet standards in any of 13 categories, including foster care.

Accusations of mismanagement and abuse by a Portland-area foster care provider led Gov. Kate Brown to commission an independent review of the foster care system last year, and the consultants hired to conduct the review, Public Knowledge LLC, issued their preliminary report last week.

Child welfare systems are complicated, but the root cause of deficiencies in Oregon's foster care system is simple: Not enough capacity. The state simply lacks an adequate number of places to send children in need of foster care - particularly children with behavioral, emotional or other problems. As a result, children are too often placed in foster care that poorly matches their needs.

A cascade of bad consequences can flow from such mismatches. Public Knowledge found that decisions about where to place children are often based on the availability of space, rather than on the interests of the child. The state, desperate to maintain its shrinking number of foster care providers, sometimes compromises standards for certification or licensing. Appropriate placements, the consultants noted, can prevent abuse - the implication being that inappropriate foster care placements lead to a higher incidence of abuse.

Adding capacity to the system could be less costly than continuing to put foster children in any facility that has space for them - including, in a pinch, in motels. A lawsuit filed on behalf of two foster children who were found to be malnourished seeks $60 million from the state. According to state Sen. Sara Gelser, D-Corvallis, who has taken an interest in child welfare issues, Oregon has only 83 percent of the caseworkers it needs to guard against abuse. As long as that shortcoming persists, Oregon will be vulnerable to lawsuits, and children will be vulnerable to abuse.

Once Oregon has the capacity to ensure an appropriate placement for each foster child, the state will need to improve its processes for tracking and investigating claims of abuse. Public Knowledge found that the current processes are inconsistent and poorly coordinated. Young people in foster care don't trust that their allegations of abuse will be properly investigated, and for good reason - the consultants found there to be little or no follow-up after abuse investigations.

Without more capacity, none of the foster care system's problems can be addressed. Capacity can be increased by recruiting more and different kinds of foster care providers, or by placing fewer children in foster care in the first place. Oregon must adopt one or both of those approaches, because the system that exists to protect and improve the lives of children in crisis is too often failing to do either.

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