

To: All Members of the Senate Study Committee on Adoption and Foster Care

From: Lesli Reece, Ministry Director for Fostering Together at North Point Ministries, Inc. and former foster parent.

Subject: Public Input

I apologize for the need to provide this input via written document because I am not in Atlanta on September 26, 2023. Upon reflection, however, because my remarks are fairly detailed, my hope is that receiving them in writing will enhance the committee's ability to absorb and factor them into your work.

I have included, as well, my personal and professional resume which I hope will help explain the background experience I have had that has helped me to shape my perspective.

Lastly, I have shared this write up with several people I work alongside, who might have had differing opinions, in order to vet the ideas I'm advancing. Whether leadership at a Child Placing Agency or Department of Family and Children's Services or foster parents currently serving on the front lines, there are no ideas in here that have received push back. Rather, they are all cheering me on to take this step of providing public input. That, in no way, implies that these are ideas that don't require further input and shaping as they are tested for their effectiveness. It simply means that many who have experienced the system from different angles see hope in the overarching focus shift that underlies all of these ideas. **Relationships Matter.** Shaping the system in a way that prioritizes them and supports them is critical to the success of the system whose name implies that families and children are its focus.

Here we go...

I once was a foster mom who hosted an 8 year old boy in my east Cobb home. The boy was from Cartersville. Moreover, the boy's father, who was accused of neglect, lived in a triplex that looked over the barbed wire fence into the train yard. Although the boy was only 35 miles, geographically, from home he may as well have been a thousand miles away in how it seemed and

felt to him. Not one thing that was familiar or comfortable, as he would have defined it, was available to him.

When he came to us he was on his 4th placement in as many months. His case had gone concurrent and his father was angry and giving up. The system had stepped in because he was a single father who was strained to keep a roof over their head, traveled for work and, too often, leaned on others to look after his son. Now he was watching his son be shuttled from place to place like he was a piece of furniture that didn't fit.

Don't get me wrong, the boy was a handful but my perspective on 'why' was just beginning to be shaped.

Much, if not all of his behavior, was perfectly designed to fight his way back home. Much of his father's anger was centered on being held at bay from his son with an add on "to-do" list and no meaningful support or encouragement.

8 months later our foster son **was** reunified and we were able to keep him one last night to let him properly say goodbye to all of the new relationships he'd forged in his time with us. (We did, by the way, stay connected over the past 12 years but not in the way we could and should have because 35 miles presents a big challenge to sustaining a meaningful relationship).

However, that's not the really important thing that happened on August 22, 2011. That day, when myself and 2 of my 5 children took him home, his father invited us to go see the after school program that I'd arranged for him to attend. It had extended hours and fed the children dinner before sending them home for the night, a real win for a single working father.

The minute we entered the area of the church building where the kids were convened, **several** of the kids jumped up from their seats and shouted his name. **That** is when I realized that something profoundly wrong had happened. He had lost everything. Every single good thing. Relationships that were a part of his heart, his identity, his sense of belonging. The system that set out to protect him inflicted harm with their methods. The good intention was short-sighted and treated him and his family like a problem to solve, not a family who needed help.

Ever since then I've been on a mission, in any way that I have influence, to work item by item toward creating a system that is hyper-locally focused and human centered.

RPPS in its current, and soon to be improved, forms have been a huge step forward in providing normalcy for children in their assigned foster home. Families First, if it is well implemented, will be helpful, no doubt, in keeping families together in the first place, but, when foster care (which, in a child's view, should more properly be called stranger care) is needed, then the system we have is poorly designed to maximize the child's sense of safety, familiarity, and connection. The remainder of this document details several elements that, if addressed, could provide a game changer set of influences on the outcomes of children who require the full intervention of foster care.

There are a couple of system issues hiding in plain sight that, left unaddressed, will continue to contribute to the following issues:

- ***Placement stability***
- ***Reunification Rates***
- ***Pace of reunification***
- ***Worker satisfaction & stability***
- ***Cost of placements***
- ***Foster family sustainability***
- ***Educational performance***
- ***Community engagement***
- ***Stability of adoptions when that outcome is necessary***

*There are nationally recognized organizations who currently measure most of these factors who can be relied on to validate the impact of the changes that are implemented in pilot counties.*

These macro system issues can be corrected in select pilot counties in order to prove their impact on these critical success factors before making changes, systematically, across the State in Georgia.

The system of care is one that, ideally, would elevate and place a high value on relationships. Relationships are the bedrock of human identity and necessary for people to thrive. Over time it has become, instead, a system of chaos and complexity that is anti-relational as a result.

Children cared for by the existing system are being taught, as an unintended consequence, that relationships are not important, don't last, shouldn't be trusted and are a primary source of pain, grief, and loss.

The current problem is delineated below. While some suggested solutions are offered as thought starters, the purpose of this commentary is to elevate several problems that, together, conspire to make our system far more damaging on the psyche of the children and families it purports to serve than it should be.

*Premises:*

- 1. No kids actually want a new family. They just want their family to be healthy and whole. (Ask Judge Juanita Stedman's point of view on this statement if you think it's an overstatement)*
- 2. Kids removed from all that is familiar vs. just what is imminently dangerous are given a fear-centered existence where even their own Walmart or McDonald's is nowhere to be found. They are psychologically too far from home to comprehend how to ever get back there in their minds and hearts.*
- 3. Kids deserve to keep the most and lose the least if foster care needs to be a part of their story. In order to accomplish this, a hyper-local system needs to be developed that returns the issue of children in care to the very same community that they are already a part of.*
- 4. The way that the community, the workers, and the foster families wrap around those situations should be **additive to**, not a replacement for, their existing connections and positive influences in their life.*
- 5. The system of care in each community needs to include basic supportive systems and if the ecosystem is missing pieces then there need to be community-based influencers helping to round out the available resources that will allow families facing challenging situations to gain the support they need without disrupting the viability of continuing connection to their children.*

There are many people more equipped than I am to enhance the list below, however, as a person with a background in business, strategy and organizational structures, I am confident that the starter list below will go a

long way toward improving the system's outcomes and I would implore the committee to take seriously the idea of a legal mandate to undertake piloting these changes and monitoring their results in 5-6 counties, of differing types, to prove out the results before a statewide mandate is shaped.

**CPA contracts are not properly designed to ensure that adequate homes are licensed in every locale.**

- Current contracts require CPAs to recruit homes within a 50 mile radius of an office that they maintain but they are allowed and continually requested to take placements from much farther away.
- The majority of CPAs maintain their offices in metro Atlanta.
- The majority of homes are recruited in the metropolitan area causing a vacuum cleaner effect as an unintended consequence.
- No incentives exist to encourage development of homes that more closely align with the local area needs.
- The entire system is strained by the chaos that placement away from the home county causes.
- The true 'gap' of needed homes in any given locality is unclear since the homes could be licensed by any/many different entities and are not tightly managed to serve the local need.
- Supportive systems and relationships are unable to contribute properly to the reunification process when a child is moved away from their natural community.
- In addition to smart contracting, geographically, there need to be performance criteria that guide the renewal of contracts. If the goal is for the agencies supporting placements to be like minded with the system goal of reunification then, among other performance criteria, it should be weighed into their measure of success.
- While it's not pervasive there are agencies who actually work against the system goal of reunification and will purport to be able to steer the outcome of a case toward adoption. Whether this is done simply as a recruiting tactic or as an actual abuse of their contractual obligations needs to be dealt with.

**Caseworkers are people who entered a caring profession but the way their work is designed makes it impossible for them to express their given talents successfully.**

- Relationships, caring for people, and investing in them is the driving force behind a person's desire to become a social worker.
- The job description of a typical caseworker in a system that is allowing kids to be thrown all over the state is unsustainable.
- Caseworkers cannot invest deeply in relationships since they are, literally, chasing children across large geographies in order to have basic levels of contact with them.
- The displacement of children from their natural community also contributes to the caseworkers extreme challenge in having meaningful relationships with the bio family.
- Caseworkers should be assigned to the foster homes in the community they serve.
  - It will invite children into a system of care where all of the adults (foster parent and caseworker) are already familiar with one another and 'teaming'.
  - Birth families will have an advocate, in the caseworker, who can slow down and shepherd them through the process of attaining reunification.
  - CASA's, Therapists and all other supportive services will be far more able to stay connected and aligned with the absence of the chaos that displacement from their natural community contributes to the case.
- Measuring job satisfaction and retention will be an important outcome to observe and document. I believe it will be a meaningful impact.

**Caseworkers from more than one party are not needed in order for cases to be properly managed. (This likely requires legislative change) Staffing structures should be identical regardless of the licensing body.**

- The party that licensed the home should oversee the case directly and be the party responsible for case reviews both informally and formally before the court.

- At present, ALL cases belong to DFCS, regardless of whether a CPA who is being paid to supervise the home is involved.
- The system right now pays the CPA for work that they will not allow them to do in earnest.
- The CPA caseworker is not directly responsible for anything related to the case and operates as an intermediary between DFCS and the foster family which is inefficient, at best.
- Investigating how other states who allow CPAs to case manage fully is an important step in the pilot project.
- Privatization might be something to investigate but should not be necessary if the CPA's are properly contracted to do the work they are already paid to do and are under a performance measurement system that aligns them to the ultimate goal of reunification's high value.
- Duplicate case workers actually create confusion and dissipate the communication about a case since the direct connection of the foster family to the responsible party is, at best, diluted but can also easily cause distortions to creep in.

**Not all of the licensed homes in a given county are readily available for use by that county.**

- This issue is partly due to
  - contractual elements discussed above
  - information availability
  - relationships and how they influence who a DFCS county calls first, second ... last.
- All homes within a county should be not only visible to the county office needing to make placement but should be **reserved** for that county unless, by their judgment, they are confident that they can share that resource with a nearby county due to an overage that exists.
- The securing of availability of placement homes within a community will have byproduct benefits to all parties involved including but not limited to:
  - Children staying in their familiar school setting (and not having that setting disrupted when placement ends)
  - Friendships being maintained

- Relationships with teachers, doctors, therapists, etc. before, during and after care will be sustainable
- Visitation will be simpler to facilitate and sustain
- CASA involvement will be simplified
- Court, Family Team Meetings and other case related reviews will be simplified
- Caseworkers will not spend unnecessary time traveling to far away places for visits with children, freeing them up to be more deeply involved in the details of the life of the child.
- Creating supportive relationships for and between birth & foster families will be more simple to establish and easier to maintain post placement.
- There are plenty of people who are willing to step into supportive lasting relationships through churches and 501c3 organizations but the movement of the children and lack of nearby access to the birth family limits its effectiveness.

**Children needing adoption should be made visible using extreme focus on keeping them in their CURRENT community if that is where they have meaningful relationships to sustain.**

- Many pathways are not utilized on a hyper local basis that would likely be effective.
- Current methods are macro/state level and cause kids hardship when they lose all that is familiar in order to gain a permanent family.
- All of the school, doctor, therapist relationships in addition to friends, church or continuity of relationship with former foster families are destroyed when a child isn't adopted in the community where they currently reside.

**The system is set up to be its most expensive version.**

- The system we have wasn't designed; it was a response to a localized need and was adapted over time, as demand grew, much like a poorly managed renovation. It is a patchwork of fixes that probably worked better under less pressure at earlier stages of the systems development.



- Here are a few of the cost areas that are exacerbated by the above structural issues:
  - Overpaying for caseworker support of cases due to doubling up with CPAs
  - Caseworker loss of productivity traveling to see children
  - Actual hard costs of traveling to see children in distant places (car expenses and other reimbursable expenses)
  - Travel expenses for CASAs
  - Transporter expenses that could be eliminated or substantially reduced if kids were kept within their local area
  - Staffing turnover due to chaotic elements of the work
  - Inability to review and measure staff performance tightly due to an overly complex job description and requirements to travel distances to accomplish basic job duties.
- There are, undoubtedly, other efficiencies that can be identified and monitored during the “pilot project”.

**A Deeper Dive Into Adoption Reform (and I know this is a big mindset shift I’m implying):**

1. When permanency can’t be achieved within the original family the focus on replacing the family should also include sustaining whatever prior family connections are possible within agreed upon and safe boundaries. This could include parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, siblings, or even foster parents who are not offering to adopt but have a vested relationship with the child.
2. Adoption within the existing community where the child resides should be the highest priority, with very few exceptions made, in order to allow the child to keep the most connection and belonging possible from their recent history.
3. At a conference hosted by The Children’s Bureau I was introduced to a shift in language that I think is powerful and appropriate to consider: Termination of Parental **Responsibility** vs. Termination of Parental Rights which, almost always, is translated into Termination of Parental and all Familial Relationships.

4. Current law in Georgia actually leaves room for post-adoption contact to be included but the preponderance of adoptions function as “closed” with no effort given to how to preserve contacts in a safe and healthy way. Kids, even those who feel loved and cared for in the family who is raising them, will eventually want to know and personally come to understand their original family system. The opportunity to do that gradually and thoughtfully is being denied to children whose adoption doesn’t contemplate that need and plan for it.
5. With the presence of Adoption Share powered by Family Match there is no longer a strong reason to license and stockpile families who only wish to adopt. They can, instead, put themselves into the match system and when a match looks viable they can achieve the legal standing to pursue adoption for an actual child who is needing adoption. This will reduce workload to formally approve homes that require re-licensure on a routine basis without an actual target child being identified for their family.
6. Training prospective adoptive families on the needs of children to include continuity of connections and their relational history is missing and much needed.
7. If a family who wants to foster a child can’t envision an open style of adoption, from the beginning of their licensure process, then I would argue they will not be suitable for partnership parenting during placements and would not be a suitable adoptive resource because of their felt need to protect at an unnaturally high level. We cannot erase the history a child comes with so our best hope for the child is to include, honor and help them to create a “both-and” story with a more complex family system but without any missing pieces.

We have an unparalleled opportunity to reshape how we support our most vulnerable, ensuring that they keep the connections that matter most while providing effective care. I urge you to consider the profound impact that community-centric care can have on our children's lives and the entire child welfare landscape, and I implore you to support policies that pave the way for this transformative shift

**Lesli Reece**

Experienced professional with a corporate background as well as professional experience in child welfare.

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## EXPERIENCE

### **North Point Ministries, Inc**

Director of Fostering Together

August 2011-Present

- Grew the team from one staff supporting 20 foster families to 9 supporting 140+ foster families who are hosting 225 children
- Foster and manage relationships with many outside organizations including leadership of the State Child Welfare System and other 501c3's working in the child welfare sector
- Maintain focus on vision and mission for the organization and my team so that we continue to grow in stability and scale at a sustainable pace.

### **The Coca-Cola Company - Various(in reverse order)**

August 1987-August 1998

- Deal Manager in the Mergers & Acquisitions Area
- Planning Manager in the Coca-Cola USA Planning Office
- Chief of Staff for the CFO of Coca-Cola USA
- Chief of Staff for the CMO of the Coca-Cola Company
- Director of Global Staffing for the Coca-Cola Company
- Director of Knowledge Transfer for the Coca-Cola Company

### **Touche Ross, Atlanta & Arthur Andersen, Dallas, TX**

July 1984-August 1987

Tax Staff for both of these firms with advancement to Tax Senior prior to moving from Dallas, TX to Atlanta, GA in November 1986. Worked predominantly in the Real Estate sector of these firms.

## EDUCATION

### **University of Texas at Dallas**

Graduated in May 1984

BS Degree in Accounting & Finance

## STRENGTHS

Relationship Development

Strategic Thinking

Adaptability

Seeing and Leveraging  
Connections

## OTHER RELATED MATTERS

Former Foster & Respite  
Parent (2010-2013)

Former Member of the  
Governor's Child Welfare  
Reform Council, 2016-17

Member of The Families  
First Advisory Council, 2018-  
2023

Founding Board Member of  
Connections Homes

Current Board Member of  
Wellroot Family Services

## LANGUAGES

Mother of 5 grown children  
aged 34-23

Married 35 years

Six Grandchildren ages 2-6

Thank you for your time and consideration and please feel free to ask me any questions or invite my involvement if further development of any of these ideas is planned.



