



Testimony by Kristyn Peck

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Senate Appropriations Subcommittee on Community Health and Human Services

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Good afternoon. I am Kristyn Peck, Chief Executive Officer of West Michigan Partnership for Children, which I will refer to as WMPC.

On October 1, WMPC began its third year of a five-year innovative foster care pilot in Kent County. After only two years of operations, this approach is already yielding successful outcomes in safety, permanency, and well-being for children and families.

I am here today to request the urgent restoration of two million dollars of vital funding for WMPC. The governor administratively transferred these funds from the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services (MDHHS). This administrative transfer is different from many of the other vetoes or transfers, in that MDHHS is our sole source of funds, without which we will no longer exist. Specifically, if not urgently restored, as of December 31st, WMPC will be unable to continue its work providing oversight of the placement and care for the approximately 850 children in Kent County who receive foster care and adoption services.

I would like to thank Chairman MacGregor and Vice Chair Bizon, and other subcommittee members for the opportunity to testify today. I know we all share the belief that children are the most vulnerable members of our society, and that they deserve safety, belonging, and the opportunity to thrive.

As my colleague Janet Snyder Reynolds mentioned, WMPC exists because of the years of collaboration by many of you in this room -- the Michigan Legislature, a committed group of MDHHS and private child welfare agencies, the Kent County Administration, Judges, and many other stakeholders who acknowledged that the child welfare system could work better for children and families, and that improved outcomes require a different approach.

On October 1, 2017, WMPC assumed responsibility for the placement and care of approximately 800 children and youth who were in foster care in Kent County through a contract with MDHHS. WMPC administers foster care differently than the rest of the state, in that we use a front-loaded case rate that incentivizes quicker permanency for kids and allows us to invest in services, staffing models, and best practices to address child-specific needs and root causes. WMPC is the fiduciary agent and ensures contractual compliance for a collaborative consortium made up of the five private foster care case management agencies in Kent County, approximately forty providers of residential services statewide, and other agencies that provide other supportive services to kids and families. The collaborative consortium includes Bethany Christian Services, Catholic Charities West Michigan, D.A. Blodgett-St. John's, Samaritas, and Wellspring Lutheran Services.

Mr. Chairman, in my testimony today, I will highlight four areas where WMPC's innovation has led to improved child outcomes that would not be possible without the performance-based funding model.

These areas are: 1) the creation of Enhanced Foster Care, 2) increased resources for strengthening families, 3) investment in cutting-edge software, and 4) increased capacity for the foster care workforce.

### *First, creation of Enhanced Foster Care*

When WMPC launched in October 2017, it identified that 13 percent of youth were in residential settings and there were not sufficient community-based placement options for children with higher-level needs. In response, we created Enhanced Foster Care, or EFC, as a trauma-informed, community-based service which we rolled out within our first quarter of operations. During their weekly on-site visits to our partner agencies, WMPC Care Coordinators help identify eligible youth for authorization of EFC services. EFC provides the child and their caregiver a behavioral specialist and a clinical case manager to develop family-centered treatment planning and intensive support in the home. Not only is placement in the community with EFC services rather than in a residential setting in the **best interest of the child and consistent with the philosophy of the Family First Prevention Services Act**, it also saves WMPC an average of **\$177/day**. **WMPC spent \$1,500,000 less in residential expenses** by the end of FY19 compared to FY18 with the introduction of EFC<sup>1</sup>. EFC has also led to a **reduction in utilization of residential settings by 5 percent**<sup>2</sup> and a **reduction in the number of days that children spend in residential care per year by 20 percent**<sup>3</sup>.

Mr. Chairman, I'd like to share the story of Damien<sup>4</sup> to illustrate how EFC helps children and families. Damien entered foster care in January of 2017. His mother was unable to safely parent him due to escalating behaviors resulting from his trauma. When WMPC began oversight of the case in October 2017, Damien was living in a residential setting in another county. WMPC advocated for Damien's move to a residential setting that could provide the level of treatment Damien required, but that was geographically closer to his mother's home for easier facilitation of visits between the two. WMPC arranged for a neuro-psychological assessment to identify the source of Damien's behavior and to inform an appropriate treatment plan. WMPC authorized EFC services while Damien was still in a residential placement to help Damien's mother build capacity to safely parent and nurture Damien. Within a short time period, Damien's mother was ready for a trial reunification, and WMPC provided family reunification services to support the placement. Damien and his mother are doing well now and WMPC successfully closed the case within the last month.

### *Second, increased resources for strengthening families*

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1 Source: WMPC Financial Statement\_9.30.19.

2 There were 103 children in residential placements of a total of 814 youth in foster care when WMPC launched on 10/1/17, or 13% of youth in WMPC care were in residential settings. On March 31, 2019 there were 74 youth in residential placements of a total of 897 youth in WMPC care. 13% of youth in residential -- 8% percent of youth in residential= reduction of 5%.

3 Source: Number of days in residential care FY15 -- FY19, Chapin Hall. Number of days in residential care FY19, MindShare.

4 Name has been changed to protect the child's identity.

WMPC values the critical importance of family in a child's life and focuses on preserving family connections. WMPC arranged for our workforce to be trained on an evidence-based family-finding model and purchased the software application "Genopro" to maximize the case workers' ability to create genograms, or family tree maps. Through an increased staffing rate, WMPC supported its partner agencies in hiring "Family Finders". These individuals conduct diligent search efforts to identify family members to serve as potential foster parents, guardians, mentors, or supports to the child. WMPC also developed data-driven foster parent recruitment goals, to include increased recruitment in zip codes with the highest removal rates. Placing children in foster homes in their own community helps minimize trauma and disruption by making it more likely children can remain in the same school, near their friend group, and it affords parents the opportunity for easier visits, with the goal of reunification. Through these strategies, **WMPC has increased placements of children in relative care by 6 percent<sup>5</sup> and increased by 65 percent the number of licensed foster homes in the three Kent County zip codes with the highest child removal rates.<sup>6</sup>**

#### *Third, investment in cutting-edge software*

WMPC recognizes the value of 21<sup>st</sup> century technology to help identify child welfare solutions and has invested in MindShare, a data platform that assimilates data from nightly feeds from the MiSACWIS system. MindShare has been critical to improving WMPC's utilization management and real-time understanding of what's happening with each case. MindShare has built almost 30 dashboards with WMPC's Performance and Quality Improvement team, which uses these dashboards to analyze performance data in real-time and engage with our network providers to monitor performance measures, data quality, and quality improvement plans. Leveraging MindShare's data synthesis, WMPC meets with providers quarterly to review contract compliance and the achievement of performance outcomes. MindShare has contributed to significant improvement in meeting or exceeding the Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) required by MDHHS. As of the end of the fourth quarter of fiscal year 2019, **WMPC is meeting or exceeding statewide performance in 10 out of 11 KPIs<sup>7</sup>.**

#### *Finally, increased capacity for the foster care workforce*

National retention rates for foster care caseworkers are notoriously low, and Kent County is no exception. Caseworker turnover has a systemic impact on child permanency outcomes. According to a study referenced by Casey Family Programs, "children in care who had only one caseworker achieved permanency 74.5 percent of the time... [while] children who had two caseworkers achieved permanency 17.5 percent of the time, and only 0.1 percent of children who had six or seven caseworkers achieved permanency."<sup>8</sup> To support the foster care

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<sup>5</sup> MDHHS Fact Sheet, Children in Care by Living Arrangement at 10/2017 and 6/2019.

<sup>6</sup> Source: MindShare, licensed foster care homes at 10/1/2017 and at June 25, 2019.

<sup>7</sup> MiSACWIS Social Work Contacts Timeliness Info View Report, retrieved August 6, 2019; MDHHS Children's Services Agency - MMR Scorecard statewide performance, April - June, 2019

<sup>8</sup> Source: <https://www.casey.org/effective-strategies-achieving-permanency/>

workforce, WMPC has increased the staffing rate to its consortium member agencies, which has allowed:

- Hiring of staff who can quickly step into the role of Foster Care Case Manager during transitions;
- Hiring support staff to assist with scheduling medical and dental appointments;
- Hiring Family Engagement Specialists; and
- Increased salaries for foster care case management staff.

WMPC also added a position on its team which consolidates data entry for manual payments, freeing up the workforce to spend more time with children and families.

WMPC believes that its support of the foster care workforce has helped to ***improve overall agency performance*** and ***decrease the length of stay for children in foster care by 5 percent***<sup>9</sup>.

Mr. Chairman, WMPC is inspiring hope in our community by moving the needle on so many markers that are indicative of child safety, permanency, and well-being. We are creating belonging by shifting the mindset and practices of our child and family service system from one where we are the experts to one where we recognize that the best solutions lie within those we serve. We are intentional about co-creating solutions with those with lived experience as a youth in foster care, a parent of a youth in foster care, and foster parents.

In conclusion, Mr. Chairman, I am pleading for the urgent restoration of WMPC's funding before the November recess. Otherwise, we have been directed to transition our oversight of foster care in Kent County to MDHHS by December 31. If funding is not restored urgently, the years of work that have gone into creating this model will quickly unravel.

With the exception of WMPC's contract with MDHHS, there is no mechanism in the state that allows for the flexibility of a performance-based funding model. There is no other mechanism that allows for the real-time analysis of child data to inform program and practice decisions and continuous quality improvement other than through WMPC's contract with MindShare.

WMPC is a shining example of how a private/public partnership committed to the best interest of children can effectively collaborate to effect systemic change. At stake is the future of child welfare in the state, and Michigan has the opportunity to continue being an early adopter of this innovative approach. Most importantly, however, 850 children and their families deserve continued support through this pilot.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today. I hope that the next time I'm before this committee it is to share our continued successes and our lessons learned for other Michigan counties interested in implementing a performance-based model.

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<sup>9</sup> Source: Kent County Case Rate Pilot Fiscal Monitoring as of Fiscal Year 2019 Quarter Ending 3/31/19.