



Where Are Your Children Tonight?

BY CAROLE HURLEY

Every night in Texas, nearly 30,000 children go to bed in a shelter, a group home, a treatment center, or a foster home.¹ The state has determined, for a variety of reasons, that these children's birth families can no longer care for them in a safe manner and have placed them in state custody, or foster care. Once the state becomes responsible for these children, they are our responsibility. They belong to you and me — we, as the state, stand in for their parents. We need to ensure that their needs are met.

Child Protective Services (CPS), a program of the Texas Department of Family and Protective Services (DFPS), is the state entity that investigates tens of thousands of reports of child abuse and neglect every year. Only when no other options are available to provide for a child's safety is placement in foster care the choice. Faced with ever-burgeoning caseloads, high staff turnover, increasing numbers of child victims, and underfunding, CPS strives to provide these children and their families with the services they need to be safe, stable, and successful. Without adequate funding, it is a losing battle.

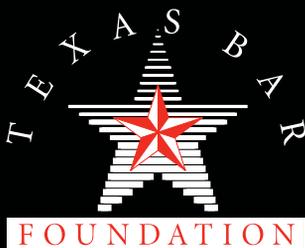
Children come into foster care from chaotic homes that lack stability. They may have been beaten, sexually abused, exposed to drugs, and neglected. School-aged children may have never attended school regularly. Younger children may have received little mental stimulation that is necessary for intellectual development. They come into care dirty, hungry, frightened, and bewildered, with little more than the clothes on their back. They are scared and angry, having been taken, with no warning, from the only environment they know, from people they love. Most children taken into care do not believe they have been “rescued” and, in spite of their dire living conditions, love the person from whom they were taken. They come into care with developmental delays, learning disabilities, mental health issues, and behavioral problems. While the hope is that placing children into foster care results in short-term placement in a stable, consistent, and structured home, leading to long-term improvements in their lives, statistics indicate this is not always the case.

According to the DFPS *2009 Annual Report and Data Book*, children in Texas remain in foster care an average of just over 14 months if they leave care to return to family or a relative. They stay in care an average of nearly 30 months if they are waiting for adoption. Some children stay in care until they turn 18 and age out of the system — those children average more

than five years in foster care. In spite of CPS’ best efforts, children in foster care move far too frequently, sometimes changing placement several times each year, so unlike the children in typical families, they often do not form strong bonds with their caretakers. With each move, most foster children change schools, losing the sense of continuity and security that comes from going to the same school day after day for years and losing the opportunity to form bonds with favorite teachers, school staff, and friends.

Every move for a child in foster care means a new set of house rules and expectations, a different schedule, new foods, and lost friends. The community support that most children rely on — team sports, Scouts, extracurricular activities — isn’t available to children in foster care because they move so often. When these children move, they often leave behind toys, clothing, and other precious belongings. Sometimes foster children have no warning at all that their placement is about to change, and they do not have the opportunity to say goodbye to friends and teachers. Each move can mean months of lost educational progress and emotional growth. Even very young children regress with a move.

Caseworker turnover at CPS, about 24 percent according to the DFPS *2009 Annual Report and Data Book*, means that



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most children will have a caseworker change several times during their stay in care, further increasing the lack of stability for the child. Foster care is meant to be temporary — it is not intended to be a substitute for a loving, permanent family. In spite of the best efforts of CPS and the private agencies that train and license foster families, some children in care continue to experience trauma. In some cases, foster children have been treated worse than when they lived with their birth families.

Children who have been in foster care often fare far worse than other children as they reach adulthood. Children who have spent time in foster care are much less likely to finish high school; one in four report symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (compared with 4 percent of the general population); the teen birth rate and incarceration rate are much higher than that of the general population; and nearly one-third of homeless adults report having been involved in the foster care system.²

In terms of spending for children in foster care, Texas ranks near the bottom of the national scale. With the recent economic downturn, more children are coming into care, yet most state agencies, DFPS included, are being asked to make significant budget cuts. Those cuts will make it even harder for CPS to take care of our children — the children for whom you and I are responsible.

Notes

1. "Children in Foster Care During Fiscal Year 2009," DFPS *2009 Annual Report and Data Book*.
2. Miller, Christen, *Texans Care for Children*. "Transitions to Adulthood for Texas Foster Youth." Policy Briefing Paper, Dec. 10, 2009.



CAROLE HURLEY,

a private practitioner in Austin, serves as co-vice chair of the State Bar's Committee on Child Abuse and Neglect. She is the proud parent of two adopted daughters who were previously in foster care.

TexProtects *Successful Child Protection Advocacy in Action*

BY MADELINE MCCLURE

TexProtects: The Texas Association for the Protection of Children is a statewide membership organization founded in 2004 to advocate on behalf of abused and neglected children. TexProtects educates its members and the Texas Legislature about solutions to reduce child abuse, improve the Child Protective Services (CPS) system, and heal child victims.

TexProtects leads the effort to ensure all child advocacy organizations speak with one voice. TexProtects initiated the Texas Child Protection Roundtable, which brings together research experts, advocates, and program providers with child protection expertise to develop consensus and promote a public policy priority agenda in unity.

In a short time, TexProtects has achieved major accomplishments. In 2005, 80 percent of TexProtects' legislative recommendations were incorporated into Senate Bill 6, the state's omnibus CPS reform legislation. The organization's advocacy efforts have substantially increased funding for child abuse prevention programs. In 2007, TexProtects played a crucial role in helping to pass S.B. 156, which created the Nurse-Family Partnership (NFP), an evidence-based home visitation program that improves the health and well-being of low-income first-time parents and their children. In 2009, TexProtects

secured \$18 million in funding from the Legislature to provide thousands of Texas children and families with NFP services statewide.

Other TexProtects legislation has included bills to increase pay and reduce caseloads for CPS caseworkers; to mandate judicial training and attorney ad litem training in child abuse issues; to require as a mandatory bond condition no contact with a victim for perpetrators charged with child sexual offenses; and to ensure judges take into consideration the impact a continuance will have on a child victim.

TexProtects' 4,000 members have played an instrumental role in these legislative successes. The organization's action alerts provide summaries of complex bills, plus talking points, sample letters, and contact information of decision makers, ensuring members' actions require a limited amount of time, expertise, and expense.

For more information about TexProtects, visit texprotects.org.



Madeline McClure is executive director of TexProtects and a licensed clinical social worker.