

**A Call for Child-Serving Systems to Coordinate Rapid Response Plan
Submitted to Cuyahoga County Health & Human Services Director David Merriman**

On October 15, 2021, the Advisory Board to the Cuyahoga County Division of Children and Family Services (CCDFCS) Community Advisory Board learned about the ongoing challenges of children and young adults with multiple needs staying at the CCDFCS Jane Edna Hunt (JEH) building, as well as the need for more residential placements that are equipped to support children who have experienced significant trauma. We commend the CCDFCS in striving to secure safe placements that meet needs of these children and young people but understand that this problem is one requiring a multi-system response. The Advisory Board agreed to adopt a statement advocating for child-serving systems across the county to work collaboratively to address this crisis with urgency.

Issue/Need

The fact that some Cuyahoga County children with multiple service needs do not have a safe and supportive place to live - or even to go temporarily for respite care - presents an urgent demand for an alignment of child-serving agencies to coordinate care using a rapid response plan. The children and youth staying in the childcare room at the JEH building are there for various reasons, but many are beyond the control of CCDFCS, including disruptions of foster care placements, significant developmental disabilities, serious mental health and/or behavioral health needs, domestic violence incidents with caregivers, disruptive but non-violent behaviors from children in need of intensive support services, and an overall lack of child-serving providers willing to accept children with high level needs. While our community may be relatively resource rich, our systems alignment and connections are poor. In addition to better systems coordination, there is also need for additional services, including more certified foster homes, short-term placements for respite care or crisis stabilization, in-home behavioral interventions, and other culturally responsive, trauma-informed supports, especially for older teens who are transitioning to adulthood. Essentially, these children and youth are homeless and in need of more intensive support within safe and stable residential options, at least for a short term. Ultimately, the overall goal should be for children and youth to be in families - or to be unified with their family - as soon as safely possible. For young adults seeking independence and requiring more long-term housing solutions, they too would benefit from relational supports and ongoing connections with caring adults.

Call to Action

As members of the CCDFCS Advisory Board, we were appointed by the County Executive and County Council to provide input from the community to CCDFCS on programming, practices and policies to address the needs of families and children at risk of abuse or neglect in our county. This includes advocating for the safety and well-being of all children and families in our county; however, in this instance, CCDFCS is only part of the solution. No single agency or department is solely responsible for what has led to this current challenge, nor is any single agency or department fully equipped to manage the myriad of needs presented by the children being brought to the JEH building. Collectively though, all of the county child serving systems have the combined expertise and abilities to create a system-wide rapid response plan for these children and youth. This includes: the juvenile and family court, the ADMHAS Board, the DD Board, the CCDFCS, housing providers and children's services providers.

We urge our Cuyahoga County health and human services leadership to convene these system leaders with a sense of urgency and a clear timeline in order to develop a comprehensive, child-centered, trauma-informed, multi-system, rapid response plan for children and youth with more intensive needs. This rapid response plan should take into account the contributing causes of the current crisis, including the complex needs of the youth, the relevant market forces, and workforce constraints, as well as potential new resources, such as potential ARPA funding, OhioRISE, and the brokering new services. This rapid response plan should also include a temporary residential option and be implemented as soon as reasonably feasible, acknowledging that any delay has immediate and potentially lasting traumatic impacts on these children.

Engage the Community

In addition to deeper and strategic investments in the child-serving systems and their collective service coordination, we also encourage the County to educate the broader community about the needs of these vulnerable children and to seek community assistance with recruiting more foster homes, in-home support services, crisis interventions, and mentors for youth. The CCDFCS Advisory Board can assist with these educational efforts in collaboration with the County.

In closing, alignment of resources and services for a group of youth who are isolated and traumatized, involved with multiple systems, and at high risk for additional harm is a humane and smart way to go. Our community has the leadership to bring us together to create the rapid response plan needed to make a meaningful difference in the lives of some of our most vulnerable residents. We stand ready to work in partnership with our leadership and request a timely response to this call to action. Thank you for your consideration.

Approved 12-13-21

Lakecia Wild, Chair, CCDFCS Advisory Board

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