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Number of kids in Missouri foster care drop, though officials admit challenges persist

Department of Social Services leadership testified at a House Children and Families committee hearing Tuesday about issues facing the state's child welfare agency

BY: **CLARA BATES** - SEPTEMBER 13, 2023 5:50 AM



📷 Director of Children's Division Darrell Missey and director of the Department of Social Services Robert Knodell testify in the House Children and Families committee Sept. 12, 2023 (Clara Bates/Missouri Independent).

Leaders of Missouri's child welfare agency on Tuesday touted a reduction in the number of children in the state's overburdened foster care system, telling lawmakers it represented

progress toward building a more preventative system.

But they also acknowledged that the Children's Division continues to face major challenges, fielding questions from the House Committee on Children and Families about persistent staffing and retention issues, a backlog of child abuse and neglect reports, a lack of publicly-accessible data and more.

There were 12,790 kids in foster care as of August 2023, down from a peak at 14,265 kids in 2021.

The reduction of kids in foster care is evidence of "the trajectory toward a healthier system," Robert Knodell, director of the Department of Social Services said, in part due to an increased focus on providing resources to prevent kids from entering foster care.

But "much work remains to be done," he said. "...We have no desire to either minimize or distract from these challenges."

The hearing, which featured wide-ranging questions from lawmakers about the Children's Division, took place Tuesday morning in advance of the legislature's annual veto session on Wednesday.

The next legislative session begins in January.

Rep. Hannah Kelly, a Mountain Grove Republican who chairs the committee, said convening the hearing to discuss a range of questions for Children's Division leadership was an effort to prepare for a "productive session for the kids in 2024."

"We all work together at the end of the day to make sure that kids are safe," Kelly said, "and to find out what that needs to look like as we move into each new session."

Progress on prevention, officials say



📷 The committee hearing room as Director of Children's Division Darrell Missey and director of the Department of Social Services testify in the House Children and Families committee Sept. 12, 2023 (Clara Bates/Missouri Independent).

Reducing the number of kids in state custody by expanding front-end resources to help families stay together has been a consistent [goal](#) of Darrell Missey, who became director of Children's Division in January 2022 – the sixth director under Gov. Mike Parson.

In 2021, the state removed children at a rate nearly twice the national average, even when accounting for poverty, according to the [National Coalition for Child Protection Reform](#).

And once kids enter care, the goal is “almost always” reunification, Missey said, but children taken into custody were reunited with their families only about half of the time last year, Missey said.

The other half includes adoptions, guardianships and aging out of the system.

In July, the number of kids in the state's foster care system dipped below 13,000 for the first time in nearly a decade, according to public data.

Number of Children in Missouri Foster Care

The number of kids in foster care dipped below 13,000 in July for the first time since 2014.



Point in time data: children in foster care on the last day of every month, Aug 2013-Aug 2023.

Chart: Clara Bates/Missouri Independent • Source: [Missouri Department of Social Services Monthly Data](#) • [Get the data](#) • Created with [Datawrapper](#)

Knodell credited the decline not only to “upstream prevention,” but also to children achieving permanency, improved staffing in “many areas,” and collaboration with the court system.

Missey said preventative services the agency currently offers include family-centered service workers who are involved in cases where the issues don’t rise to the level of needing to remove the child, who help connect families with resources, among other tasks.

Other preventative services include privately-contracted in-home services.

Last year’s budget included \$13.7 million to help “rebuild” the [Children’s Division](#) by hiring 100 “prevention workers.”

Missey said they have so far hired only 16 prevention workers and have “more in the pipeline.”



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And Knodell said staffing and “especially retention” in the agency remain “a real challenge.”

“We need more foster families,” he said. “I can’t say that enough. Capacity for prevention, notably in substance abuse, and behavioral health spaces is limited.”

A program called Parents as Teachers, which provides free at-home visits to provide high-need families parenting education and support, is moving from the social services department to be housed entirely in the Office of Childhood within the education department, which lawmakers raised concern about.

One **goal** of Parents as Teachers is to prevent child abuse and neglect.

“I am concerned that with this move,” Kelly said, “we are telling vulnerable families that they’re not going to get the specific attention needed by these services now.”

Missey said where the money goes “indicates what the emphasis is going to be” and “the context of child welfare is something very different from home visiting that is done in this context of education.”

Missey also said home-visiting funding would help the agency.

“If you all decided to give more funding for more home visiting that would be done by us or contracted with somebody, it would be welcome,” Missey said, “because it’s the kind of thing we need to be able to make sure that we can take care of kids in their own homes without removing them.”

Kelly pledged to continue the conversation about the program going into session.

“And I guess I’ll just say on the record that I feel this is not a good decision,” she said. “If I would have realized what was in the package that I cast a vote for, I probably would have thought differently about this.”

Concerns about data transparency



 Rep. Hannah Kelley, R-Mountain Grove (Tim Bommel/Missouri House Communications).

A major concern lawmakers raised during the Tuesday hearing regarded data transparency on the number of kids Missouri has in a temporary care program.

In 2020, lawmakers passed a law to create a “[temporary alternative placement agreement](#),” or TAPA, which provides removal of children from the home for no more than 90 days into relatives’ care. The parent or guardian voluntarily enters into a TAPA with the Children’s Division, and it can only be done when the child is not in imminent risk.

It was implemented in mid-2021. TAPAs, sometimes called “kinship diversions,” were [framed](#) as mitigating the trauma of entering foster care by preventing kids from needing to enter foster care.

Beginning in [2021](#), Kelly raised concerns that the kids in TAPAs agreements were “uncounted.”

The state does not publicly post the numbers of kids in temporary care, which lawmakers said gives an incomplete picture of the foster care system.

[Nationally](#) the practice of kinship diversion has been referred to as a kind of “hidden foster care” system which some child welfare experts have [criticized](#).

“I need to get these numbers, because it is my firm belief that we need to have a tracking system very similar to the tracking system that you give us here,” Kelly said, referring to the public data for the number of kids in foster care.

“We need to have that same transparency,” she said.

Missey said TAPAs are “the last line before we’re making a request for custody.”

Statute requires a family-centered service worker to be involved in the TAPAs cases, which Missey said is one “reason the number isn’t higher” – in St. Louis, he said, there are no TAPAs cases because there aren’t enough workers.

According to current data Missey shared at the hearing:

- There are 217 kids now in temporary care under TAPAs, meaning they are with relatives in temporary placements, within 188 agreements.
- There are 23 kids on what Missey called diversion, which is when the custodial arrangement is adjusted in the immediate family – for instance, when custody shifts from a mom to dad.
- In fiscal year 2023, the TAPAs and diversions combined included 1,065 kids, he said. Only around half returned home.
- Of those 1,065: 302 ended up in foster care, 508 were returned to their previous arrangement – generally meaning home, 149 were diverted to another caregiver, 97 to guardianship, and 65 unknown “which means to say there’s a data entry problem, in my mind” he said.

Lawmakers asked for more extensive, regularly-updated public data on the matter.

Knodell said the department believes “we have a capacity to provide you with ongoing numbers that are consistent with what I’ve got here, to the degree we can understand them,” and that he’d look into whether their system allows for that to be published.

Missey agreed that more transparency is needed, including so he himself can regularly consult the data.

“When people ask me these questions I have to dig to find out,” Missey said. “I have to say okay, research people, go find the answers to these questions. It’d be really nice if we could all just look at it. And I think we’re in the process of making all that happen.”

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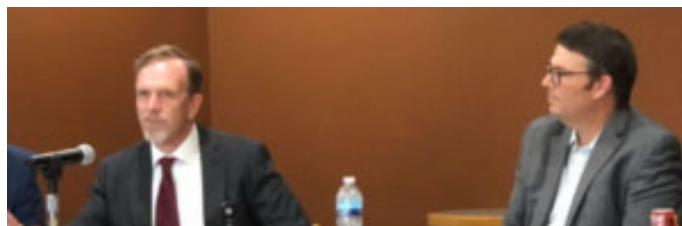
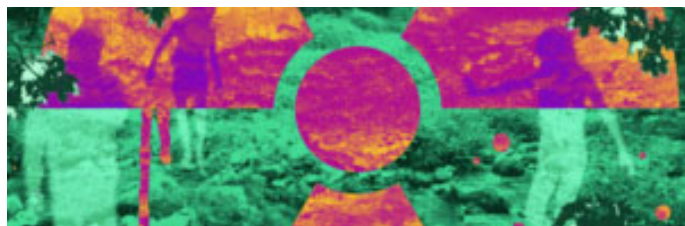
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