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Thank you, Task Force Members, for your hard work.

Hopefully your recommendations will begin us on a path to significantly improving the front end of the state's response to child protection reports. Because the challenge before the Governor's Task Force has focused on counties' initial response to child protection reports, the experience had by children and youth who are actually removed from their homes has not been part of the current discussion. The time has come to begin a similar level of scrutiny and investigation into whether our use of shelters, foster homes, group homes, and residential treatment centers for children removed from their homes actually results in safer, healthier children.

*Ampersand
Families
recruits and
supports
permanent
families for
older youth,
and champions
practices in
adoption and
permanency
that restore
belonging,
dignity
and hope.*

Inasmuch as the front-end response to child protection reports has been inconsistent county to county, so too is the out-of-home care experience for our most vulnerable children and youth. We have too many children in care without a meaningful, time-defined permanency plan to either get them home to their family, into a permanent guardianship situation with a relative or into an adoptive home. Too many older youth and youth of color are simply "stuck" in care, moving from place to place until they join the ranks of the 400 youth that age out of Minnesota's child welfare system each year (MN DHS, Child Welfare Report 2013).

As a community, we empower our county human service staff to remove children from their families when we fear for their safety. Once removed, children live their lives in a state-supervised, county-administered system of care that is inconsistent and that has almost no structure for accountability to assure that children receive what they need in order to do better than they were doing in the home from which we removed them. Whether or not their needs are met literally depends on the county of responsibility and the experience or caseload size of their assigned worker. We have to do better by these children and youth than luck of the draw. Individual social workers are empowered with extreme levels of decision-making authority to make life-altering decisions for young people who are in placement, sometimes with little training, support or accountability for the outcomes of those decisions.

With this letter I propose two actions on behalf of our most vulnerable children. First, I respectfully ask the Task Force to consider recommending to the Governor that he appoint a Task Force on the Well-Being of Children and Youth in Out-of-Home Care. Secondly, I add my voice to the professionals representing families and youth of color that recently recommended that the Governor's office create an Ombudsman to provide oversight, accountability and protections to children served in out of home care in Minnesota.



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