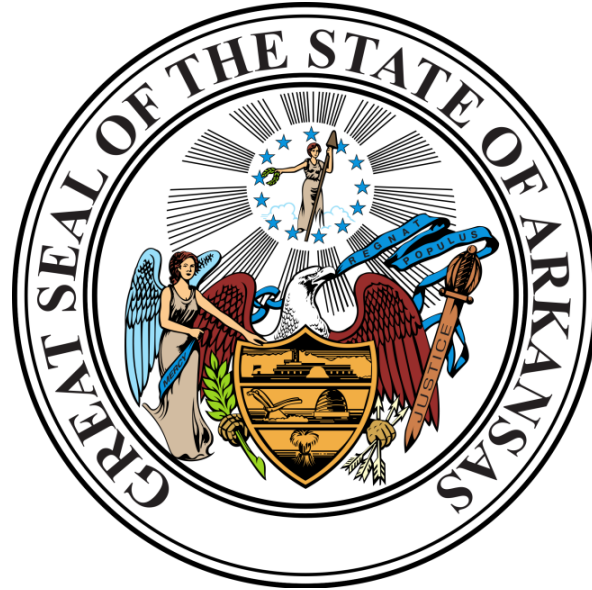


# EXHIBIT C



## Draft Report on Reducing the Number of Children in Foster Care

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## INTRODUCTION AND STUDY ISSUES

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Pursuant to Act 574 of 2021, the Senate Children and Youth and House Aging, Children and Youth, Legislative and Military Affairs Committees have been tasked with studying the best practices for reducing the number of children in foster care. The study shall include:

- An assessment of the number of children in foster care
- An examination of the state's current practices and policies aimed at reducing the number of children in foster care and the efficacy of those practices and policies;
- An examination of the methods other states use to reduce the number of children in foster care and the efficacy of those methods; and
- The formulation of a plan for the state to implement the best practices to reduce or eliminate the number of children in foster care, including without limitation increased funding, education, advertisement, and support.

The Committees held several information gathering meetings and heard presentations from various agencies and entities.

## ENTITIES WHO PROVIDED THE COMMITTEES INFORMATION

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### **The Division of Children and Family Services (DCFS), Department of Human Services**

DCFS is a division of the Department of Human Services, and is tasked with ensuring that children in the State of Arkansas are cared for. This involves monitoring foster care children, child abuse prevention, and adoption programs. In regard to foster care, the division has stated that the ultimate goal is to find safe and caring families for children and that they use every method available to ensure success. This includes partnering with private entities and community resources. The division presented to the committees on November 15, 2021, and June 21, 2022.

## **Restore Hope**

Restore Hope is a private organization in the state aimed at helping families stay together through interactive programs. The programs enable parents to receive education, work skills, housing stability, and more. This helps keep individuals out of incarceration and children with their families and out of foster care. Restore Hope presented to the committees on August 23, 2022.

## **Project Zero**

Project Zero is a private organization whose goal is to reduce the number of foster care children in the state to zero. They pursue this by raising awareness through recreational events, sharing individual stories of children in foster care, and partnering with other entities and community leaders. Project Zero presented to the committees on August 23, 2022.

## **INITIAL PROBLEM**

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### **DCFS Explains the Situation**

At the November 15, 2021, committee meeting, DCFS presented statistics and issues surrounding foster care in the state. When the pandemic began in March 2020, the number of children in foster care was 4,415, and reached 4,855 by October 2021. As of June 2022, the number of children in foster care has slightly fallen to 4,541. DCFS stated the increase is not attributed to increased foster care cases, but difficulties discharging children from care during the public health emergency as staff and clients were frequently quarantined.

Throughout the pandemic, DCFS has recorded over 1,300 staff quarantines, despite only having around 1,000 staff members. This meant there has been more than one positive COVID-

19 case among a single individual. This has caused a backlog of cases and put additional pressure on staff attempting to work the additional cases.

The average Family Service Worker caseload went from 20.2 in March 2020, to 24.9 in September 2021. The additional work resulted in turnover creating a buildup of more cases. The turnover rate for Family Service Workers was 44.58% in 2020 and increased to 65.3% in 2021. Additionally, turnover rates for Program Assistants was 45.38% and increased to 63.23% in 2021. The backlog of cases became serious enough that by September 2021, caseloads per worker were still higher than pre-pandemic levels. DCFS has recognized these problems and is currently implementing solutions to them.

## **FINANCIAL SOLUTIONS AND METHODS**

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### **Financial Plan of DCFS**

DCFS has implemented various strategies to ensure that employees are retained and properly trained to reduce the foster care numbers in the state. Salaries have been one area that DCFS has made efforts to improve upon; they have increased starting salaries for Program Assistants from \$26,000 to \$28,500 per year. Family Service Workers now start at \$36,155 per year, with a seven percent raise once classroom training is complete. Family Service Workers are further incentivized to stay with DCFS by requesting consideration of a paygrade promotion to a GS07 position as well as being eligible to become a Family Service Specialist with a ten percent increase in salary.

### **Techniques of DCFS**

DCFS is undergoing certain practices to reduce the number of children in foster care as well as ensuring that a child's new home is loving and safe. The agency has stated that when a

child is placed with a relative, maltreatment is less likely to occur in a home. Therefore, they have focused on this demographic, and children being placed with a relative has increased 13.9 percent from March 2019 to September 2021. DCFS is also increasing their staff training through webinars and studying best practices. The division has further increased their abilities by partnering with private companies such as Project Zero and Restore Hope. These companies are able to provide assistance to reduce foster care from a private sector advantage.

### **Techniques of Project Zero**

Project Zero has worked to raise awareness of foster care children in the state. One of their programs are videos of children giving their personal stories. These videos give character and emotion to the children for individuals to see. In addition, Project Zero puts on events every year such as *Disney Extravaganza*, which in 2022 was created through the efforts of over 450 volunteers, churches, business, and individuals in the community. Over 71 percent of waiting foster care children in Arkansas attended and were able to enjoy games while parents seeking to adopt and who were screened by DCFS before attending could observe them. There were 36 children adopted because of *Disney Extravaganza* this year.

In addition, Project Zero also strives to let waiting children enjoy their childhood while they are waiting for adoption. This is done through programs such as *Candy Land Christmas* in which they work to create a Christmas list for every waiting child. The list is put online and individuals are able to purchase items.

### **Techniques of Restore Hope**

Restore Hope is another entity that has a partnership with DCFS. Their methods center on parents in order to prevent children from being placed in foster care. Their clientele consists of parents in which:

- 72 percent have been incarcerated
- 25 percent are homeless
- 47 percent have not received either a GED or high school diploma

Due to these statistics, Restore Hope is providing stability to these individuals by offering programs where parents can attend trade schools to receive employable skills. In addition, the organization helps them find stable housing so that a family can focus on their education. As parents are given a stable lifestyle, a child is given a safer home environment, keeping them out of foster care.

## **REQUESTS OF THE STATE**

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Director Martin stated that Pulaski County needs 174 new positions over a three year period. This is due to a crisis in Pulaski County which has been created by a buildup of cases. She explained that her staff at present levels is not capable of keeping up with the rising number of children in foster care. In November 2019, there were 364 children in foster care in Pulaski County; by November 2021, there were 708.