

Children's Rights

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<https://www.childrensrights.org/making-kids-homeless-in-kansas/>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

In September, the media [reported](#) the alleged rape of a 13-year-old girl sleeping in a child welfare agency office in Johnson County, Kansas.

The story of this child staying overnight in an office because Kansas broken system lacked any housing for her exemplifies a long-known danger. Kansas child welfare system is, and has been for at least a decade, systematically failing to protect children in foster care in the custody of the states Department for Children and Families (DCF).

In November, Childrens Rights [took action](#). The class action lawsuit we filed, along with our partners Kansas Appleseed and National Center for Youth Law, tells the stories of what the ten child plaintiffs named in the suit have endured but they speak for thousands more.

The plaintiffs range in age from 7 to 17, and have been in foster care for anywhere from several months to nine years. They have all been subjected to disrupted housing conditions so extreme that they are essentially rendered homeless while under the care of the state. They are pushed to the breaking point by being moved from place to place with little more than the clothes on their backs. The state pays more than \$900,000 a month to private agencies to treat children this way with no accountability.

And things are getting worse. According to a 2018 study, which Childrens Rights believes actually underreports the extent of the problem, housing instability for Kansas children is on the rise. Children are churned through new placements at a rate more than twice the national average, and the number of repeat placements has increased by 30 percent since 2016.

Churning in the Kansas foster care system dates back almost 20 years. This dangerous practice moves children from one foster care placement to the next anywhere from ten to over 100 times while in DCF custody.

Churning treats children like packages on a conveyor belt: forced to find a place to sleep for a night or two anywhere a bed, couch, office conference room, shelter or hospital can be found. The vicious cycle can go on for days, weeks or even months.

The Kansas City Star [quoted](#) Lori Ross, a long-time Missouri child advocate, describing how constant churning dehumanizes already traumatized children: What one-night stays do is make it very clear to the child that they have zero value to anyone. You arent valuable enough to have stuff. Youre not valuable enough to go to school.

In addition to the devastating emotional and psychological impact, research shows that repetitive night-to-night placements also have a direct impact on childrens normal brain development, and can cause developmental and neurological damage that may be irreparable.

Children entering foster care are by definition traumatized and need mental health care. Yet administrative barriers within DCF, delays, and long waits for mental health services mean that children are being deprived of the treatment they need.

Churning is deeply tied to the problem: the trauma makes the need for mental health services even more urgent, while the very nature of churning creates barriers. Haphazard and unpredictable placements make it hard for kids to make or keep appointments.

The story of M.L., one of the plaintiffs named in the suit, is all too typical. M.L. is 17 years old. She entered foster care when she was six and was eventually adopted along with her sister. They were sexually assaulted repeatedly by their adoptive foster father but stayed in that home for three years before re-entering DCF custody.

Since then, DCF has moved M.L. more than 42 times. Once, for an entire week, she was forced to sleep in agency offices. Despite being diagnosed with PTSD and bipolar disorder, M.L. has not received consistent medically necessary mental health treatment. She has run away on several occasions and been the victim of sex trafficking.

Traci Dotson, a social welfare student at the University of Kansas, sees the states shortcomings through a very personal lens. She is herself a survivor of Kansas foster care system.

From 15 to 17 years of age I was in the custody of DCF. I am now working to change a broken system from the inside out. Our state is setting records for the number of children in custody; thats a record to be ashamed of. This lawsuit can deliver real, tangible relief for children who desperately need it. But even by just bringing this case to court, Childrens Rights is telling the world that Kansas is not protecting our most vulnerable children. People are finally talking about this. Thats the beginning of real change.

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First Name	Last Name
Email Address	

