

NATIONAL COALITION FOR CHILD PROTECTION REFORM

**53 Skyhill Road (Suite 202) / Alexandria, Virginia, 22314
Phone and Fax: (703) 212-2006 / e-mail: info@nccpr.org / www.nccpr.org**

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**For further information, Contact:
Richard Wexler, Executive Director
Office: 703-212-2006 / Cell: 703-380-4252
rwexler@nccpr.org**

MICHIGAN HARMS CHILDREN WITH NEEDLESS FOSTER CARE, INSTITUTIONALIZATION, CHILD ADVOCATES SAY *NCCPR Releases report with 37 recommendations for change – without additional spending*

DETROIT (FEB. 18) – Michigan is harming thousands of children by needlessly tearing apart their families, and institutionalizing far too many of the children it takes, according to a study released Wednesday by a national child advocacy organization.

“The take-the-child-and-run mentality that dominates Michigan child welfare endangers the futures, the psyches, and sometimes the very lives of vulnerable children,” said Richard Wexler, Executive Director of the National Coalition for Child Protection Reform, which released the report at a news conference at the offices of the Skillman Foundation. “Other states that take, proportionately, far fewer children have become national models for keeping children safe. They’ve done it by picking up the mantle of reform and innovation that Michigan dropped more than a decade ago.”

While these other states have significantly improved their child welfare systems, Wexler said, “Michigan has seen case after case in which children were taken from their own homes only to die in the licensed foster homes and group homes of strangers.”

The report includes 37 specific recommendations for reform. But, Wexler said, the recommendations would not require spending more money. “The great paradox of child welfare

is that the better the option for children, the less it costs,” Wexler said. Safe, proven alternatives to foster homes cost less than foster homes which cost less than group homes which cost less than institutions. That means all of the reforms we recommend can be accomplished by reallocating the money Michigan already wastes on needless foster care and institutionalization.”

In some ways, Wexler said, Michigan’s class-action lawsuit settlement with what he called “the group that so arrogantly calls itself ‘Children’s Rights’” actually will make things worse. “Though the settlement has some good provisions, it allows money to be diverted from programs that help poor people into more foster care,” Wexler said. And Wexler condemned a requirement in the settlement that grandparents and other relatives providing “kinship” foster care be formally licensed by the Department of Human Services.

“That requires complying with ten single-spaced pages of hypertechnical regulations few of which have anything to do with health and safety,” Wexler said. “Even the home in which President Obama was raised by his grandmother could not have met these requirements.”

Wexler noted that the requirements are retroactive “raising the very real possibility of the mass expulsion of children from the loving homes of grandparents, forcing them into the homes of strangers and the dormitories of institutions.

“CR is waging a war against Michigan’s grandparents, and DHS has surrendered,” Wexler said. “The group that so arrogantly calls itself ‘Children’s Rights’ doesn’t know much about either children or rights. Because if you ask almost any child who is old enough, he’ll tell you himself: If mom and dad can’t take care of me, I have a right to be raised by grandma and grandpa.”

Wexler said that in the early 1990s Michigan was looked to as a leader in child welfare. But reforms repeatedly have been undermined by what Wexler called Michigan’s “foster care-

industrial complex – a powerful network of private “providers” of foster care paid for every day they hold children in foster care.

“Michigan’s tragic history is one in which innovators reach out to bring to the state the best ideas from around the nation, only to have each one undercut by a foster care-industrial complex desperate to preserve its perks, its prerogatives and, most of all, its *per diems*.”

“Things are so bad that, according to a landmark study of racial bias in Michigan child welfare, the Michigan *Race Equity Review*, some private agencies required by contract to provide services to poor families in their homes simply refuse to do it because they don’t feel like venturing into inner-city neighborhoods – and DHS lets them get away with it,” Wexler said. “Things are so bad that Michigan’s private agencies have urged legislators to put agency interests ahead of children’s interests even if it may mean violating federal law.”

Wexler said some in that foster care-industrial complex actually mean well. “They’ve persuaded themselves that their failed programs are helping children just because their intentions are good. That’s bad enough. But not everyone is well-motivated.

“As Prof. Ronald Davidson, Director of the Mental Health Policy Program at the University of Illinois at Chicago Department of Psychiatry, and a key figure in reforming the child welfare system in Illinois, has written: ‘Sadly, there is a certain element within the child welfare industry that tends to look upon kids in the way that, say, Colonel Sanders looks upon chickens...’

“It all shows that the biggest addiction problem in child welfare is not substance-abusing parents, though that problem is serious and real.” Wexler said. “The biggest addiction problem in child welfare is powerful, well-connected private child welfare agencies that are *addicted* to their *per-diem* payments. And they are putting their addiction ahead of the children.”

Michigan’s child welfare tragedy also is fueled by what Wexler called “pernicious

myths" about who is in the foster care system and why.

“Contrary to the common stereotype, most parents who lose their children to foster care are neither brutally abusive nor hopelessly addicted. Far more common are cases in which a family’s poverty has been confused with child “neglect.” The Michigan *Race Equity Review* found such confusion pervasive in Michigan, noting that families calling DHS for help with heat in the winter may wind up with nothing but a cold house that now has a child abuse investigator at the door.

“Other cases fall between the extremes, the parents neither all victim nor all villain,” Wexler said. “What these cases have in common is the fact that there are a wide variety of proven programs that can keep these children in their own homes, and do it with a far better track record for safety than foster care.

“That is vitally important, not for the parents but for the children. The biggest myth in child welfare is the claim that child removal equals child safety, and tearing children from everyone they know and love somehow is ‘erring on the side of the child.’ In fact, there probably is no phrase in the child welfare lexicon that has done more harm to children than ‘err on the side of the child.’

“When a child is needlessly thrown into foster care, he loses not only mom and dad but often brothers, sisters, aunts, uncles, grandparents, teachers, friends and classmates. For a young enough child it can be an experience akin to a kidnapping. One recent study of foster care ‘alumni’ found they had twice the rate of post-traumatic stress disorder of Gulf War veterans and only 20 percent could be said to be ‘doing well.’ How can throwing children into a system which churns out walking wounded four times out of five be “erring on the side of the child?

“A second study, of 15,000 cases, is even more devastating. That study found that even maltreated children left in their own homes with little or no help fared better, on average, than

comparably-maltreated children placed in foster care.

“All that harm can occur even when the foster home is a good one. The majority are. But the rate of abuse in foster care is far higher than generally realized and far higher than in the general population. That same alumni study found that one-third of foster children said they’d been abused by a foster parent or another adult in a foster home. (The study didn’t even ask about one of the most common forms of abuse in foster care, foster children abusing each other). Switching to orphanages, already overused in Michigan, won’t help -- the record of institutions is even worse.

“Furthermore, the more a foster care system is overwhelmed with children who don’t need to be there, the less safe it becomes, as agencies are tempted to overcrowd foster homes and lower standards for foster parents. In Michigan, Timothy Boss, Joshua Causey, Johnny Dragomir, Ricky Holland, Isaac Lethbridge and Allison Newman all *died* in the name of “erring on the side of the child.

“But even that isn’t the worst of it,” Wexler said. Everyone knows how badly caseworkers are overwhelmed. They often make bad decisions in both directions – leaving some children in dangerous homes, even as more children are taken from homes that are safe or could be made safe with the right kinds of services. The more that workers are overwhelmed with children who don’t need to be in foster care, the less time they have to find children in real danger. So they make even more mistakes in both directions. That is almost always the real explanation for the horror-story cases that, rightly, make headlines.

“None of this means no child ever should be taken from her or his parents. Rather, it means that foster care is an extremely toxic intervention that must be used sparingly and in small doses. But for decades, Michigan has prescribed mega-doses of foster care,” Wexler said.

Among the other findings in the report:

●Michigan has virtually abandoned almost all serious efforts at prevention and family preservation – funding what little is done almost exclusively with relatively small amounts of federal money left over after slashing the welfare rolls. This money even has been diverted from keeping families together to subsidize middle-class families who may be adopting those same children. The settlement with CR may actually worsen this problem. (**Full report: *The coming TANF train wreck*, p. 19**)

●Michigan accepted an innovative waiver that would have allowed \$100 million a year in federal foster care money to be used for safe, proven alternatives as well – only to back out at the very last minute, and slink away from the deal. Florida accepted the same deal and, as a result, has made enormous progress in turning around its once dreadful child welfare system. (**Full report: *Squandering \$100 million the Michigan way*, p. 64**).

●Michigan’s Intensive Family Preservation Services program, Families First, nationally recognized as among the nation’s best, with an outstanding track record for keeping children safely in their own homes, has been marginalized within DHS, its budget repeatedly cut. (**Full report: pages 41 to 43**).

●Michigan appears poised to back away from still another successful innovation, Family to Family, (an initiative of the Annie E. Casey Foundation, a longtime funder of NCCPR, though not of the group’s current work in Michigan). Last year, DHS reduced the level of participation in the program at two key sites, Wayne and Macomb counties. (**Full report: *The campaign against Family to Family*, p. 59**).

“Few people remember the name of the character played by Marlon Brando in the movie *On The Waterfront*. The washed-up prizefighter was named Terry Molloy. He had a shot at glory but was forced to throw the fight,” Wexler said. “But even people who never saw the film know his most famous line: ‘I coulda been a contender.’”

“Michigan is the Terry Molloy of child welfare. Over and over it has a chance to be a contender for excellence in child welfare. And over and over, it throws the fight.

“But Michigan can be a contender again. It won’t take more money to do it, only the will, and the willingness to battle the entrenched interests that have stymied reform so many times before – this time, without throwing the fight.

ABOUT NCCPR

The National Coalition for Child Protection Reform is a non-profit organization whose members have encountered the child protection system in their professional capacities and work to make it better serve America’s most vulnerable children. A complete list of our Board of Directors is in the full report, and more information is available at www.nccpr.org

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