We must collaborate to transform the state's foster care system

By Craig Gordon

As someone who has been deeply immersed in our foster care system for over 40 years, I acknowledge that it has been in crisis for far too long. Although repeated temporary measures have been attempted over the years, the challenge of finding long-term, sustainable solutions for youth in foster care has eluded us.

There are significant challenges that must be overcome, including substance abuse, a housing crisis, staffing shortages and a reported 30% decline in foster care placements due to COVID-19. Moreover, a few highly publicized bad actors have had a chilling effect on potential foster parents' willingness to open their homes to vulnerable children. We can't let these very real problems deter us from ensuring that every child has a safe, supportive and loving home.

In my recent letter to the editor responding to *The Boston Globe* article "DCF using apartments as short-term housing for foster children," I wrote that the collaboration of human services organizations and DCF has provided temporary shelter to youth with complex medical and behavioral needs. These community-based nonprofits came forward to immediately address a critical lack of suitable placements and were intended as an alternative to youth sleeping on floors and couches in state offices. While we can commend the expeditious response, we also need to focus on sustainable, permanent solutions.

Despite the ongoing difficulties, we have witnessed progress in recent years that gives us hope. Organizations like Communities for People have worked tirelessly to preserve families, recruit and retain foster parents, seek out group homes and initiate independent living options for teens transitioning from the foster care system. By providing safe and stable homes and offering wrap-around services, we have made significant progress in improving the lives of the more than 4,000 youth in foster care.

Sustainable change requires ongoing and collaborative efforts from the public and private sectors to:

Implement proactive parental training: Address the root causes leading to children entering foster care by providing support services to parents dealing with housing instability, substance abuse, domestic violence, unemployment, mental health and other challenges.

Emphasize kinship care: When biological parents are unable to care for their child, prioritize placing them with relatives and other close caring adults who can provide a loving home and establish efficient protocols to ensure a smooth transition.

Streamline and optimize foster care recruitment processes: Simplify and expedite the process of becoming a foster parent to avoid frustration and application fatigue.

Improve foster parent retention: Address the concerns regarding low pay and lack of support for foster parents. Provide the resources foster parents need so they can effectively handle the challenges of today's youth.

Expand group care: Increase group home capacity for the toughest-to-care youth with trained staff and proven treatment models. Provide an array of effective, congregate care options of varying treatment intensities. This will require allocating additional resources and reevaluating zoning laws.

Enhance independent living options: Expand independent living programs for youth transitioning from the foster care system. Ensure that they have the necessary support including mental health assistance, job placement, life skills training and caring adult connections to thrive.

Address workforce challenges: Without a dedicated workforce, none of these options can be realized. This requires securing highly trained, competent staff by offering a living wage and investing in skill and career development. Additionally, we must create career pathways that inspire high school students to pursue social work/caring careers.

While I'm thankful for the temporary solutions, we need collaboration more than ever. By coming together and fueling innovative solutions, we can transform the foster care system and provide every vulnerable child with a safe and supportive environment. Our youth are depending on us, and together we can make a lasting difference.

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