

Foster families and children need advocates

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AUSTIN—Texas faces a foster care crisis, but Christians can make a difference through advocacy and by offering support to caregivers, workshop leaders told participants at the Texas Baptist Christian Life Commission Advocacy Day in Austin.

More than a year ago, a federal judge in Corpus Christi [ruled](#) Texas violated the constitutional rights of foster children by exposing them to unreasonable risk in a system where they “often age out of care more damaged than when they entered.”

In his State of the State address to lawmakers Jan. 31, Gov. Greg Abbott declared reform of Child Protective Services—including the foster care system—one of the top four emergency priorities for the Texas Legislature.

“We have a serious foster-care capacity crisis in Texas,” said Sarah Crockett, public policy coordinator for Texas CASA, the program that enlists and equips volunteers to serve as court-appointed special advocates for children.

Volunteers can help stand in the gap, she noted. More than 9,100 CASA volunteers served 27,953 children in 213 of the 254 counties in Texas last year. But with close to 49,000 children in care, that leaves 44 percent without the benefits of a volunteer.

One year of CASA advocacy costs Texas taxpayers less than one month of foster care, she noted.

In addition to serving as volunteer advocates for a specific child, Christians

also can advocate for better public policy regarding child welfare and the foster care system, Crockett said.

She highlighted four key bills in the Texas Legislature:

- SB 11 by Sen. Charles Schwertner, R-Georgetown, privatizes case management services; mandates timely and appropriate services for children in foster care; strengthens standards for investigations; and improves prevention services.
- HB 4 by Rep. Cindy Burkett, R-Sunnyvale, provides a monthly payment for relatives providing kinship care to children in the foster system.
- HB 5 by Rep. James Frank, R-Wichita Falls, makes the Department of Family and Protective Services a stand-alone agency, and it strengthens standards for investigations and consolidate investigations at CPS.
- HB 6, also by Frank, privatizes case management services and improves access to child-care services for foster parents.

Bills related to CLC legislative priority

She also noted several bills related to a CLC legislative priority—to support efforts to improve outcomes for foster-care youth while under state supervision, support efforts to move youth to permanency and increase support for youth aging out of the system.

- HB 596 by Rep. Jarvis Johnson, D-Houston, requires a child to have a court-appointed attorney the entire time he or she is in foster care.
- HB 928 by Rep. James White, R-Hillister, requires the Department of Family and Protective Services to help students apply for and transition to college when they age out of foster care.
- HB 2331 by Rep. Dawnna Dukes, D-Austin, creates a pilot program

for credit unions to partner with youth in foster care to teach them financial responsibility.

- HB 1608 by Rep. Ina Minjarez, D-San Antonio, creates a summer internship program for foster youth older than age 15.
- HB 1968 by Rep. Diego Bernal, D-San Antonio, requires judges to ask at permanency hearings if a foster child has received his or her birth certificate and Social Security card.
- SB 482 by Sen. Borris Miles, D-Houston, allows the Department of Family and Protective Services to collaborate with workforce boards to support foster youth in developing job and career options and securing their general equivalency diplomas.

Churches can support foster families

Panelists who participated in a related workshop emphasized the role churches can play in providing ongoing support to foster families.

Many foster families feel isolated, said Katelynn Holte, director of Restore Foster Care. Churches can help by providing short-term respite care or a parents' night out for foster parents, she noted.

Simply bringing a prepared meal to the home of a foster family demonstrates Christian compassion and care, said Don Forrester, vice president of programs and services with Children at Heart Ministries.

Christians also can provide positive role models for foster children and youth, he added.

"Kids who have five significant adults in their lives fare far better in adulthood than those who do not," he said.

Churches should require any adults who spend time with children and youth to submit to background checks, the panelists agreed, and several stressed the importance of offering [trauma-informed care training](#) to

church staff and volunteers.

Forrester also recommended [Empowered to Connect](#) resources for training and awareness.

Rachel Cooper, policy analyst with the Center for Public Policy Priorities, stressed the importance of kinship care, noting children in the foster system who are placed with relatives experience less disruption and greater sense of security.

Panelists noted churches can provide financial assistance, spiritual support and encouragement to grandparents raising grandchildren and other relatives who provide kinship care.