

Testimonial

Address for Nebraska State Senate*

Jessyca Vandercoy, M.S.W.

*Editor's Note: This testimony was presented in Fall, 2004 at a Nebraska Senate hearing on the crisis in Child Protective Services in the state.

My name is Jessyca Vandercoy. I have been employed as a Protection and Safety Worker in Omaha since 1999 in both on-going and initial assessment units. I have a Masters degree in Social Work and am a provisionally licensed mental health practitioner. I am here today speaking with a dual perspective. I work as a casemanager in the child welfare system and at one time was a state ward.

My life began in the child welfare system. I lived with my biological mother for about the first 18 months of my life. I was removed from her care and placed in foster care due to her inability to protect me from men she had in her life and her limited level of functioning.

I was brought to the attention of CPS in 1978 after a neighbor had called and made a report that I was outside in February in just a diaper. A case manager responded. I was left in my birth mother's home. That caseworker continued to question my birth mother's ability to care for me, so she returned again and again to ask questions and check on my well being. Over the first year of my life, I was in the hospital for body lice, pneumonia, cigarette burns to my feet, and a skull fracture. I was placed in foster care at 18 months of age.

I know exactly where I would be if I had not been placed in protective custody. I have a biological sister who was not as fortunate as I. She spent her first years with our birth mother. She is mildly mentally retarded. Her injuries and her impaired development are a result of abuse she endured as an infant by our birth mother's husband. She has a seizure disorder that is related to the abuse she faced. She was sexually abused as a toddler and was severely neglected as a child. She was later adopted by a relative and still struggles emotionally and physically.

I remained in foster care for two years. I was in foster care in Pennsylvania and my soon-to-be-adoptive parents were in Missouri. They had been foster parents for the public agency in Pennsylvania when they had lived there, and my mother had briefly been the attorney for the agency. As biased as she may be now, my adoptive mother says that when she got a

call from the adoption supervisor describing me, she knew right away I was their daughter. A year later, my adoption was finalized.

I am sharing my story here today as a testimony to how two children with the same birth mother and very similar circumstances can have two very different outcomes because someone had the courage and strength to intervene, take action and protect a child. I must thank more than a higher power. I must also thank a concerned community, a diligent case worker, a responsive CPS supervisor, a timely court, and probably others that I have yet to know.

The current crisis with Child Protective Services in Nebraska is alarming. I come to my job each day with the awareness that I make a difference. When I face children who have been abused and neglected, I know that I may be their hope. Yet, I know I can not do it alone. I am physically unable to reach the children that are listed in the near 60 case files I have sitting on my desk today. It will be too many children today and in six months from now, if there is not a fundamental shift made in our communities.

I see the crisis in the Child Welfare system as a burden we all share. No one agency can respond to the needs of these children and families alone. In my personal story, I believe that I made it out of a dangerous family system because of the many people who bothered to ask questions and commit to my well being. We must commit to the well-being of the children in the State of Nebraska. We do this by properly funding the agency and equipping the agency with trained staff and rewarding staff who attain higher education and experience. Additionally, we begin to believe community members have a responsibility to be involved and to not tolerate child maltreatment. The community must be educated on issues of child abuse and neglect. We receive many referrals from professionals in the community who will report their concerns but pass the responsibility to an overburdened system that is unable to respond in a timely manner. In the meantime, a child waits. As we know here in Nebraska this can result in the death or serious injury of a child. The system or the case manager does not injury our children. A parent or caretaker does and it happens because our society and

community does not respond to the call of protecting our children and supporting overburdened families.

Increasing funding to the Protection and Safety Division is a start, but is not enough. We must hold child abusers accountable, educate our communities, and improve rehabilitative and preventative services to families in need. We must provide adequate mental health and drug treatment to parents who are struck by these diseases. No one agency or government can bear the entire burden. We must require and train professionals, that have contact with children at risk, to complete professional assessments. This in turn helps the system to weed out referrals that do not meet the state standards of abuse or neglect. We must educate our communities, making sure they are well informed.

Lastly, our community must champion the work of protection and safety staff that enter the homes of gang members, the mentally ill, drug dealers, drug addicts, felons, and other dangerous parents in pursuit of protecting a child. Protection and Safety staff are overworked, underpaid, and repeatedly disrespected by the media.

I can personally tell you, I stay in this job because I care about children and families. I stay because I know that my work makes a difference. I stay because I was once a child waiting for someone to take action and protect me. I ask that as individuals and as a community we work to create communities in Nebraska that are involved and that are not tolerant of child maltreatment. I am proof that a community can make a difference in responding to child abuse and neglect.

Jessyca Vandercoy, M.S.W., lives in Omaha, Nebraska with her husband and two children. Jessyca has continued her work in Child Welfare as an Independent Home Study Contractor for the Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services. As a home study contractor, Jessyca assesses the appropriateness of traditional foster home and relative placements. Jessyca has also recently become a foster parent for a 22 month old girl.