

**Metro**

A fix for the state's broken foster care system? Lawmakers pledge action



JESSICA RINALDI/GLOBE STAFF/FILE 2019

The DCF office in Roxbury.**By Kay Lazar**

GLOBE STAFF APRIL 09, 2019

One lawmaker immediately called the state's child advocate.

Another may refile legislation requiring an independent review any time a child is bounced around in foster care.

Still another said she will push for more money to keep troubled families intact, so fewer kids might end up in the state's broken foster care system.

The action follows a Boston Globe story Sunday that revealed an [overwhelmed state child protection system](#) in which youngsters are regularly pushed, night after night, from one temporary emergency foster home to another because there aren't enough safe havens for all of them.

The Department of Children and Families doesn't use a central system for tracking the available foster homes on any given night, creating a chaotic process that forces social workers to scramble each night, and children to be driven around for hours, in search of an open home.

“I was shocked to hear that,” said Representative Kay Khan, a Newton Democrat who has cochaired the Joint Committee on Children, Families, and Persons with Disabilities for a decade. She said lawmakers approved money several years ago for DCF to upgrade workers’ computers and cellphones.

Khan said she called the state Office of the Child Advocate on Monday, an independent agency that advocates for children and families, to ask for a meeting. She wants the office to organize a review of other states’ child protection departments to see how Massachusetts could improve its system.

“If we don’t take care of these kids, they’re the ones that end up in the criminal justice system at some point,” Khan said.

Khan’s committee cochair, Senator Sonia Chang-Diaz, a Democrat from Jamaica Plain, said she will advocate for more money in the state budget to help families on the edge receive needed substance abuse and mental health treatments.

Children are landing in foster care and mired there for increasingly longer stretches of time as the opioid epidemic continues to splinter families and flood the foster care system. Advocates told the Globe that families are not receiving the help they need, and

DCF remains reluctant to return children from foster care to these unstable homes.

Approximately 80 percent of the children in DCF's caseload — more than 36,000 youngsters — remained at home in fractured families desperate for help, and potentially at risk of entering the foster system. Yet less than 10 percent of the agency's services budget goes to family support and stabilization services, according to a recent budget analysis by Massachusetts Law Reform Institute.

“Getting more money for everything is an uphill fight,” Chang-Diaz said. “But this issue is very much on my radar.”

Representative Tricia Farley-Bouvier, a Pittsfield Democrat who is championing a bill to strengthen foster family rights, said she might also refine and resubmit a previous proposal to require an independent review of any case in which a child is moved from one foster home to another more than twice after being removed from his or her parents.

State data show that almost one-third of children in foster care in Massachusetts get shuffled to multiple foster homes in their first few months away from their parents, a rate greater than just about anywhere else in the country.

Fixing this problem “doesn’t seem to be a priority for the department, and yet there are really bad outcomes here when kids are bouncing,” Farley-Bouvier said.

A spokesman for Senate President Karen E. Spilka said the Ashland Democrat is “taking a look at the issues raised” in the Globe story but declined to elaborate. House Speaker Robert A. DeLeo said in a statement he has tapped a member of his leadership team, Representative Paul J. Donato, as a point person for future action.

“I’ve already spoken with leader Donato on this issue, and I look forward to hearing from other House members as we look at ways to address this ongoing problem,” DeLeo said.

Kay Lazar can be reached at kay.lazar@globe.com Follow her on Twitter [@GlobeKayLazar](https://twitter.com/GlobeKayLazar).

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