

# Trauma-Informed Child Welfare for a Resilient Iowa

## ACEs:

Adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) are traumatic events that can dramatically upset a child's sense of safety and well-being.

### ADVANCING A TRAUMA-INFORMED CHILD WELFARE SYSTEM

The effects of child abuse and neglect are as varied as the children affected. Traumatic experiences can overwhelm children's natural ability to cope. Chronic or repeated trauma may result in toxic stress that interferes with normal child development and cause long-term harm to children's physical, social, emotional, or spiritual well-being. These adverse effects can include changes in a child's emotional responses; ability to think, learn, and concentrate; impulse control; self-image; attachments to caregivers; and relationships with others. Children's responses to traumatic events are unique and affected by many factors, including their age at the time of the event, the frequency and perceived severity of trauma, and the child's innate sensitivity, as well as protective factors such as the presence of positive relationships with healthy caregivers, physical health, and natural coping skills which can buffer some of the negative effects.

Trauma of all kinds is extremely common among children involved with child welfare. Studies show that as many as 9 out of 10 children in foster care have been exposed to some form of violence. Entry into the child welfare system causes additional trauma due to separation from family, school, neighborhood, and community, as well as fear and uncertainty about the future. In addition, children who enter the child welfare system are more likely than others to have experienced multiple traumatic events and to exhibit more complex symptoms.

Child welfare systems that are trauma-informed are better able to address children's safety, permanency, and well-being needs. With the shift in attention toward well-being and healing, the child welfare professional's role changes. Staff will spend more time screening for trauma, facilitating effective mental health treatment, and following up to ensure appropriate progress is being made toward those treatment goals.

11,236 

Iowa children confirmed as abused by parent/caregiver in 2017, up **26%** from prior year.

### LEGISLATIVE REQUESTS

Support the continued development of a trauma-informed child welfare system in Iowa by:

1. Reducing the caseloads of Iowa DHS Social Workers to meet the recommended Child Welfare League of America standards of no more than 12 cases per social worker investigating child abuse, and no more than 17 cases per social worker for ongoing in-home cases.
2. Investing in the Comprehensive Child Welfare Information System to support the critically needed data system overhaul to ensure the state is able to ensure program quality and the safety of children in Iowa's child welfare system.
3. Advancing evidence-based practices which support children, families and professionals in multiple disciplines and settings, to reduce the need for out-of-home placement in the child welfare system.





## Keys to Advancing a Trauma-Informed System

It is essential that all professionals, caregivers and volunteers involved with the child welfare system [Department of Human Services (DHS) Social Workers, Child Welfare Service Providers, Family Safety, Risk, and Permanency (FSRP) workers, Foster Parents, Juvenile Court Services, law enforcement, attorneys, Guardian Ad Litem, Court Appointed Special Advocates, medical and mental health providers, victim advocates, etc.] are well-equipped to provide high quality, trauma informed practices to support children and families who experience adversity as a result of child abuse, neglect, or other acts of violence. Hearing repeatedly about children's trauma histories may result in vicarious trauma (the personal transformation that occurs as a result of working with clients' traumatic experiences) or secondary traumatic stress (the stress resulting from helping or wanting to help a traumatized or suffering person) among professionals. Left untreated, this can decrease effectiveness and lead to excessive burnout or turnover. Being trauma-informed (understanding, recognizing, and responding to the effects of trauma to help survivors rebuild a sense of control and empowerment) requires attention to trauma's effects on all participants in the system including children, caregivers, and service providers.

### CHILD WELFARE IN IOWA FACTS

- In 2017, 11,236 children in Iowa were confirmed as being abused by a parent or caregiver, an increase of 26% from the previous year and the largest single year increase of abuse in the past two decades.
- In 2017 in Iowa, 9,716 children were placed in foster care. Iowa is higher than the national average with 8.1 per 1,000 children in foster care (compared to the national rate of 5.6 per 1,000 children).
- Children of color are disproportionately represented in Iowa's foster care system: Five times the number of American Indian/Alaskan Native and four times the number of African American children per 1,000 as compared to white children.

**IOWA** RELIES ON DHS SOCIAL WORKERS TO PROTECT OUR CHILDREN

**32%**

of social workers handling child abuse investigations had 15+ cases compared with recommended load of 12 cases

**59%**

of ongoing Case Workers visiting homes had 30+ cases compared with recommended load of 15-17 cases

**1:7**

ratio of supervisor to case manager compared with recommended ratio of 1:5

## References

Prevent Child Abuse Iowa (2018, December 27). *Child Abuse in Iowa*.

Child Welfare Policy and Practice Group (2017, December 22). *Iowa Department of Human Services Initial Targeted Child Welfare Review*.

Iowa State Data Center (2018, March 30). *Number of Children in Foster Care*.

Iowa Department of Human Services (2017, June 30). *Annual Progress and Services Report*.

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