

STORM WARNING

Louisiana Needs More Foster Homes for Children

**An Advocacy Paper
May 2023**



Louisiana United Methodist Children and Family Services, Inc.
Serving Louisiana's Children and Families for 121 Years
<https://LouisianaChildAdvocacy.com>

Storm Warning: Louisiana Needs More Foster Homes for Children

Too Many Children, Too Few Foster Homes

Louisiana is unprepared for the storm approaching the shores of its child welfare system. Louisiana's children in foster care require that the Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) has sufficient staff and that DCFS staff have adequate training, software, vehicles, and all the tools necessary to accomplish their life-saving work. In the latter half of 2022, Louisiana read the headlines about what happens when any state's child welfare agency is under-resourced and weak: some un-rescued children will die.

Under the oversight of the Senate Health and Welfare Committee, DCFS is reorganizing and expending great effort to rebuild and train staff. Although not yet robust, DCFS is working to restore itself.

Louisiana's children in foster care require foster homes. This fact is more important to the individual children in DCFS custody than whether the agency has enough staff and tools. Unfortunately, for too long, Louisiana has recruited, trained, certified, and maintained too few foster homes to meet the needs of children.

“There are 178 fewer foster homes this year than there was last year, while we have 531 more children this year than last year.” – Terri Ricks, Secretary of Louisiana Department of Children and Family Services, to House Appropriations on 4/4/2023.

The Current Situation

The situation is worsening. The growing gap between the number of children in foster care and the number of foster homes available to care for them may soon overwhelm Louisiana's child welfare system. The gap is growing suddenly, and there is no indication of a timely correction.

In testimony to the Louisiana Senate's House Appropriations Committee on April 4, 2023, DCFS Secretary Terri Ricks, speaking about the increasing demands upon DCFS, reported,

“So we want to talk to you about the investigations, the changes in effort and need that's affecting child welfare caseloads. Investigations based on the number of calls that we're getting right now are projected to climb 43% higher this fiscal year over last year. If that trend holds, that translates to **7700 more investigations this year than last year** for child protection. As cases increase, there's also an increase in urgency. Whereas last year, 66% of those calls that we got needed to be investigated within 48 hours. That's risen to 77% so far.”

Secretary Ricks continued, “We have **531 more children in foster care** today than a year ago. We need foster parents. There are **178 fewer foster homes** this year than there was last year, while we have 531 more children this year than last year. The climbing number of intakes accepted for investigation has led to an increase in open cases. There were 7,302 investigations opened the first week of March as compared to 4,646 at the start of the fiscal year.”

(The bold text is for emphasis.) Those numbers, the increase of 531 children in foster care against a loss of 178 foster homes, are frightening.

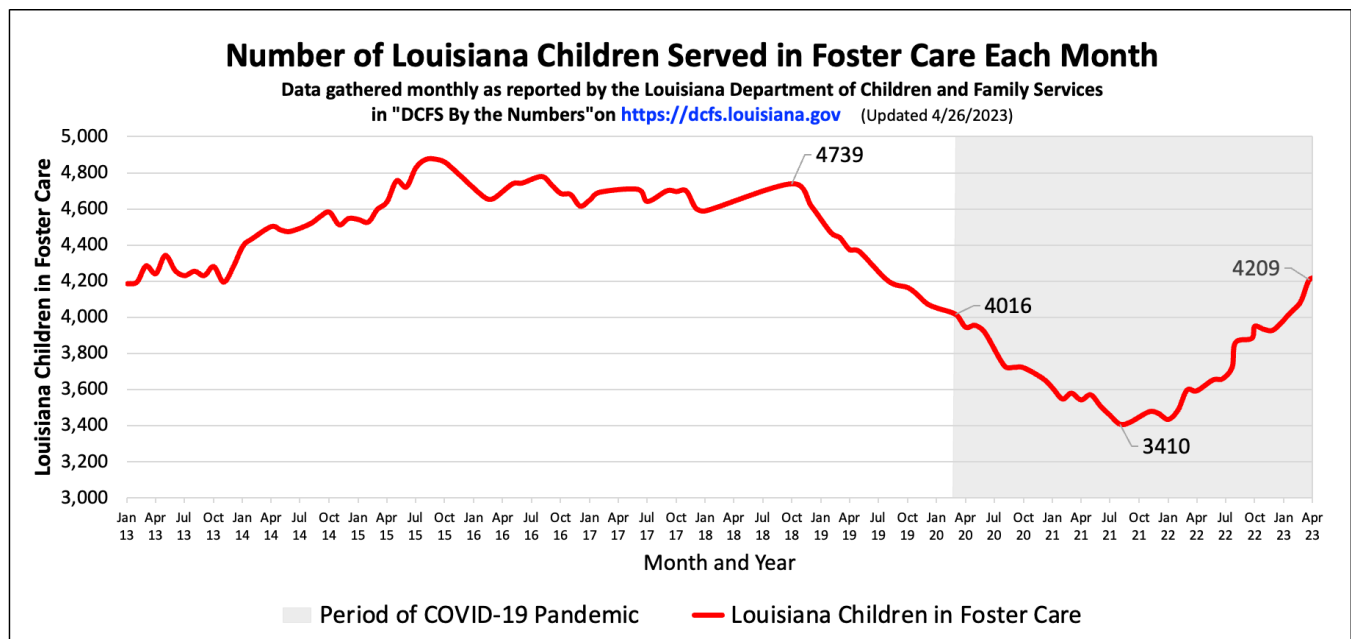
Foster care is not an elective service chosen by children upset with their parents. Children are only in foster care because of abuse or neglect that was severe enough for a judge to order their removal for their safety.

Data shows that the number of Louisiana children in foster care is increasing. The consequences for children will only worsen until Louisiana secures enough foster homes to handle what lies ahead.

The Data

Each month, the Louisiana Department of Children and Family Services updates a statistical block on its website titled “DCFS By the Numbers.” At any point, the numbers indicate only the latest reporting period. Without the perspective of time, it is impossible to know whether this month’s numbers are better or worse, larger or smaller, than any time in the past.

Fortunately, DCFS is faithful to report this data each month. The chart below shows the history and trends of Louisiana children served in foster care each month since January 2013. The last few years indicate an interesting wide “V” pattern.



The period of the COVID-19 pandemic is at the right end of the chart, highlighted in gray. The “V” in this period makes sense. Schools closed as an early response to the pandemic.

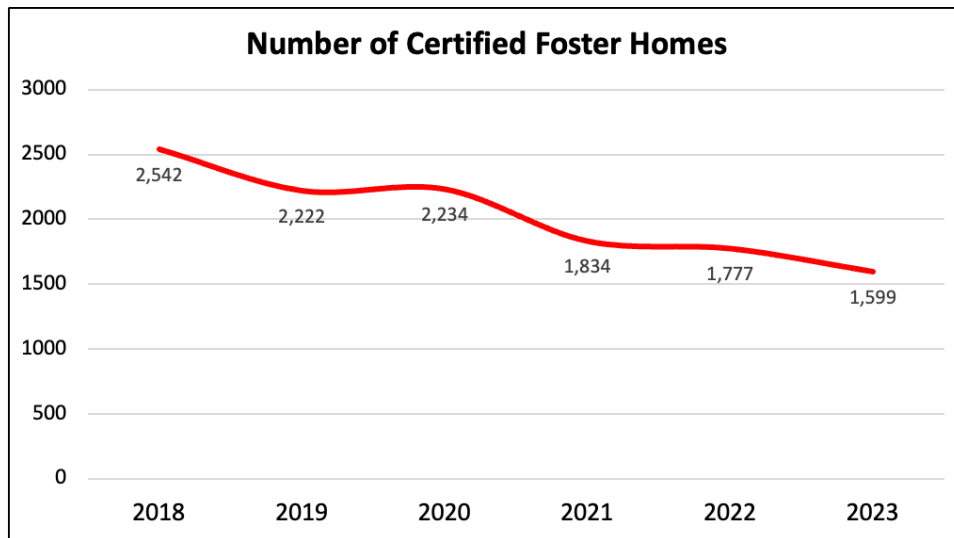
(It is difficult to account for the steady decline that began a year before the pandemic, but the previous period from July 2015 through October 2018 appears to represent the “normal” number of children in Louisiana’s foster care system, but it may only mark the bottom of the range that extends beyond 2025.)

The chart gives every reason to believe the number of Louisiana children in foster care will continue to increase again to at least the 2015-2018 normal range. The realities of society combined with DCFS’s

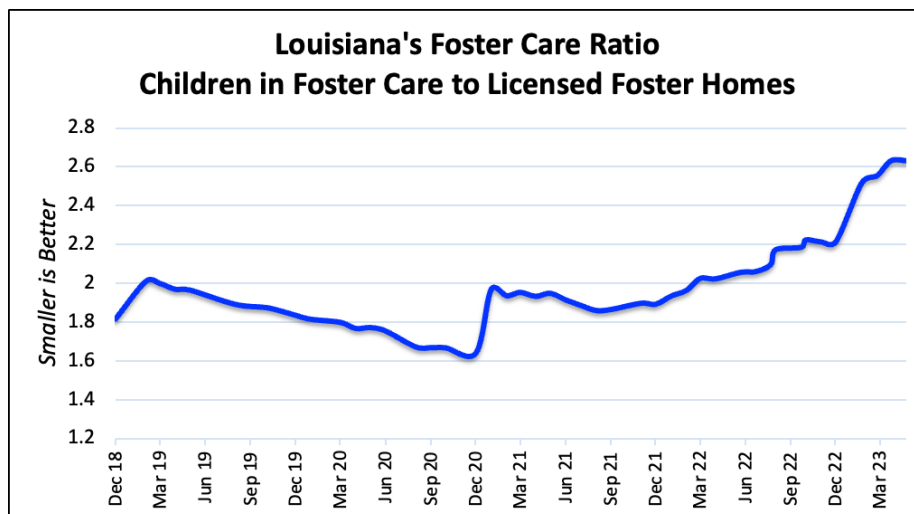
restrengthening may explain the continued increase: children are in schools where they are seen, substance use is rising, calls the Hotline to report child abuse and neglect are increasing, and DCFS is successfully staffing up to fill vacancies making the agency more responsive to children’s needs.

Louisiana Foster Care Trends

Understanding that the number of Louisiana’s children in foster care is dramatically increasing is only the first step to appreciating the scale of Louisiana’s crisis. One must also understand that while the number of children in foster care is rising, the number of foster homes available to provide care steadily decreases. The chart below shows the number of certified foster homes in Louisiana during recent years. While the number of children is increasing, the number of homes is decreasing.



Louisiana’s “Foster Care Ratio” is the ratio of children in foster care to the number of licensed foster homes. Smaller Foster Care Ratios are better than larger, because the small ratio indicates more homes are available relative to the number of children who require them. As indicated by the chart below, Louisiana’s Foster Care Ratio is climbing and the trend is clearly moving in the wrong direction.



Louisiana Begins “Officing” Children

Already, Louisiana has too few foster homes available for children. There are consequences. In more than one region, DCFS has had to keep children in offices overnight. The technical term for this is “placement exception.” However, the more descriptive colloquial word “officing,” is used when public child welfare agencies keep children in state office buildings overnight because foster care and group homes are unavailable.

Officing usually precedes “hoteling,” the next step states take to address a shortage of foster homes when officing becomes unmanageable. (The risk is real. Georgia provides an example of a public child welfare agency losing control. During 2022, Georgia appropriated \$28 million for its Department of Children and Family Services to put children in hotels. Some of the children lived in hotels for months at a time.)

When children stay in offices or hotels, they are often unschooled. In addition, children who have been trafficked through hotels are at risk of renewed trauma from forced hoteling.

Simply stated, for Louisiana, the number of foster homes, or other types of appropriate placements, must increase to meet the needs of children already in care, and faster than the growing number of children who will enter foster care.

Finally, to learn more about the use of officing and hoteling, and their impact upon children, see: <https://louisianachildadvocacy.com/hoteling-children-in-foster-care/>

Preparing for the Approaching Storm

We in Louisiana know the ways that hurricanes affect all of us. They devastate our lives and interrupt our progress. So, we begin working together to care for our families and communities before the storm arrives. We prepare, we endure, and we recover. In the same way, all of us in Louisiana must work together to secure enough homes for children in foster care. We must recover Louisiana’s foster care system.

Louisiana’s Department of Children and Family Services cannot weather this storm alone. Today, Louisiana’s children in foster care require more help than the State of Louisiana can provide because the gap has grown too large. Louisiana’s children need all of us to work for their protection before the storm arrives.

So, here are several ways Louisiana’s foster care stakeholders can act now to protect children through the approaching child welfare storm:

1. Those who are able can volunteer to become foster parents. DCFS’s “how to” is here: <https://www.dcf.louisiana.gov/page/adoption-louisiana-foster-children-in-need-of-forever-homes>
2. Louisiana’s faith community can step up to reclaim its proper role in ministry to children. When one surveys Louisiana’s child welfare history (which long predates the state’s regulatory or direct involvement in the well-being of Louisiana’s children), there is no doubt that Louisiana’s children have benefited from the partnerships of Church and State. Without question, Louisiana’s children have been helped more when Church and State have partnered well to care for children than when the two have worked apart.

Unfortunately, due to changes imposed by Louisiana to create the *Healthy Louisiana*, the state's Medicaid-funded managed care system, the larger faith-related child welfare providers were forced out of child welfare and into behavioral health. At the same time, between 2013 and 2014, smaller child welfare group home providers were forced out of operation by suddenly and drastically reduced per diem rates. The loss of large and small child welfare providers systematically eliminated placement options for DCFS. Even now, the services provided by these organizations lost to child welfare work have not been replaced, leaving too few placement options for children whose behavioral needs require structure. (These are the children who are now in offices and hotels.)

With Louisiana's governmental entrée into child welfare in the 1940s, laws and methods were created to ensure basic safety for children. The state promulgated "minimum standards of care" for private agencies. The State of Louisiana began regulating school attendance; ensuring primary medical care was available, like health screenings and vaccinations; and implementing laws to protect children from abuse, neglect, and child labor. Without a doubt, this was a good thing.

In addition to loss of services that took place in 2012-2014, an earlier loss occurred. With the initial entrée of state government into child welfare, many participants in the Church's child welfare efforts faced decisions related to the separation of Church and State, distribution of power, and duplication of services. Consequently, some faith groups began abdicating their critical work in child welfare. For example, rather than transitioning their orphanages by modifying services to meet the identified needs of children as society evolved and government regulations increased, some denominations responded by shuttering children's services.

It is essential to understand that this abdication by the Church is no small thing in Louisiana's history. The list of shuttered, faith-related child-serving organizations – *organizations which no longer exist in Louisiana* – is very long. For example, it includes more than 65 former "orphanages and asylums" in New Orleans alone.

In the vernacular of the street, the Church once "owned" child welfare. Unfortunately for Louisiana's children, as the State of Louisiana increased its presence, power, and direct control in child welfare through the years, the Church backed off. As a result, today, Louisiana has relatively few faith-related ministries addressing the needs of children in foster care.

In fact, today, only three faith-related organizations are actively and broadly recruiting foster families in Louisiana. Two of these organizations limit their activities within their denominations, and Methodist Foster Care, with more than 150 children in care, specializes in therapeutic foster care.

There is a role for faith groups in foster care recruitment and services, but these groups must be encouraged to step up to care for children. The work does not happen by accident, and without an invitation and sufficient information to understand the need, faith groups may be slow to act. Unfortunately, when Louisiana's children need large numbers of placements, most interventions by faith groups today will be congregation-specific and not able to scale quickly to meet the state-wide needs of thousands of children.

3. Until this storm passes, Louisiana's Governor and the members of our Legislature can prioritize the recruitment of foster homes over other matters. We often forget what a powerful influence our Governor's Office exerts upon issues related to children's services. For example, one can look at the

work of the Children's Cabinet. Under some Louisiana governors, the Governor's Children's Cabinet has nearly failed to exist due to a Governor's failure to prioritize the needs of children. However, under other Governors who sought to improve conditions for children, the Children's Cabinet was restored and became very active as it is now.

For better or worse, Louisiana's Governor determines whether children and their needs are broadly prioritized in Louisiana. Equally important is the degree to which the Senators and Representatives who comprise the Louisiana Legislature keep an eye on Louisiana's children.

So, imagine a statewide ad campaign in which members of Louisiana's opposing political parties stand together to say, "We may disagree on some things, but we are absolutely united in our work to protect Louisiana's most important asset. Please consider becoming a foster parent. Here's how"

4. DCFS must continue improving its foster parent recruitment, training, certification, and maintenance procedures to allow individuals to open their homes to children in foster care. For example, while qualifications must be met and verified, feedback from foster caregivers about the process indicates DCFS can simplify the steps required to become foster parents.
5. We must all keep in mind that children cannot solve this. They need all of us!

The State of Louisiana owns this problem. Louisiana must organize and invest in a very public, energetic, state-wide foster care recruitment campaign. State government gained skills in publicizing crises during the initial years of the COVID-19 pandemic. Louisiana can transfer the lessons learned in that work into a public campaign to recruit foster homes for children. The public needs to see maps of foster care gaps. Until this crisis passes, the Governor and state officials must be in front of cameras each week promoting foster care.

Summary

While the last year seems chaotic for Louisiana's child welfare system, the trends indicate Louisiana is experiencing the calm before an approaching storm. Recruiting enough foster homes for a rapidly growing number of children in foster care must become Louisiana's priority, and work must begin immediately. Otherwise, Louisiana will find it nearly impossible to care properly for children, and children will suffer.

###

References

1. WSBTV.com News Staff. *Georgia paid \$28 million to keep foster kids in hotels last year.* <https://www.wsbtv.com/news/local/georgia-paid-28-million-keep-foster-kids-hotels-last-year-costing-taxpayers/3RCKKOA02ZAJHBWD2Q5VTOQATE/> Feb 2, 2023. Accessed April 19, 2023.
2. Wheat, Rick. *Hoteling Children in Foster Care.* <https://www.louisianachildadvocacy.com/hoteling-children-in-foster-care/> October 24, 2022. Accessed April 19, 2023.
3. Louisiana Department of Children and Family Services. *Adoption - Louisiana Foster Children In Need of Forever Homes.* <https://www.dcf.louisiana.gov/page/adoption-louisiana-foster-children-in-need-of-forever-homes> Accessed April 19, 2023.