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Is Anti-Racism Training For Child Welfare Workers Moving The Needle?

The number of black and minority children going into foster care increased more than the number of white children going into foster care in the five years since the state began training workers to combat "institutional racism" within the child welfare system.

The number of children in foster care increased overall between this year and 2015, when Michigan Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) sought out a contractor to help train child welfare workers in an effort to address what some say is the overrepresentation of children of color in the child welfare system.

But child welfare advocates say institutional racism extends beyond the placement of children in foster care, as the removal of children from homes comes at the very end of the line in a complex system, said Michele **COREY**, vice president for programs at Michigan's Children.

"There are so many inequities in service provision and action by service providers and others that lead to these kinds of inequities in out-of-home placement," said Corey, who added later that to "really assess" the over-representation or "even increasing inequities in the out-of-home placement end of things, you really have to look at the inequities at all stages of the system."

The state just recently added funds to its contract with Eliminating Racism & Creating/Celebrating Equity (ERACCE), a Kalamazoo-based firm hired to deliver training to help root out racism within the child welfare system (See "[DHHS Seeks Training To `Combat Institutional Racism' In Child Welfare.](#)" 7/27/15). The funding is good through Fiscal Year (FY) 2022, according to the grant amendment approved by the State Administrative Board (SAB) last month.

The total number of children in foster care is up roughly 5% since 2015. And for children of color, they've seen a 9% increase in foster care placements since 2015, and all minorities have seen a nearly 8% increase, compared to white children seeing a 3% increase, according to data provided by the DHHS broken down by race.

DHHS spokesperson Bob **WHEATON** said the overall increase "is the result of both an increase in entries and lengths of stay in care," and noted the numbers include children past the age of 18 who "voluntarily remain in foster care" so as to "take advantage of monthly stipends and supports."

As to the increase of placement of minority children, "we can only speculate," Wheaton said.

Parker **JAMES**, the Kids Count policy analyst at the Michigan League for Public Policy (MLPP), said, "while there certainly is bias, implicit and explicit, in family separation decisions made by caseworkers, which the state is working to address, the root of the problem starts even earlier.

"One of the challenges in reducing these disparities, and in measuring the progress of specific efforts like this to do so, is that there are a number of contributing factors to consider and the broader context of historic, systemic and institutional racism," he said.

James said "it is likely that racial biases play a role in reports of potential abuse or neglect made by mandated reporters as well as residents, neighbors, teachers and others," although he doesn't know the extent of that.

Corey said there are "so many training needs of child welfare workers" and that until there's a way to address the amount of turnover in the workforce, "the training will always be less than effective."

Since 2015, 300 DHHS staffers -- including staff who train child welfare staff -- have gone through the two-and-a-half day workshop on "Understanding and Analyzing Systemic Racism," and more than 60 DHHS central office leaders have attended a day-long "antiracism" leadership session, Wheaton said.

Thanks to that training, new "cultural competence training" has been included in the training of 1,845 new child welfare workers, Wheaton said.

In addition, a formal Child Welfare Antiracism Team is expected to launch this year with training and technical assistance from the ERACCE contract, Wheaton said.

James said the MLPP is "happy to see" that the DHHS "remains aware of the need to address these racial inequities in the foster system as best they can."

The issue of minority children being overrepresented in the child welfare system is one that's been studied extensively at least in two occasions in Michigan the past 13 years.

In 2014, a group called the Michigan Race Equity Coalition in Child Welfare and Juvenile Justice issued a report that found children of color are more likely to be removed from their home due to abuse and neglect than white children, and twice as likely to age out of foster care than white children, among other findings.

The group was led by former Supreme Court Justice Mary Beth **KELLY** and former lawmaker Lynn **JONDAHL**, and was cited by DHHS as the impetus for hiring a contractor to help with anti-racism training (See "[Report: Minority Children 'Overrepresented' In State Foster Care System.](#)" 5/21/14).

And in 2006, a Michigan Advisory Committee on the Overrepresentation of Children of Color in Child Welfare studied the issue as well, with the group being chaired by the head of the state's human services department, Marianne **UDOW**.