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**The Settlement Home For Children:
Foster Care Redesign and the Fate of a 100-Year Institution**

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by

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Report

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Dedication

This report is dedicated to the thousands of children in the Texas State Foster Care System and the hundreds of foster families, caseworkers, therapists and other staff who work to provide needy children with a safe haven. This report is also dedicated to the Settlement Home for Children and its Club Ladies, staff and residents.

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Abstract

The Settlement Home For Children: Foster Care Redesign and the Fate of a 100-Year Institution

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The University of Texas at Austin, 2013

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For almost 100 years, the Settlement Home for Children has provided an anchor of stability in the uncertain lives of hundreds of abused and neglected Texas children and young adults. The child welfare organization has evolved to fit the needs of the Central Texas community, transforming programs or overhauling its system of care when legal or social changes in child welfare called for reform. Advocates and state officials have lauded the Home as a model of innovation in statewide foster care services. Today, however, this century-old establishment faces an uncertain future as the state implements its long-awaited Texas Foster Care Redesign. Some Settlement Home staff said the redesign could change the entire structure and operation of their programs. It will cut state funding to child placement agencies. Redesign eliminates the list of criteria used to place children in appropriate care, and could change how – and to whom – the Home provides care. The privatization of the entire foster care system is the foundation of redesign and will alter the Home's relationship with the state, potentially forcing the Home to close down as a child placement agency.

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List of Multimedia

- Timeline: Historical Moments in Child Welfare and the Settlement Home for Children, online at
[http://cdn.knightlab.com/libs/timeline/latest/embed/index.html?source=0AuIaB_7IEMZddE1NOXJTbzFmTljiY3FaVlpLMkNjdWc&font=Georgia-Helvetica&maptype=TERRAIN&lang=en&height=650].
- Video: The Many Volunteers of the Settlement Home for Children, uploaded as a supplementary material. Also can be found online and password-protected under "settlementhome2013" at
[<http://vimeo.com/80421007>].

A Settlement Home Resident: Frances' Story

Frances Cortes was 16 years old the first time she ran away from her group foster home. It was a spur-of-the moment decision. Two of her housemates had been planning for weeks to escape the home, and like them, Cortes wanted to flee the confining walls of the Texas child welfare system.

Casa Sara, where Cortes lived, is part of the Settlement Home for Children in Austin, Texas. It's a state-licensed organization that serves neglected and abused children and young adults. Set up as a residential home for 12 young women, ages 7 through 17, the cottage features multiple bedrooms and a kitchen, dining room and common area. There's also an office and quarters for the live-in staff.

But Cortes and her fellow runaways had had enough of that comfortable environment. One night they cut through the security wires criss-crossing one of their bedroom windows. Here was their chance to leave the system on their own terms. But freedom wasn't what Cortes thought it would be. After a couple of days on the street, she decided, with trepidation, it was time to return. "I knew that when I came back there was gonna be repercussions," Cortes said. "But I went back voluntarily."

Cortes said the alternatives - going back to her mother's house or trying to make it on her own as a runaway - were not options. When she was 14, the state brought her under its care. Cortes was removed from her family for the third and final time. Cortes had suffered years of abuse and neglect at the hands of her mother, who had trained Cortes and her five siblings to evade any suspicious Child Protective Service workers. When she finally found herself at the Settlement Home, after a year of shuttling among various foster homes, Cortes said it was like having a home for the first time. She loved the way the Settlement Home provided a sense of community and support without asking her to relinquish ties with the rest of her family members or shutting off hope that she could remain in contact with her four sisters and one brother.

Even today, five years later, it's not easy for Cortes, 23, to explain why she ran away from Casa Sara's nurturing environment. "We ran away not because we felt

unsafe,” she said in a recent interview at her south Austin duplex, but “because when you’re in a restricted environment, you have that natural want to be rebellious, to make your own decisions.”

Yet after a few days of dodging police and playing hooky from class, of bumming rides and food from friends, Cortes was ready to return to the safety net of the Settlement Home. She realized how much she had missed Casa Sara and its protected yet supportive atmosphere. She missed the individual therapy sessions and the movie nights.

And not even the repercussions were as bad as she had feared. Cortes thought she might be moved to one of the Settlement Home's more restrictive programs, or that they might not take her back at all. The staff warmly welcomed Cortes back, although she did have to endure the usual routine: pregnancy and drug tests, therapy sessions and a few days of closer monitoring. Other than a second weekend runaway to see a boyfriend, Cortes stayed at the Home until she turned 18 and aged out of the Settlement Home’s programs and the Texas child welfare system in 2008.

“A lot of times when you’re in a situation you’re going to have a negative outlook,” Cortes said. “When [I] step away from it and look back... things could have been different if I had realized they were there for me, to help me, not to hurt me.”

Cortes said she now sees the Settlement Home as a driving positive force in her life: “They gave me the childhood that I never had,” Cortes said. “The memories, advice and relationship, all packed into one.”

The Settlement Home Faces Changes with Redesign

For almost 100 years, the Settlement Home has provided an anchor of stability in the uncertain lives of hundreds of Texas children and young adults who are under temporary or permanent care of the state.

Currently the Home serves 76 children and youth, ages 7 to 23. It offers four main programs: residential treatment cottages, therapeutic group homes, independent living apartments and foster care and adoption placements. The state places children with the Home – which then either cares for the children or recruits foster and adoptive families to care for them. Over 450 volunteers – all women – and its 40 paid staff run the Home and its programs.

The organization has continuously evolved to fit the needs of the Central Texas community, transforming programs or overhauling its system of care when legal or social changes in child welfare called for reform. At times, advocates and state officials have lauded the Home as a model of innovation that has helped set precedent for statewide foster care services. Its mission is to promote healing and growth in children, young adults and families by providing a range of services, support and resources. More recently keeping a focus on children who have experienced abuse and neglect.

Today, however, this century-old establishment faces an uncertain future as the state implements its long-awaited Texas Foster Care Redesign. In 2011, Governor Rick Perry signed a bill directing the Texas Department of Family and Protective Services to proceed with plans for renovating a foster care system that its many critics feel has done an inadequate job of caring for needy children and youth.

State Representative Dawwna Dukes, an Austin Democrat, sponsored the original 2011 bill that gave the go-ahead for redesign. She said critics point to the current system having a unequal geographical distribution of services and care providers and a habit of "too often placing children outside their home communities, leaving behind family, friends, schools, church homes and their support system."

In 2013, the state began to implement the redesign piece-meal. The new system privatizes state child welfare by appointing a lead contractor to run each of Texas' 11 care-management regions. Each private contractor will directly – or indirectly through the help of subcontractors – place needy children with foster families or programs. Lead contractors will bid on regions they are interested in managing as the state slowly rolls out each redesign phase.

Dukes said the redesign's main goals are to "keep children closer to home, minimize placement changes, keep siblings together and reward providers for quickly moving children to safe, permanent homes." The redesign will gradually take hold out of necessity, she said, "due to the sensitive nature and magnitude of caring for the most vulnerable children of the state." Dukes has historically been against privatization, and said she sponsored the bill with the hope that she could help the state keep a closer watch on the process. She said the state would evaluate safety, best practices and assess outcomes throughout the process in order to ensure children are in good hands.

The rollout began with lead contractor Providence Services Corporation in North and West Texas in August 2013, and urban counties surrounding Dallas are in negotiations with a different provider for the next stage of redesign, but state officials said it's too early to predict when redesign will come to Central Texas. It's also too soon to know what redesign means for already established child placement agencies, like the Settlement Home.

Some Settlement Home staff said the redesign could change the entire structure and operation of their programs. It will cut state funding to child placement agencies - money which currently makes up 63 percent of the Home's \$4.35 million annual budget. Redesign eliminates the list of criteria used to place children in appropriate care, and could change how – and to whom - the Home provides care. The privatization of the entire foster care system is the foundation of redesign and will alter the Home's relationship with the state, potentially forcing the Home to close down as a child placement agency.

But state officials and child welfare advocates said that there is ultimately no way of knowing how redesign will affect the 31,300 children in the foster care system and the nearly 340 established child-placement agencies throughout the state. “It’s too soon to tell if [redesign]’s actually going to improve outcomes for children,” said Ashley Harris, Child Welfare Policy Associate for the child advocacy group Texans Care for Children. Harris said advocates are cautiously monitoring any reforms made to the system to ensure redesign is in the children’s best interest.

Dukes said it is also too early to know the current effects of the rollout. “It’s too soon for the Department [of Family and Protective Services] to report on the evaluation and assessments of the part of the system that's already in place,” she said.

The affect redesign may have on the Settlement Home and other child-placement agencies around the state remain gauzy, but one thing is certain, the scope of care provided by the Home will change. Best-case scenario, Executive Director Darcie DeShazo said the Settlement Home would adapt to fit the new regulations. “I think all will be well. [W]e have a strong reputation for providing quality care and I think we’ll just continue to do that,” DeShazo said. Worst-case scenario, the Home is being forced to consider alternatives to working within the new foster care system, like abandoning its current mission to provide care for neglected and abused children and instead provide housing for pregnant teenagers or youth within the autism spectrum.

One Hundred Years of History and a Change in Funding

The Settlement Home began in December 1916 as a nursery and free kindergarten in a rented room on East First Street. The nursery was entirely run and funded by 12 young women, who called themselves the Girls' Settlement Club. The women saw that impoverished working families needed childcare for those children who were too young to go to school. For \$90 a month, the Settlement Club staffed the nursery from 8:30 a.m. to 6:30 p.m. on weekdays.

By 1917, the Club had increased its membership and realized a different need: Some children had been dropped off at the nursery indefinitely. The Club scraped funds together to hire a part-time matron to care for the children now living in the rented nursery, and the Settlement Home for Children was born.

Over the years, the Club rented and bought land to expand the Home and its services at a few different locations around Austin. In the 1960s, an increasing population of needy children spurred the Club into settling down at one main location. They purchased 10.3 acres on Payton Gin Road, between North Lamar and IH-35, and continued to expand their services to meet the needs of the Central Texas community.

Today, the Home counts on the services of some 450 volunteers. Called the Club Ladies, they work with the residents on a daily basis and raise funds to sustain operations. Currently, the volunteers contribute \$1.34 million, or 31 percent of the Home's annual budget, mostly from the Club's popular annual Charity Garage Sale.

Under the Department of Family and Protective Services, the state contributes over \$2.73 million to the current budget, most of it coming from a set daily payment rate for each child served through the Home's programs. The remainder of yearly funding, or \$283,000, comes from grants and individual donations.

The Home gets varying need-based rates per child, with the money going directly to the specific program in which the child is placed. The current rates range from a minimum of \$41.94 a day for a child with basic needs, to a maximum of \$260.17 a day

for children and youth who need intensive, 24-hour care in the Home's Residential Treatment program. The more demanding the care a child needs, the more the state pays.

But here's the rub: The state's foster care redesign eliminates the need-based system and instead pays a blanket amount for each child, no matter their needs. The blended rates will be determined on how fast each region places children with families or programs. The Central Texas rates for region Seven won't be set until after a contractor is chosen for the region, but regions already implementing redesign – regions Two and Nine in North and West Texas - have blanket rates of \$66.94 a day. And that's a far cry from the almost \$300 allotted now to children with high needs.

Julie Moody, Spokesperson for the Central Texas care region of the Department of Family and Protective Services, said the state doesn't know yet what will happen to funding with Central Texas subcontractors. "It is just too soon to tell exactly what would happen to the Settlement Home under redesign," she said. "Funding will change, but it is impossible to say how it will change."

If regions Two and Nine are any guide, the Home can expect a rate increase for children with fewer needs, but it is likely to get much less from the state for children with intensive needs – except in unique and extreme cases.

That's a problem, Darcie DeShazo said, because the per-child rates are already insufficient to fund food, shelter, services, supervision, resource development and the quality management that each program needs to care for its children. Earlier this year the 83rd Texas Legislature increased per-child funding for current subcontractors by 14 percent after the Health and Human Services Department argued to safeguard the foster care funding safety net. "It was a much needed increase," DeShazo said. "But the daily rate per child still isn't enough." In fact, according to HHSC, foster care rates are currently 28.5 percent under-funded. The new legislation merely raised rates to the minimum amount needed to protect foster care operations.

Redesign brings another complication for the Home: Under the current setup, the facility receives the per-child funding directly from the state. Under redesign, the state will pay each lead contractor directly, who would then be responsible for paying the Settlement Home.

Marilyn Willson, the Home's funding coordinator, said all this will affect the way the Home funds its programs. "I don't exactly know how or in which way," she said. She's not sure if this will mean state funding to the Home will be cut and the Home will have to make up the difference through fundraising, or if it means the state money will be there, but will have to be funnelled into the home's programs in a different way. One thing is certain, Willson said, a loss of funding would directly affect how the Home provides for the children in its programs.

A Settlement Home Resident: Ria's Story

Children and youth like current Settlement Home resident Ria Woods directly benefit from state funding. Without her per-diem of \$260.17 a day, the Settlement Home's independent living program would not be able to house her. The elevated funds for youth at the specialized or intensive level are high because the youth need more supervision and support. With the redesign's even more limited funds, Ria Woods would not get the services she needs.

Ria Woods was brought home from a California hospital after being abandoned at birth. Brynda Woods, who care for Ria since infancy, finalized the adoption when Ria was 3 years old. As Ria grew older, she began acting out in school and at home. Ria said she was argumentative and aggressive. "I was suicidal and wanting to hurt everybody and anybody that came near me," she said.

Brynda, Ria's adoptive mother, said Ria was emotionally unstable and unable to control herself. "She was no longer just threatening suicide – she had a couple of attempts," Brynda said. "Then, at some point in time, she crossed the line and became homicidal. That's when we had to remove her from the home." Ria had tried to harm her beloved neice.

Ria was put on various trial medications and visited multiple therapists as she and her mother tried to unravel her behavior. Nothing helped. Brynda needed more support for her daughter than she could afford. Brynda petitioned Williamson County to instead put Ria into a state residential treatment center for her own safety, and for the family's safety. Ria experimented living in different centers without much change in behavior. When she moved into the controlled environment at the Settlement Home her moods and actions began to stabilize.

Ria was enrolled in the Settlement Home's Residential Treatment program in August 2009 at the age of 16. "If I wasn't here, I wouldn't know where else to go. I can go back home," she said in a 2011 interview, "but I don't want my past to come back up and me have to start all over again."

Woods eventually graduated from the Home's Residential Treatment program to a more relaxed group therapy setting and from there, in 2011, she moved into the Home's Transitional Living apartments and has lived there since. Now 22, she's been going through a rough patch after the death of her boyfriend, and has needed the Settlement Home's care more than ever. "The Settlement Home is my biggest support system," Woods said recently, sitting in a big black office chair in one of the Home's conference rooms, as she recalled how attentive the staff has been during this difficult time.

Ria has needed the Settlement Home's unique atmosphere to help her find her footing time and again, but with a cut in funding, and the redesign's move to eliminate the criteria that groups children based on mental and medical symptoms, advocates and the Settlement Home staff are worried established programs and children's futures could be jeopardized.

A Care Level System Eliminated

Courtney Valentine, who is a CASA worker - a Court Appointed Special Advocate for youth in the foster care system - was a former therapist-in-training with the Settlement Home. Having worked with other residential centers around Texas, Valentine said she's amazed by the Settlement Home's drive to never give up on a child, like Woods, who couldn't make it in other programs.

"The Settlement Home administrators take on the cases that a lot of other places say are just too far gone," Valentine said. "They not only take those girls in, but do everything they possibly can to think outside of the box in terms of treatment, in terms of support and in providing additional resources."

Under the current foster care system, a child's care level helps determine the appropriate placement for a child in the system, whether that child needs a basic, moderate, specialized or intensive amount of supervision and care. The higher the level of care per child, the more funding an organization receives from the state.

The redesign not only changes funding to a blanket rate per region, it also removes the care criteria state-wide. Children will be evaluated by a Child Protective Services staff member for placement on an individual basis, instead of through a grouped list based on their mental and medical needs. Workers under the lead providers will decide where the child should be placed. State workers will then be asked to approve any placement recommendations brought forward by the lead provider.

In 2010, a group of stakeholders – state officials, judges, advocates and former foster care youth and providers – finalized the tenets of redesign in a letter to then-commissioner Anne Heiligenstein.

The stakeholders said a major problem with foster care, and the multitude of private child-placement agencies that contracted with the state, was the Level of Care system. "Because services are fragmented and placements are specialized... many children must move multiple times to get the services they need," the letter stated.

But Linda Kokemor, who participated in the stakeholder meetings and retired as executive director of the Settlement Home in October 2013, thinks this plan will prove ineffective. “The whole purpose of redesign was to serve kids in their own neighborhood,” she said. “But to convert to that system you’ve got to have all the pieces in that area that you need.”

Kokemor worried that eliminating these care levels will widen the rift between a child’s needs and the state’s ability to provide them services. “What it’s going to force people to do is to keep kids in their own region and play with agencies in that region,” she said, whether or not those regions have the services they need. As it stands now, many regions do not have resources for children who need a specialized and intensive level of care.

“I think it’s going to fail miserably,” Kokemor said. She said before her retirement in October, she was already getting calls from regions Two and Nine to take kids into the Settlement Home’s programs because there wasn’t an appropriate facility for them in those regions. But Kokemor said she wouldn’t take any more kids under those regions because the system put in place by the lead contractor, Providence Service Corporation, had a whole new system to intake kids. “If every region has a different [provider] then I’m not going to be able to manage contracting with every region because I can’t run all those different systems,” she said. “They have different requirements for what you have to do... different outcome measures that they’re tracking, different payment schedules, different billing methods. It’s crazy.”

The Settlement Home’s programs are based on a combination of an individual child’s plan of treatment, which is set by the staff and therapists at the Home, and the state criteria. Young women, like Ria Woods, move through the Home’s different programs as their needs change.

The Settlement Home is one of a few organizations that takes children from other regions that cannot provide residential treatment services. Out of the Settlement Home’s 76 current residents, 25 came from counties other than those in Central Texas. Kokemor

said it would be nearly impossible to take children from other regions in the future, due to the push for children to stay within their own region and the added burden of dealing with multiple lead contractors.

Privatization of the System

Privatization of the entire foster care system is the foundation of redesign. The state will hand over much of its control to private agencies that will be responsible for facilitating the placement of children in appropriate environments, managing subcontractors, and paying subcontractors and individual foster families.

Payment to these contractors will be based on performance measures like placing children in homes quickly, and advocates worry that will result in children and youth being hastily pushed out of the system – whether as independents or through placements in incompatible foster homes. In a 2012 post on the Texans Care for Children website, Ashley Harris wrote: “The new incentive payments might also bring risks. Placing a child back with his or her parents too quickly – or speeding the adoption of a child without allowing time for the original family to heal – can be harmful.”

Rose Boyett is one such case.

A Settlement Home Resident: Rose's Story

Rose Boyett said the Settlement Home helped her gain her footing as an adult, without rushing her through the system. When state officials removed her from her mother's home at age 14 due to neglect, they placed her in the Home's Residential Treatment program, hoping she would be taken up by a foster family. But Boyett's mother wanted her back and Boyett realized she too wanted to be reunited with her mother – and to stay put in the Settlement Home until she could do so. “I didn't want to give up that last little thread because once I went into foster care home, I couldn't go back with her,” said Boyett, now 22. “I didn't want to get adopted.”

Throughout her time at the Home, Boyett's mother was close by. Although the Home remained Boyett's primary support system, daughter and mother were able to see each other on weekends and worked on building their relationship. When Boyett's grades slipped because she was playing hooky from the Home's on-campus charter school, her teachers and the Settlement Home staff stepped in to help. “They sat down with me and [told me] you're going to fail,” Boyett said. But they also offered her a solution: Work harder.

They also told Boyett she needed to make up the missed class time. “My teachers took turns coming in early so I'd be able to graduate by the end of year,” she said. They'd come sit with her an before and after class so she could make up her hours.

At age 16, Boyett graduated from the Home's in-house charter school at the top of her class. The following year she graduated early from her therapy program. She's still in close contact with her mother, but now supports herself and lives on her own.

But with the single contractor system, advocates are worried that young women like Boyett could be left without a program that meets their needs at an individualized pace.

Lead Contractors Could Push Out Organizations

Under redesign, the Department of Family and Protective Services chooses which lead contractors will manage a region and has the authority to approve or reject any use of a subcontractor. But DFPS will not control how each lead provider interacts with already-established placement agencies. Theoretically, contractors could also decide to do everything themselves, essentially shutting down other agencies in the region like the Settlement Home.

Diana Martinez is the Director of Public Policy and Education for TexProtects, a Dallas-based child advocacy group. She said this is a big concern for subcontractors throughout the state, but the lead contractor in regions Two and Nine, Providence Service Corporation, is so far dealing well with subcontractors in the regions, giving advocates hope that other lead providers will be accomodating as well.

“There was this feeling that [Providence] might squeeze out all the small contractors,” Martinez said. “That is still a concern, but I’ve seen them really engaging the systems that were already in place.... They’re definitely trying to work with the providers that were already out there.”

Diana Martinez said TexProtects advocates are hopeful that redesign will help change the entire system for the better. She’s confident that redesign is a forward step in promoting a child’s well being – where the child is emotionally stable, able to exceed in education and connect to a support system. “For a long time our system has been geared toward safety outcomes,” she said. “I think there’s a lot of people working really hard to better the foster care system.”

The new executive director of the home, Darcie DeShazo is staying optimistic. She doesn’t think the Settlement Home will be pushed out of working with the foster care system any time soon. She said, however, that she likes to think of the implementation of redesign in region Seven as an “if” not a “when.” The likelihood that the redesign plan will be scrapped in totality is very small, but state officials and DeShazo said there will be some fine-tuning as it is rolled out in each region.

“I think that by the time they roll this out in a couple of other regions, systems will be figured out. Glitches will be identified,” DeShazo said. “I’m not too worried about it. I think the mission and the idea – or the philosophy - behind Foster Care Redesign is really solid. But any kind of systemic change is hard.”

But Linda Kokemor said that the Settlement Home does have a few contingency plans if a lead contractor decides to work solo, or creates too many obstacles for the subcontractors to continue programming. “[If] it’s not an agency that we think is at the core reliable... then our only option is to do something different,” Kokemor said. “Maybe we don’t serve these kids anymore... maybe we go and look for a different population.”

Kokemor said there is a need in Central Texas for children in Mental Health Mental Retardation programs who still live with their parents and who are not part of the child welfare system. Children who are part of the autism spectrum need care. There’s a constant need for pregnant teen housing. The Home could also provide outpatient services for children and teens.

In short, the Home would have to shut down temporarily, Kokemor said, and figure out a new way to meet the needs of the community. Not only would its programs change, but so would the Settlement Home’s mission and reach. And a new generation of foster care children, with stories similar to those of Frances Cortes, Ria Woods and Rose Boyett, would have to go elsewhere to find a place to call home.

Kokemor said if the Settlement Home can’t find a way to serve needy children under Foster Care Redesign, the organization will figure out where the community needs them next. “There’s lots of work to do out there,” she said. “[We’re in] such a high crime neighborhood now and there’s a need for low-income daycare. We could just turn all of our cottages into daycare centers and do low-income daycare for the neighborhood.”

There’s almost “something attractive” about this return to the Settlement Club’s 1916 roots, Kokemor said. Whatever happens with redesign, she is confident the Settlement Home for Children will continue its legacy of caring for the needy in Central Texas.

“At the end of the day, we’ve always changed to meet the needs of the community,” she said, “and so we would just do that again.”

There are still a multitude of unanswered questions surrounding the fate of the Settlement Home once redesign hits the Central Texas region, but one thing is for certain - the Home has shown itself to be adaptable through its century-long survival. Whatever redesign brings to Central Texas, the Home is ready to give the best possible care to its children and youth. But the Settlement Home is just one of the hundreds of child-placement agencies that is having to rethink how it provides care for some of the most vulnerable population in our state. Texas’ 340 other child-placing agencies are facing similar futures when redesign comes to their regions.

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