

**Health and Human Services Committee  
Confirmation Hearing – Matt Wallen  
January 17, 2018**

**Matthew T. Wallen  
Director, Division of Children and Family Services  
Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services**

Good afternoon, Chairman Riepe and members of the Health and Human Services Committee. My name is Matt Wallen (M-a-t-t W-a-l-l-e-n) and I am the Director of the Division of Children and Family Services within the Department of Health and Human Services. I have had the privilege to serve in this capacity since August 4, 2017.

I appreciate being here before the committee today on the subject of my confirmation, as well as the opportunity I have had to meet with many of you over the course of the past few months. During those meetings, it was important for me to hear directly from you about the opportunities we have to work together to strengthen our child welfare system.

I will begin by sharing a little about my background and then talk about how I believe we can move forward together.

I grew up in a small town in the southern tier of western New York called Olean. It reminds me very much of my current home town of Gretna. I attended the State University of New York at Fredonia and graduated with a Bachelor's Degree. During college, I completed an internship in my local congressman's district office and was exposed, for the first time, to carrying a caseload and performing constituent services.

Upon graduation, I began my career in public service attending graduate school in the evenings at the Columbian School of Arts and Sciences at the George Washington University, where I earned my Master of Arts Degree.

Over the course of the last 20 years of my career, I have had the opportunity to lead and work within major public and private systems – as in healthcare, transportation and public safety systems. In addition, I have had the opportunity to work with thousands of stakeholders at all levels of local, state, and federal governments to advance and implement public policy initiatives throughout the country. While I have served at all levels, from the frontline to executive leadership, the most rewarding has always been directly assisting constituents to meet their needs.

More recently, I served as chief of staff for the Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services. This allowed me to work directly with Courtney Phillips, our DHHS CEO, on the day-to-day operations of the Department and other important initiatives. It also afforded me the opportunity to work with each of the divisions within the Department, to understand each of their initiatives and priorities, and see how those priorities can be achieved by working together, as one Department instead of individual divisions. This has improved access, improved customer service, and ultimately improved outcomes.

Since being appointed director, I have identified divisional priorities to include (1) early intervention and prevention services to keep families out of the system when it's safe to do so; (2) supporting our team in the field to reduce the CFS Specialist turnover rate; (3) identifying children in care for over 2 years, and developing

strategies to return them to permanency. I have several other ideas, but if we can make progress on these priorities, it will significantly move the division toward stabilizing the system and improving outcomes.

I would like to spend a few minutes during this hearing discussing our progress toward addressing these priorities. With regard to prevention and early intervention, CFS supported the Bring Up Nebraska launch in September. This effort will support 11 collaborative efforts throughout Nebraska to serve children and families in their communities.

CFS also started a pilot program to refer Hotline intakes that screen out for abuse and neglect but give rise to potential poverty concerns, to a community-based response system. The pilot was restricted to the Fremont area, and proved to be successful. We were able to assist six referrals, but we need to expand to an area where we can serve a larger population.

The CFSS turnover rate was 32% from July 2016 – July 2017. Since then, I have visited several offices in the field, made some leadership changes, and listened to our team members to determine what could be done to support and improve the culture there, at all levels. After making just a few changes, I went in and measured turnover from July 2017 – December 2017, to see if our efforts were resulting in any improvements. They have. From July – December the turnover rate decreased to 19%. I am confident we are off to a good start.

Another operational improvement project, one that will have a positive impact on our initial assessment team, just went into pilot this month. We realized that, in its current state, the intake process requires 131 steps and 8 rework loops and results in a lead and processing time of anywhere between 5 to 166 days, so we mapped out changes to make the process more efficient. The newly implemented changes require only 83 steps and 2 rework loops, significantly cutting back on the lead and process times. The new lead and processing times will be between 4 to 30 days. Again, this pilot just launched in January so we will see what adjustments need to be made and continue to measure the results against our baseline.

CFS has also taken additional steps to assist youths in the system for extended periods of time. In August, we identified 362 state wards that had been in state custody for at least three years and out of home care for over two years. I worked with the service areas to highlight these cases, identify barriers to permanency and to make every effort to get them home as soon as possible. Since August, we got over 119 to permanency. Recently, we expanded the scope of this intensive review to include youths out of home care for over two years, in working with the FCRO to identify over 600 in out of home care for two years or more. We are in the process of establishing a work group to dig into each of these cases and to prioritize placing those youths into permanent homes.

Before I wrap up, I would just like mention the Children and Family Services Review (CSFR) conducted last summer. In November, I hosted a briefing for the federal Children’s Bureau to formally inform Nebraska, and our stakeholders about the CSFR results. We had over 150 attend the report out and corresponding small group work sessions. This was vitally important as we gathered stakeholder input for the development of the State’s program improvement plan. We will continue to collect feedback and will have the draft program improvement plan in pretty good shape by the end of January. We have to submit that and negotiations will likely begin late-February.

I will stop there. We have a lot going on. As I have stated before, we will continue to be inclusive of everyone, accessible, open, and transparent as we work on these important projects. I want your feedback, as well as that of other stakeholders who have an interest in improving Nebraska’s protection and safety, and public assistance programs.

I appreciate your consideration of my confirmation and the time allotted me to testify today. I am grateful for the opportunity to serve Nebraskans as Director of the Division of Children and Family Services.

I am happy to answer any questions you might have.