

# A Phoenix shelter where Arizona children in state care wait for a home, help



Marv Jo Pitzl, The Republic | azcentral.com 5:02 a.m. MST August 28, 2016

*While elected officials work to improve Arizona's troubled child-welfare system, daily life for kids in shelter care takes on its own rhythm.*



(Photo: David Wallace/The Republic)

She arrived, eyes wide, face crinkled with worry, complaining loudly.

Nothing was familiar in this place filled with kids — a big playground, a dinner table the right height for a 6-year-old.

For the curly-haired girl, it was her newest home, a step up from the state office where she had been waiting for hours, but a scary place nonetheless. Mom was nowhere to be found, and the frightened little girl let everyone know, insisting loudly she needed *her* bed, *her* house, *her* mom.

"You could see the fear on her face," said Holland Gerhard, who in January welcomed the girl to Child Crisis Arizona, a Phoenix shelter filled almost exclusively with kids in the custody of the state Department of Child Safety. "She was angry, and we let her let it out."

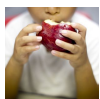
Five miles away, state lawmakers were debating proposals to improve the lot of children such as this little girl. The beleaguered DCS was working to reverse dismal trends that had seen the number of kids in state care grow, even after an infusion of millions of new dollars to turn the system around.

And Gov. Doug Ducey had just outlined his hopes for child welfare, telling Arizonans in his State of the State speech that there's one number that keeps him up at night: 18,927. "That's how many Arizona children, through no fault of their own, have found themselves in the foster-care system," he said seven months ago. "We have to stand up for these kids. And that means making sure that no matter the failings of their parents, they and their caregivers have the resources they need."

**RELATED:** [There are some issues we just won't let go \(/story/news/local/arizona-investigations/2016/08/28/there-some-issues-we-just-wont-let-go/89313770/\)](/story/news/local/arizona-investigations/2016/08/28/there-some-issues-we-just-wont-let-go/89313770/)

Often lost amid the headlines, applause lines, and legislative debate is the day-to-day reality of children in the system.

Over the next four months, lawmakers worked to make good on Ducey's goal. But it's a steep hill: Since Ducey delivered his speech, the number of kids living outside their family homes as of June 30 dropped by 640 — a 3 percent reduction.



AZCENTRAL

[Critics say Arizona is cheaping out on child-welfare services](http://www.azcentral.com/story/news/politics/arizona/2016/08/21/arizona-child-welfare-services-contracts/89002230/)

[\(http://www.azcentral.com/story/news/politics/arizona/2016/08/21/arizona-child-welfare-services-contracts/89002230/\)](http://www.azcentral.com/story/news/politics/arizona/2016/08/21/arizona-child-welfare-services-contracts/89002230/)

Between April and June, more kids left state care than entered it, a hopeful note given the recent trend of more children coming into the system every year than leaving it.

Any efforts by lawmakers or the governor to turn it around likely are too late to change much for these children.

The girl with the curly hair is living proof of the crisis: She spent five months at the shelter before being sent to a group home. Counselors felt she would fare better in an environment with fewer kids. Another girl, 8, has lived at the shelter since December 2014, waiting for a permanent family.

## Preventing problems

[Fullscreen](#)

It's mid-morning, and a group of preschoolers enters their classroom. At the door, they kick off their shoes and meet the greeter of the day, who wears an apron that shows different ways to greet people — a hello, a handshake, a hug.

[A look at the Child Crisis shelter](#)

The 3- to 5-year olds plop down in a circle and get to work.

First up: a discussion about bubbles. It grows into a talk about safe touches and unsafe touches, with the kids listening attentively.

The curriculum is designed with the children's backgrounds in mind.

"Prevention is key," said Torrie Taj, CEO of Child Crisis Arizona. "We can't just serve children in crisis. We know what we do here is very important, and these kids will carry it with them forever."

Prevention was on the minds of lawmakers, too.

As they started work on the state budget, the legislators were fuming over DCS' decision to shift much of its funding for preventive services into foster-care support. Dollars intended to help pay for parenting coaching, or therapy, or drug counseling, were instead funneled to help foster families. Lawmakers took steps to ensure it wouldn't happen again — or at least not without their knowledge.

The budget that took effect July 1 includes \$5 million in new funding for programs, such as substance-abuse treatment and housing subsidies, intended to keep risky situations for kids from deteriorating to the point they would need to be put in foster care. That's on top of \$40 million in continued funding for prevention. Lawmakers also directed that any attempt to use the money for other purposes must first be disclosed to the Legislature's budget committee.

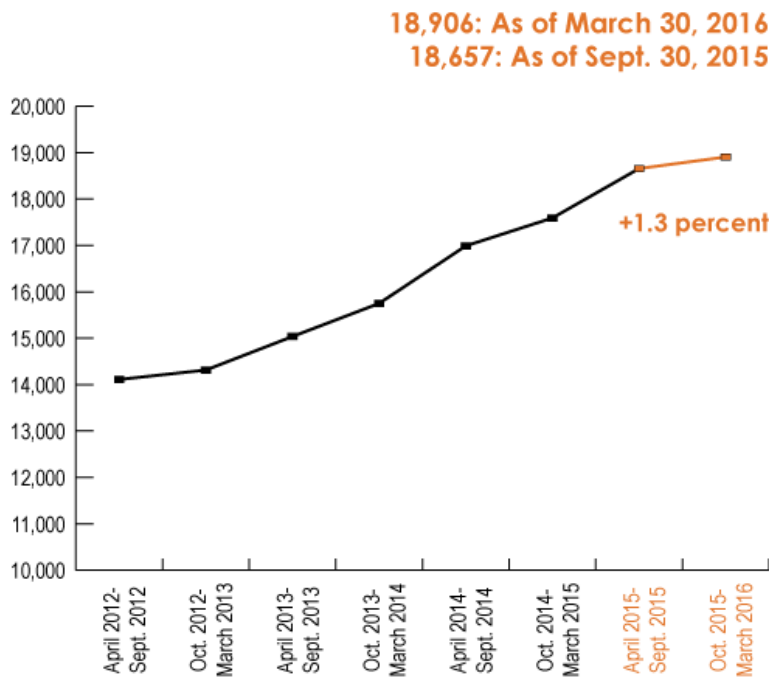
For advocates such as Dana Wolfe Naimark with the Children's Action Alliance, that's a vital step. It makes in-home services a priority, she said, and that should help keep families together by heading off problems before they grow into a crisis.

## Child Crisis facts

- Founded in 1977 as Child Crisis Center.
- Merged with Crisis Nursery Inc. in 2015
- 2 locations: Phoenix (houses 36 children) and Mesa (houses 42 children).
- Child Crisis placed 494 children in foster care in 2015.
- 58 percent of the cost of care paid by the Arizona Department of Child Safety if the child is in DCS custody.

## Children in out-of-home care

DCS must report key child welfare statistics every six months. The most recent report, showing data for the six months that ended March 30, shows a slight uptick in the number of kids in out-of-home care.



Source: Arizona Department of Child Safety

# 'I'm not looking back'

The mother of one boy residing at Child Crisis said no one offered her services when DCS removed her child in May 2015.

Her son, then age 5, was spending most of his time with his grandmother while the mother worked, and struggled with a methamphetamine and heroin addiction.

The mother and grandmother both say miscommunication over who was to pick up the boy from day care led to DCS removing him from mom's care, and landing him in a string of foster homes before arriving at the shelter.



AZCENTRAL

Judge holds Arizona Department of Child Safety in contempt

(<http://www.azcentral.com/story/news/local/arizona-investigations/2016/07/08/judge-holds-arizona-child-safety-agency-in-contempt/86752618/>)

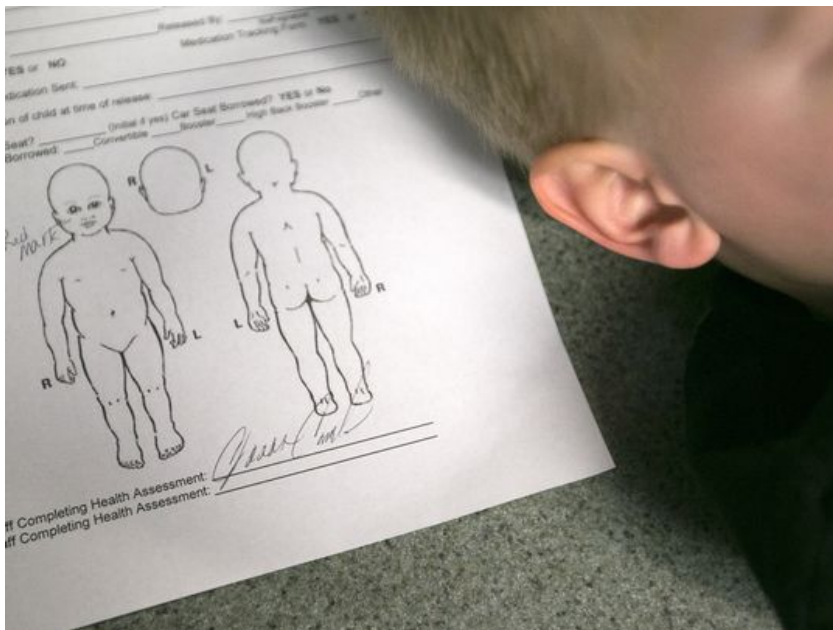
The removal shocked the boy's mother into acknowledging her drug problem and getting help, the grandmother said.

"She automatically put herself in detox, before they (DCS) said anything," she said of her daughter, who was terrified of losing her son. "She said, 'I'm done, I'm not looking back.' "

In the following months, the boy's mom worked with caseworkers, and under a judge's supervision eventually won permission for her son to return to his grandmother's care. If all goes well, she's on a path to have the boy return to her home.

The women told their story through tears in the shelter's lobby. They had just returned the child to the shelter after a court-authorized weekend away filled with a visit to a water park and lots of outdoor play time.

## Shelter of last resort



The 2-year-old blond toddler is examined for any bruises, marks or scrapes has at Child Crisis on March 1, 2016. (Photo: David Wallace/The Republic)

Children arrive sporadically at Child Crisis Arizona. Staffers give DCS a daily report on how many beds, if any, they have available.

Shelters are the last resort, if caseworkers feel compelled to remove a child from home and can't find a family member or a foster family to take them in.

For Taj, the more kids they can take in, the better.

"Our goal is to be occupied 100 percent of the time," she said. "It is not acceptable to have children sleeping in offices, and in the back of cars."

The average stay at the Phoenix shelter in May was 129 days.

"If they need a midnight placement, we take them," said Gerhard. Kids have come from as far away at Tucson.

On this sunny day, a 2-year-old blond toddler arrives midday, straight from DCS' temporary placement center in central Phoenix. It was his fifth home in less than a month.

He had been with a foster family for nearly three months, but it didn't work out.

He spent two days at the placement center — an office outfitted with beds and a playroom — before he was sent to another foster family. That lasted two weeks, then it was back to the placement center for five days.



AZCENTRAL

Why more Arizona children will be sleeping in state offices

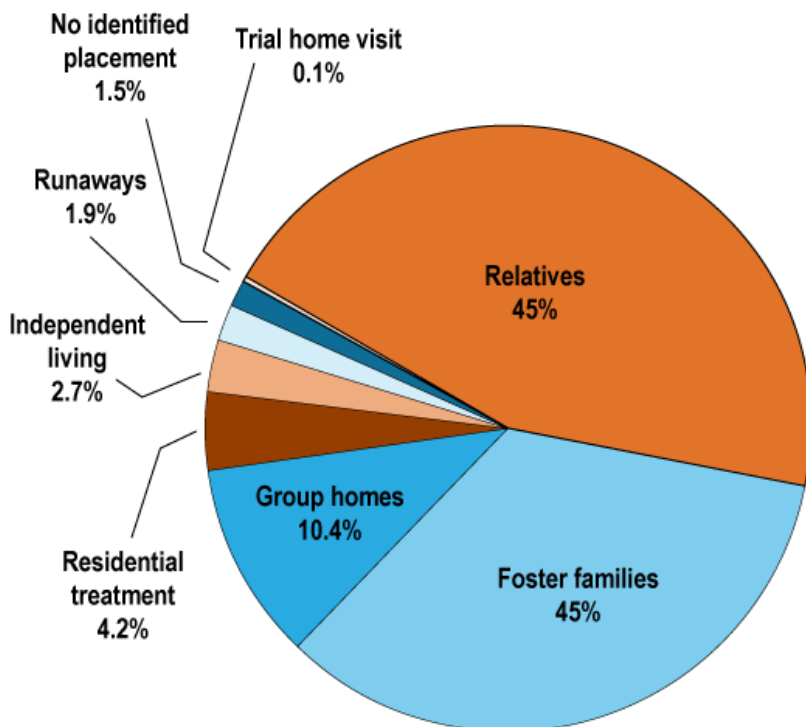
(<http://www.azcentral.com/story/news/politics/arizona/2016/02/29/why-more-arizona-children-sleeping-state-offices/81001948/>)

When a bed opened at the Child Crisis center, he joined his older brother, age 8, there.

The toddler sings as he gets a full-body check, each mark and bruise carefully documented on a diagram. His placid demeanor, staffers say, is probably because he's been through this drill numerous times.

## Out-of-home care: Placements

Most of the 18,906 children in out-of-home care and under state custody as of March 30 are with relatives or foster families.



Source: Arizona Department of Child Safety

## Fixing the system

Even as Taj and her staff worked on plans to expand Child Crisis Arizona, lawmakers were working to reduce demand for such places.

Support was strong for most of these measures, which included laws intended to ease the workload on DCS by outsourcing some work and slightly narrowing the kinds of reports the agency must investigate. Others aimed to speed up the adoption process, which would get kids into permanent homes, the goal for children currently in state care.

While much of the legislation was aimed at adoption, lawmakers also passed bills to help foster parents.



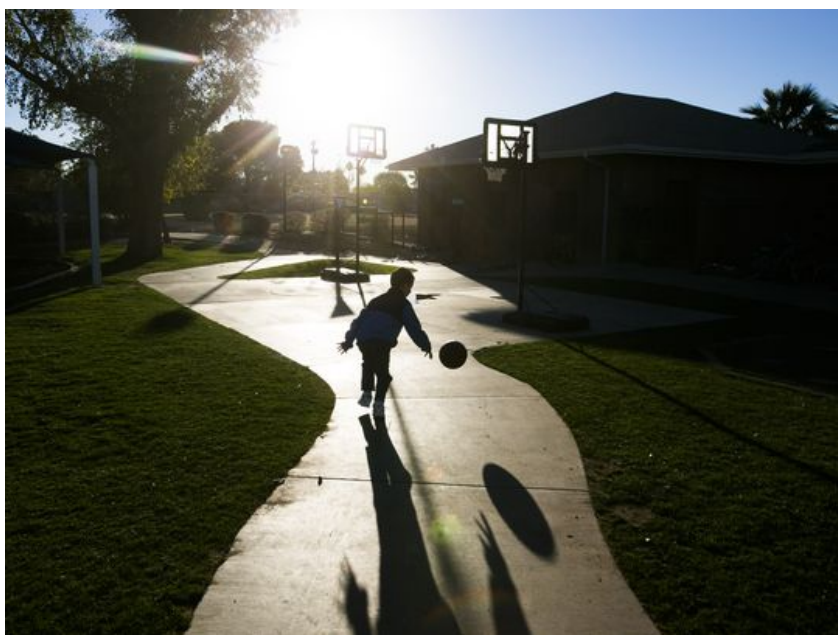
AZCENTRAL

Fed up with excuses, red tape 3 Arizona foster moms forge new path at Capitol

(<http://www.azcentral.com/story/news/politics/2016/03/14/foster-moms-break-down-barriers/81488040/>)

"Jacob's Law" makes it clear that foster parents have a right to state-provided behavioral-health services, something that previously had been overlooked. It took effect in March, and children's advocates said they were seeing almost immediate results.

## 'Everybody's happy'



A 7-year-old who arrived at Child Crisis the previous night explores the play area. (Photo: David Wallace/The Republic)

While debates and the closed-door negotiations were happening at the Capitol, daily life at the shelter followed its own routine: Rise early, eat breakfast, off to school for the older kids (the shelter takes children through age 8), therapy and class time on site for the little ones. Swim lessons twice a week, family-style dining for all meals.

There were playground antics and group singing to "Do You Want to Build a Snowman" whenever the "Frozen" DVD played. There were temper tantrums and medical checks. Tears and taunts and laughter.

And, occasionally, there is a final goodbye. Even if it happens during nap time.

A father tiptoes into the darkened room where his son, 5, is sleeping and gently shakes him awake. He does the same for his daughter.



### HOW TO FIX ARIZONA'S DCS

- Four fixes for our broken child-welfare system  
(<http://www.azcentral.com/story/fixes-arizonas-broken-child-welfare-system/78810740/>)
- 1. Prevent the problems  
(<http://www.azcentral.com/story/arizona-foster-child-theres-no-place-like-home/80233984/>)
- 2. Cut the backlog using contractors  
(<http://www.azcentral.com/story/backlog-lingers-arizona-child-welfare-agency-redefines/80205720/>)
- 3. Stabilize the workforce

It is time to go home, he tells them.

His son has been at the shelter since March 2015. His little girl followed four months later. DCS removed the children when the dad's estranged wife, who is struggling with drug addiction, called the police with reports of domestic violence.

After months of counseling and classes, the father said he is ready to go it alone as a parent. The courts and DCS agreed, and he gets a final round of advice and binders of paperwork as he checks the children out of Child Crisis, hopefully never to return.

Losing his kids, he said, rocked his world and forced him to change.

"If it wasn't for them, I wouldn't be on this road in life," he said of his determination to be a caring parent. "When I became a single parent, that was the thing that made me change my whole world."

Now, he said, it's time to bring his kids into that new world.

He helps his son put on his shoes, wiping drool from the child's mouth. His little girl perches nearby, beaming.

Cupcakes — a parting tradition — are passed out.

The father grabs bites of one as he helps his girl into her bright-pink coat.

A cab is waiting to drive the reunited family to their central-Phoenix apartment.

"Everybody's happy," the father says as they pile into the cab.

<http://www.azcentral.com/story/year-overwhelming-workload-chance-do-good/80189724/>  
• [4. Support foster kinship families](http://www.azcentral.com/story/parenting-arizona-like-pulling-bodies-out-fire/80393738/)  
<http://www.azcentral.com/story/parenting-arizona-like-pulling-bodies-out-fire/80393738/>



**AZCENTRAL**

[4 fixes for Arizona's broken child-welfare system](http://www.azcentral.com/story/news/arizona/politics/2016/02/19/4-fixes-arizonas-broken-child-welfare-system/78810740/)

<http://www.azcentral.com/story/news/arizona/politics/2016/02/19/4-fixes-arizonas-broken-child-welfare-system/78810740/>

## Key DCS legislation



Child Crisis houses nearly 30 children ages 0 through 8. They stay at the shelter an average of six to nine months. (Photo: David Wallace/The Republic)



Key legislation passed by lawmakers and signed by Gov. Doug Ducey. Most changes took effect Aug. 6:


- DCS can ignore calls to the state's child-abuse hotline if they involve an allegation of abuse or neglect that happened more than three years earlier, and if there is no indication the child is currently in any danger. DCS says it will let them stop chasing dead-end tips; it's unclear how much that will ease caseloads.
- To speed adoptions, foster parents can adopt a child already in their care without going through another state certification, given they already have a foster certification.
- Another bill provides free legal services to end a parent's custodial rights. It's intended to ease costs for a family that wants to adopt.
- Lawmakers delivered on a key Ducey proposal: to give foster children enrollment preference at charter and district schools. And they took the first steps toward creating a customized education plan for each foster child and closely monitor the child's progress in school. It will launch next year.
- Lawmakers ended the "grandmother penalty" by permitting a family member caring for a child who is in DCS custody to benefit from a cash-assistance program.
- They also create a dollar-for-dollar tax credit of up to \$500 for individual donations to foster-support charities and \$1,000 for couples.

## Child Crisis Arizona facts

- Founded in 1977 as Child Crisis Center.
- Merged with Crisis Nursery Inc. in 2015.
- 2 locations: Phoenix (houses 36 children) and Mesa (houses 42 children).
- Child Crisis placed 494 children in foster care in 2015.
- 58 percent of the cost of care paid by the Arizona Department of Child Safety if the child is in DCS custody.


Reach the reporter at [maryjo.pitzl@arizonarepublic.com](mailto:maryjo.pitzl@arizonarepublic.com) (<http://maryjo.pitzl@arizonarepublic.com>) and follow her on Twitter, [@maryjpitzl](https://twitter.com/maryjpitzl) (<https://twitter.com/maryjpitzl>).

Read or Share this story: <http://azc.cc/2c63orl>




**Expand Your Reach**  
Create a professional website.

Custom domain  
Hundreds of themes  
Expert support  
**From \$5.99 a month!**

AdChoices 

**GET STARTED TODAY!**

 WordPress.com