

# RAK MAGAZINE

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## Inspiration from **ONE YOUNG ENTREPRENEUR**

**ARIZONA'S CHILDREN**  
Why are 18,000 kids in state care?

**PARENTS NIGHT OUT**  
20+ date-night ideas

**BONUS PULLOUT**  
**VALLEY EMERGENCY &  
URGENT CARE CENTERS**





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Linda Peterson guides playtime with a child at Child Crisis Arizona in Mesa.



# ARIZONA'S CHILDREN

**NEARLY 18,000 KIDS  
ARE IN STATE CARE.  
WHAT HAPPENS  
NEXT IS UP TO US.**

BY SHERI SMITH | PHOTOS BY RICK D'ELIA

**ABOUT 40 CHILDREN** — infants through preschoolers — temporarily reside at Child Crisis Arizona's emergency shelter in Mesa. These are children who have been removed from their homes because of abuse and/or neglect, and for whom foster-care placement has not yet been possible.

The Mesa shelter isn't the only emergency facility in our state, but it arguably is one of the best. And although conditions at the Child Crisis shelter are not ideal, the children seem to be well cared for by trained professionals demonstrating patience, kindness and love.

For the moment, these children are safe, but their circumstances are temporary. Their true lot in life is yet to be determined. As wards of the state, without families to look after them or places to call home, these children belong to all of us, and their fates will be determined by the decisions we make.

While I was touring the shelter in October, our guide gave us these instructions: "Whatever you do, don't pick them up," she said. "If you pick up a child, you will eventually have to put that child down. And then they might cry. Once one starts crying, they all start crying. You don't want to be responsible for that."

That doesn't sound too difficult until you walk past a 2-year-old girl with dark, pleading eyes and outstretched arms. She's waiting for a hug. At that moment, Arizona's foster-care crisis feels personal. Walk past enough of those faces, and the reality of exactly what is at stake sets in.

## THE BACKDROP

Who are these children and how did they get here? That's a long and complicated story compounded by the Great Recession of 2008, when the child-welfare system was dealt two devastating blows: The American economy was on the brink of collapse, and state officials responded with severe budget cuts to family services.

Programs including Family Builders — a support system that addressed such family stressors as substance abuse, poverty and mental-health issues — were dismantled. Families facing greater economic insecurity watched as their support services virtually disappeared. The number of child-endangerment cases began to skyrocket.

By 2009, child-abuse and neglect investigations had increased 70 percent. Compounding the problem were several high-profile child-abuse fatalities that caught the news media's attention. Public pressure to remove at-risk children from their homes increased immediately.

Child Protective Services began to falter under a heavy backlog of cases. The morale of staff members plummeted and turnover rates rose.

The number of children in crisis continued to climb steadily. By 2015, more than 18,000 children were living in foster care and group homes. The number was increasing at a rate of 10 percent per year, and was forecast to exceed 20,000 by this year.

## THE GROWTH OF CHILDREN AGES 0–17 IN ARIZONA FOSTER CARE SINCE 2000.



Source: National Kids Count — a project of the Baltimore-based Annie E. Casey Foundation to track the wellbeing of children in the United States. [datacenter.kidscount.org](http://datacenter.kidscount.org)

For foster care and adoption services resources, visit: [raisingarizonakids.com/foster-care-and-adoption](http://raisingarizonakids.com/foster-care-and-adoption)

Arizona found itself positioned as an outlier in the nation. While other states' statistics for children in the foster-care system were dropping, Arizona's numbers continued to rise. There were not enough beds to accommodate the sheer volume of children. State offices became makeshift bedrooms for kids sleeping behind cubicles on office-room floors.

The time for drastic change had arrived.

### CALL FOR ACTION

In 2012, then-Gov. Jan Brewer created the Office of Child Welfare Investigations and asked Greg McKay, a career law-enforcement officer and Phoenix homicide detective, to chair it.

Investigations into the child-welfare system concluded that child-removal decisions were being made by knee-jerk emotional reactions instead of goal-setting based on specific desired outcomes.

In November 2013, McKay sent Brewer a memo describing "the dangerous and unlawful practice" that resulted in the closure of more than 6,000 reports of child abuse from 2009 to 2013 without investigation. He wrote that he had "identified many reports of extreme nature closed as N.I. [not investigated]," including cases with prior abuse reports.

Soon thereafter, Brewer dissolved CPS. She replaced it with the Department of Child Safety. She appointed Charles Flanagan, previous head of the Arizona Department of Juvenile Corrections, as its director. Flanagan attempted to make improvements, but high-profile tragedies and a backlog of cases continued to plague the department.

When Doug Ducey became governor in 2014, he declared Arizona's foster-care crisis a top priority. The day after he took office, Ducey met with McKay, who presented him with the backlog of cases, which by then had grown to 13,000. McKay insisted the backlog was compromising the effectiveness of DCS and putting children in danger.

In February 2014, Ducey named McKay director of DCS.

### SIGNS OF IMPROVEMENT — AND CAUTION

McKay immediately faced several large-scale challenges. The only way to deal with them, he believed, was to break each down into manageable chunks with measurable goals and priorities. His plan addressed five priorities for the next five years:

- Improve objective decision-making at the child-abuse hotline and during child-safety investigations.
- Improve performance and quality of services through employee retention.
- Reduce the length of stay for children in out-of-home care.
- Reduce recurrence of maltreatment by improving family services.
- Improve capacity to place children in safe family environments.

"It's slowly starting to turn around," McKay says. In 2015, "child placement was 40 hours to get into a foster bed. Now that time has been cut to 11 hours or less."

Additional positive indicators, McKay says: Children no longer are spending the night in government offices. Hotline-response time has been reduced to 20 seconds. Employee morale has rebounded as the caseloads individual employees must manage have lessened.

McKay believes abuse-prevention programs aimed at educating families and providing services that will keep children in their homes are starting to have an effect.

Interviews with other key players in Arizona's foster-care system seem to support McKay's assertion that progress is being made. A year ago, the Child Crisis Arizona facility was consistently at full capacity, CEO Torrie Taj says. Today, about 70 percent

of beds are filled.

Kris Jacober, president of Arizona Association for Foster and Adoptive Parents, also has seen statistical and anecdotal evidence that numbers are falling but says it's tough to identify specific reasons for improvement.

Bill Owsley, a guardian *ad litem* who represents foster children in the courts, agrees "the numbers have leveled off over the last few months" but adds that it's hard to tell how much of that is a result of changes at DCS and how much reflects larger factors, such as the slowly improving economy following the Great Recession.

## UNCERTAIN POLITICAL CLIMATE

I met with McKay on Wednesday, Nov. 9, 2016, the day after voters elected Donald J. Trump as our 45th president. The unexpected result of the long, contentious and frequently ugly campaign left plenty of anxiety in its wake, especially among advocates for robust social-service programs.

Many advocates of child and family services will be wondering how new national, state and local policies and priorities will affect struggling families in Arizona and around the country. Everyone I interviewed agreed on the importance of family-support programs to prevent cases of abuse and neglect.

"It's the family-support services that keep kids out of foster care," Jacober says. "Eighty percent come in because of neglect. They have no child-care subsidies. Leaving a 2-year-old with a 4-year-old. That's neglect. The problem is sometimes the families feel like they have very few options."

As I learned about some of the programs McKay has supported at DCS — a Healthy Families initiative, a Substance Exposed Newborn Safe Environment program, a Baby Box program that provides supplies and safe sleeping opportunities for infants — I couldn't help wondering whether such efforts would continue to be funded.

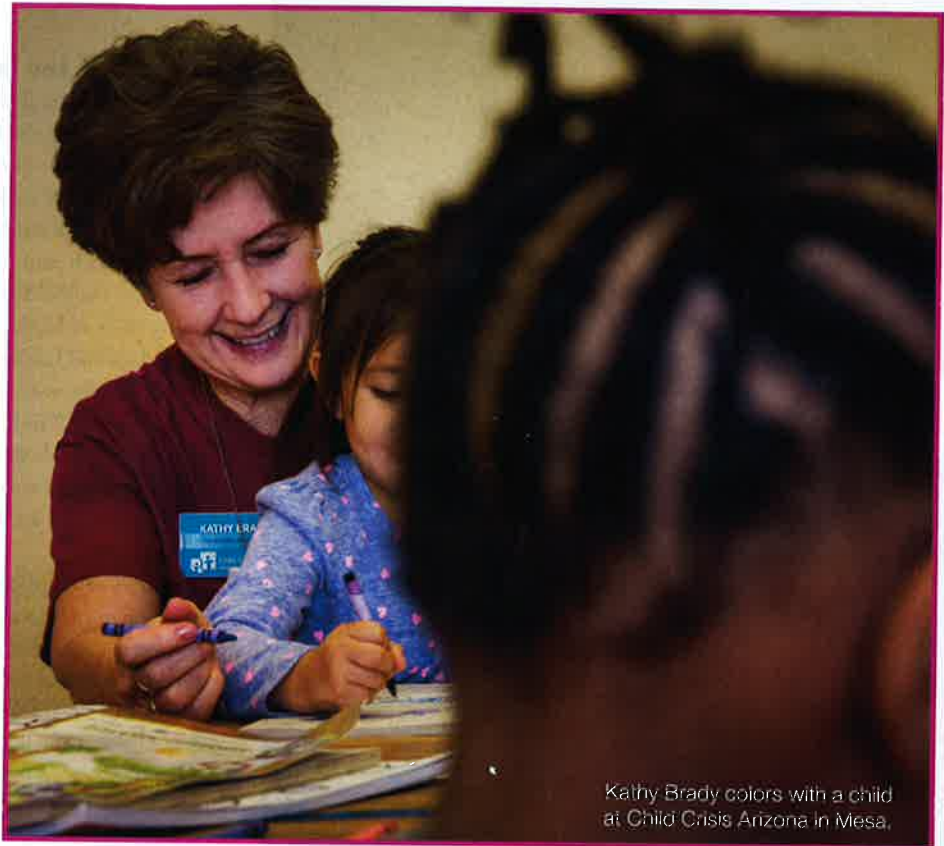
Even absent sweeping political change, child-welfare services are at risk when too-rosy perceptions of progress channel society's outrage in new directions.

"Child welfare cycles through very tragic times," McKay says. "A high-profile death or deaths create an emotional intervention and an infusion of spending into child welfare. When that dissipates, there are funding cuts, and the cycle repeats."

## OUR RESPONSIBILITY

My mind kept returning to the faces of the children at that emergency shelter in Mesa, and I could see in McKay's eyes that he was thinking of all the children's faces he'd encountered.

He shared many hopeful stories of children and families whose lives had been turned around, but there was something else, a darker vision — the



Kathy Brady colors with a child at Child Crisis Arizona in Mesa.

devastating images of child homicides he had investigated not so long ago.

A big question hung in the air that day: What happens now?

It's not entirely up to agency heads and politicians — although their policies certainly will have impact. What happens next also is up to us — *all of us* who live in Arizona. Children in foster care don't have time to wait for long-term solutions. They're growing up now.

Over the coming months, RAISING ARIZONA KIDS will publish a series of stories intended to demystify the world of foster care, adoption and family services. We will outline ways, both large and small, that Arizona families can support one another. We will share some of the inspiring, hopeful stories of successes, too.

I knew very little about foster care when I began my research for this series. Since then, I've had the privilege of interviewing many experts and families who have traveled this road. It became a personal challenge for me to work toward understanding the complexities of issues so deep and overwhelming that many of us tend to "otherize" the foster-care system as something that could never happen to us or our loved ones.

I wanted to break through that lens to more fully understand the challenges faced by the key players in this high-stakes drama: parents who lose custody of their children, overworked (and often blamed) caseworkers, resilient caregivers with the fortitude it takes to provide loving care to damaged and often despairing children. I wanted to understand the implications of allowing children to grow up without the stability and security that all children deserve.

Becoming a foster parent is not right for everyone; we will explore other ways to be a positive force in a child's life. These are our children. And as one foster parent told me, "If you want to make a real difference in someone's life, this is how."

*Sheri Smith, of Scottsdale, is the mother of Aidan (17) and Sarah (13).*