

I am writing you today to ask for your help with an issue that is within the Western Nebraska Panhandle area regarding our children/juveniles with mental health and disciplinary issues. I know that May is designated as Mental Health Awareness month and so I wanted to share my story with you in hopes that you will consider making some changes.

My husband and I have been married for over 25 years and during that timeframe became foster/adoptive parents for the State of Nebraska. We served in this role for over 14 years and during that time frame had the opportunity to adopt 4 of the children who came to live with us. One of our children is Myra, who came into our home at the age of 6 after being raised in a severely neglectful conditions and being subjected to physical abuse. She was one of 8 children removed from the home and unfortunately no one foster home had the ability to adopt all of them together, so they have been separated out into approximately 5 different homes including ours. Myra has grown over the years but struggled academically and socially due to her past. Since reaching middle school age, this has grown significantly with some substantial mental health issues arising, that has resulted in her running away, getting into physical altercations with other children, threatening suicide and self-harming herself. This has resulted in her receiving tickets from law enforcement for fighting by mutual consent, disorderly conduct, running away from home in excess of 10 times since November 2018, probation, 5 trips to the ER for a suicide assessment, placed at our local youth shelter and now her second trip to Madison, Nebraska, where she is being held at the Northeast Nebraska Juvenile Detention Center to keep her safe.

Unfortunately, the decision was made a couple of years ago to close the local juvenile detention center so that Scotts Bluff County could use the space to house additional inmates at the local jail. The space is now being used to house women, state and federal inmates vs. juveniles for monetary reasons. Any juveniles with charges resulting in detention are now forced to be sent to the Eastern side of the state to various locations, which are over 5 to 7 hours away. In addition, our local hospital, Regional West Medical Center, will not accept juvenile patients into their mental health ward, because of staffing requirements and various other reasons. Therefore, even though my daughter had been diagnosed with depression and other mental health issues related to trauma during her childhood and had threatened suicide on 5 different occasions, she would not receive inpatient treatment. As a result, she would continuously be sent home and taken to outpatient therapy, which did not have positive results. Now, as I stated earlier, my daughter has been placed once again in the Northeast Nebraska Juvenile Detention Center, with hopes that her probation officer and the psychiatrist in Norfolk, David Mitchells, will be able to draft a recommendation sufficient enough for the courts to accept so that she can be moved to a residential treatment Center, Cathedral, in Laramie, Wyoming. I have reached out to the head of probation for the State of Nebraska to help move things forward. I am remaining hopeful, but this process has been going on for several weeks now and we are still waiting for results.

I know that each of you serve on the Health and Human Services Committee and my hopes are that after reading this, you will address mental health issues for our children here in Western Nebraska. Currently, we have a group working with ESU #13 that would like to possibly

establish a day treatment facility with a day school, included for children with mental and behaviorial issues. However, this does not address those children in need of those same services after school is out of session. We have one Youth Shelter here in our area that can house between 8 and 12 juveniles, however, there is no therapeutic component included with this option. Please let me know if you are aware of any other resources available to my family to help with this situation or if there is anything additional I can do to move things forward. I have always been a strong advocate for children, serving as a CASA volunteer, Treasurer for the local Capstone Child Advocacy Center and Chairperson for Every Child, Every Day, Every Where. I also serve on the Scottsbluff City Council and would be more than happy to advocate on behalf of our children and their mental health needs in the community. Thank you for your time and I look forward to hearing from you. I can be reached at 308-641-1023 or jmckerrigan@live.com and jeanne@aulick.com.