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HEADLINE: New University of Michigan Law School advocacy clinic to help children and families better deal with foster care system

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BODY:

The tragedy of children entering the foster care system is almost a proverb. What's less well known is that many children put into foster care didn't absolutely have to be there.

The University of Michigan Law School has opened a new Center for Family Advocacy on the east side of Detroit to try to aid both families and the foster care system itself by helping to guide kids away from state-mandated care.

Vivek Sankaran is a professor in the school's Child Advocacy Law Clinic program and has been frustrated over the years not only by how hard it was to get children out of the foster care system quickly, but also by how many of them should have avoided it altogether.

"There are too many kids in the system and some of them don't need to be there at all," he said.

Out of the approximately 500,000 children in the foster care system nationwide, he said, between 65 and 70 percent are there because of situations of poverty or neglect.

Another 6 to 7 percent are there because of serious physical or sexual abuse. The rest, he said, could have avoided foster care if their families had the right tools and the right counseling.

"Families can get access to services like parenting classes and legal services, special education resources and domestic violence restraining orders," Sankaran said. "The center gives families access to help so they can make plans for their kids without going into the foster system. "

By all accounts, the Michigan foster care system is a bad place for a child to find him or herself. The entire system is under federal oversight, Sankaran said, for failing to meet the needs of the children in its charge.

There are too many children and too few resources. The Center helps the system and the state by trying to filter out the less-than-catastrophic cases.

"The system is overwhelmed and we're doing triaging," he said. "We want to make sure that the only kids to enter

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the system are the ones that absolutely need to. "

U of M staffs the clinic, and has clinic programs serving clients in Washtenaw, Genesee, Wayne, Jackson, Livingston or Monroe counties with a team of students, under supervision by clinical law faculty who are specialists in child advocacy law.

Sankaran said the U of M clinic program is one of the oldest in the country and was started in 1976.

In many of the cases they deal with, a lawyer is the right person to perform that triage, he said. Consider a mother in an abusive relationship: If her children stay in the home, they are in danger and should be removed. If a legal advocate can help draft a restraining order that removes the abusive adult, the danger is removed and the children don't have to be removed.

"The mother might know a restraining order is what she needs but not know how to get one," Sankaran said. "We can guide her through that process. "

Michael Patterson is the district manager of the North Central Children's Service District, a division of the Michigan Department of Human Services. He said more effort and resources go into managing families in the system than go into preventing them from entering in the first place.

"The Center's services are desperately needed," he said. "What they put into solving family concerns is highly cost-effective. "

He said the cost of a child in the foster system is \$15 to \$20 per day and that does not include the costs incurred within the court administrative system that manages them. The effect, for taxpayers, is a cheaper solution to the problems of families in crisis.

"It's a bargain for everyone," Patterson said. "Also, there's no way to estimate the cost to children's and families' emotional health upon entering the system. "

The Detroit Center for Family Advocacy is being funded with grants from the Skillman Foundation, the Community Foundation for Southeast Michigan, the McGregor Fund and from the Center for Children and Youth Justice as well as the University of Michigan and the Wayne County Child Care Fund.

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