

LOCAL NEWS

Housing Maryland foster children in hotels: 'unsafe situations for everyone'



By BALTIMORE SUN STAFF

UPDATED: November 3, 2024 at 8:54 AM EST

One boy was 8 when he and his siblings entered foster care. While they were ultimately adopted, he cycled for more than six years through psychiatric hospitals, foster and group homes and finally a hotel, where, “with no relatives willing to care for him ... he [expected to] age out of foster care,” according to a court report.

A 15-year-old foster youth with a history of major depression, anxiety and “placement instability” ended up in eight different hotels in six weeks, another report said, putting him “at risk for interaction with law enforcement due to his behavior problems with hotel staff and guests, which seemed to become more erratic with each move.”

Hotels are by nature transitory and transactional, far from ideal lodging for foster children who may have been removed from their own homes because of abuse or neglect with the promise of stability and safety. But that is where they sometimes have to be housed, under the watch of a contracted caregiver — or a “one-on-one” as they are commonly called — when other options are exhausted or unavailable, social services officials said.

The practice has come under the spotlight after reports emerged that a foster youth who was staying in a hotel in Owings Mills was accused of rape earlier this year.



“These are unsafe situations for everyone involved, for the one-on-one and for the youth,” said Jennifer Stine, executive director of Court Appointed Special Advocates, or CASA, of Baltimore County, which advocates for foster youths.

The Maryland Department of Human Services, which operates the foster care system, said using hotels remains exceedingly rare. Officials said they have decreased the number of foster youths staying in hotels by more than half since January 2023. As of Monday, they said, 40 of the 3,670 Maryland youths in foster care were staying in a hotel.

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“While this is a nationwide issue that child welfare administrators across the country are addressing, no child should reside in a hotel setting,” said Lillian Price, a department spokeswoman.

Those who work in foster care say using hotels is neither a new nor a strictly local issue as social service agencies across the country have long struggled to recruit and maintain enough foster families and beds in group homes or residential treatment facilities,

Even when children are successfully placed, there's no guarantee it will stick. A foster parent can fall ill and be hospitalized. A child can clash with staff or other residents in their substitute home, and be kicked out or run away.

Like other social services departments, DHS has prioritized "kinship care," in which children are placed with a relative or someone close to their family,

That is ideal, advocates said, but not always the reality. Some group homes have closed in recent years, and when there isn't an appropriate or willing kin, particularly for teenagers with behavioral or mental health issues, they can end up in a hotel as a last resort, Stine said,

Often, the most challenging children will end up in the setting where their needs are least likely to be met, she said. Instead of going to school, for example, "it's easy to just say, 'Nope, not going to go, I'll stay here and play video games,'" Stine said.

Foster children sometimes even end up staying in social services office buildings or hospitals as they await placements. By comparison, a hotel may be preferable even if no one believes an already vulnerable child is well-served living out of a suitcase, with little privacy or way to make the temporary quarters their own.

"Where do you put your items? What if you have a pet?" said Erica I. LeMon, an attorney with Maryland Legal Aid and its director of advocacy for children's rights. "We would not treat our own children like this.

"There has to be an investment [made] in placements, in these foster youth," she said. "If we don't, what's going to be their future?"

The issue of children living in hotels, sometimes for months, has come up repeatedly in reports about the Baltimore City foster care system, which has been under court order to reform for decades,

A consent decree to resolve a 1984 class-action lawsuit filed on behalf of city children for maltreatment while in foster care includes among its many stipulations that "no child may be housed in an office, motel, hotel, or other unlicensed facility."

And yet, they are, said a court-appointed monitor who reviews the twice-yearly reports that social services staff have to file on their progress in implementing reforms,

"Due to the lack of available appropriate placements, more children have spent multiple nights in BCDSS' office buildings and are living in hotels for weeks and months on end," wrote Rhonda Lipkin, the consent decree's "independent verification agent,

During the final six months of last year, according to her most recent report, 23 of the nearly 1,400 foster care children in the city spent a combined 688 nights in a hotel — some for as long as three months. As of this April, there were two youths who each had been living in hotels for more than seven months, Lipkin wrote.

Those numbers represent a marked rise over the first six months of last year, she said, when 14 youths spent a total of 341 nights in hotels in the first six months of last year.

Interspersed with such data, and her problems with some of the department's record-keeping, are heartbreaking anecdotes of children with severe medical or behavior issues — a boy on the autism spectrum with cognitive and language impairments, a girl with spina bifida and end-stage renal disease — that make them particularly hard to place and landed them in hotels temporarily.

“The practice is exorbitantly expensive, raises serious safety concerns, and is inappropriate for any long-term use,” Lipkin wrote.

Additionally, there's now a new challenge, she said, of some foster youths growing accustomed to and preferring hotels to placements where they have had problems or have run away from in the past.

While many “knock” the use of hotels, they provide somewhere for kids with nowhere else to go, said Eric Fenwick, who has contracted with social services departments to provide one-on-one monitoring of foster youths since 2017.

“No, it's not ideal,” said the owner of the Towson-based Fenwick Behavioral Services. “But there's a lack of placements. There's no other place to put these children.”

Fenwick said his staff members, who are trained in first aid, behavioral management and other skills, stay with foster children in suite hotels, which give the youths their own rooms. The caregivers take them to school and just “give them the attention and support they need,” he said.

Regardless of where foster youths are staying, DHS officials said, local social service departments are still responsible for their case management and regularly visit them.

Concerns about the practice have extended beyond the social services field. Ryan Coleman, president of the Randallstown NAACP, said he was troubled to learn about alleged incident in the Owings Mills hotel and wrote letters to government officials, including Gov. Wes Moore, and hotel representatives.

“These are not secure environments,” Coleman said.

Coleman said the safety of nearby residents should be considered.

A spokesman for the hotel, Home2 Suites Owings Mills, said in an email that he could not comment specifically on the allegations but said he understood “there was an incident involving a minor in foster care with Baltimore County Social Services and his assigned caregiver.” The hotel has since discontinued its previous arrangement with the agency to rent rooms for temporarily housing foster children and their caregivers, he said.

Police and state and county officials declined to provide details about the incident because it involved a juvenile and remained under investigation.

“The allegations are horrific, deeply disturbing, and, if true, Baltimore County will support every effort to hold individuals responsible and prosecuted to the fullest extent of the law,” said county spokeswoman Erica Palmisano, “However, as this is an ongoing case, Baltimore County cannot comment further at this time.”

Child advocates say that while hotels can be a quick fix in some circumstances, they’ve become more than that and social services agencies need to find longer-term solutions.

“It would make sense to me if once in a while, for a day or two in an emergency situation hotels were utilized so that the kid is comfortable and not sleeping in the office,” said Laura Edwards, executive director of Maryland CASA. “But I do think that it has hit a crisis level and that there are kids that are sort of stuck in these situations and not getting what they need.”

Originally Published: October 31, 2024 at 12:26 PM EST

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