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AN EXPLORATION OF COMMUNITY NEEDS:
THE LAFAYETTE COUNTY FOSTER CARE SYSTEM

By Meredith Grace McKissick

A thesis submitted to the faculty of the University of Mississippi in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the Sally McDonnell Barksdale Honors College

University, Mississippi
September 2022

Approved:

Advisor: Dr. Melissa Bass

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DEDICATION

To my parents and little sisters, who have encouraged me to chase every dream I have ever dreamt.

To my seventh grade teacher, Kassi Fox, who pushed me when I was twelve-years-old to keep asking difficult questions. To her I attribute my love for deep learning.

To Mississippi, a place I once underestimated and now believe in a whole lot.

To the children whose futures are in our hands.

To the dreamers.

To the believers.

And to the hope of a brighter future.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I firstly want to acknowledge what a privilege it is to be a student at the University of Mississippi and to have the opportunity to conduct this research. What a gift it is to be able to learn in this way. I hope to live in that acknowledgement and not to take it for granted. Secondly, I would like to thank my brilliant and patient thesis advisor, Dr. Melissa Bass. Dr. Bass has invested her time, wisdom, and compassion into this project, as well as my education, and for that I am deeply grateful. I owe another sincere thank you to Dr. Jody Holland and Dr. Sarah Mason, for answering numerous questions along the way and serving on my thesis committee.

Thank you to each of my interviewees: Erin Smith, Terrica Roberts, David Calder, David Bell, Brett Thomas, and Katy Moss. Thank you for sharing your knowledge, recommendations, and time with me, and thank you for the way you fight for children in Lafayette County. I am inspired by the impact each of you have made and continue to make on our community.

Lastly, a thank you to the Lord above for the peace, comfort, and hope He has provided me. When nights were long, weeks were busy, and answers were difficult to hear, I am thankful to have never once felt alone.

I am so grateful for the countless people who encouraged me, taught me, and partnered with me throughout this experience. Though I was born and raised in Tennessee, Mississippi has changed me. May we continue to invest in, love on, and fight for the future of Mississippi and its people.

ABSTRACT

Are there enough foster parents to meet the needs of our community? Who advocates on behalf of children who are in the custody of the state? What do children in custody need? Prior to this research, the general public was unable to find these answers in a concise and accessible manner. This study explores the community needs of the Lafayette County Foster Care System in Mississippi, through the means of a needs assessment. The assessment involves six interviews with local foster care leaders, collection and analysis of results, and formal recommendations. Findings are organized by both individual interviews and thematic analysis. The findings include a wide array of strengths and needs. Thematic strengths include cross-organization collaboration, Court Appointed Special Advocates, new Child Protective Services hire, and current resources. Thematic needs include an increased number of resource homes and parents, further resources, affordable housing, and community support. Recommended action stemming from discussion and analysis falls into three primary steps: awareness, acknowledgment, and action. The study concludes that there is much to celebrate, yet much room for growth, and the people of Lafayette County have the opportunity to engage for change.

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List of Abbreviations (in alphabetical order)

ASWS: Area Social Work Supervisor

CASA: Court Appointed Special Advocates

CBC: Community-Based Care

CFSP: Child and Family Services Plan

CFSR: Child and Family Services Review

CQI: Continuous Quality Improvement

CPS: Child Protective Services

DFPS: Department of Family Protective Services

ESEA: Elementary and Secondary Education Act

GAL: Guardian ad Litem

OHA: Oxford Housing Authority

LCFCS: Lafayette County Foster Care system

LOU: Lafayette Oxford University

MDCPS: Mississippi Department of Child Protection Services

MS: Mississippi

Chapter 1

Introduction

I was fifteen-years-old when I first learned of the depths of the foster care system. What once seemed so far from my Tennessee home, became much closer after listening to a message one Sunday morning at the church I grew up in. The pastor of our church stated it clearly: there are children in need of homes, families, and care. As I sat in the chairs of the sanctuary, my heart filled with discontentment. I was about to turn sixteen and drive a car, complete college applications, and dream about my future. Meanwhile, children both my age, older, and younger were having dreams ripped out from under them. These children were living just minutes away from me. With no voice. Few opportunities. And a vast amount of hurt, trauma, and hopelessness.

Six years later, my heart carries the same discontentment. I long to see change. I have learned an immense amount during my time in Lafayette County about the complexities of foster care. As a result, I have sought to ask questions. To find answers. To seek and pursue solutions. The implementation of this study is an academic account of these questions and their respective answers.

The Lafayette County Foster Care System is a complex. The intention of the current foster care “system” is to connect abused or neglected children with healthy homes while working towards reunification with their biological parents. Doing so requires addressing many needs for all involved: children within the foster care system, biological parents, foster parents, social workers, advocates, and those within the court system.

Are there enough foster parents to meet the needs of our community? Who advocates on behalf of children who are in the custody of the state? What do children in custody need? Are

foster parents well-supported? Do biological parents have the resources they need to succeed in reunification? What can we celebrate within our county's foster care system? And what can be grown, expanded upon, and better advocated for?

It sometimes seems as though there are more questions than answers when it comes to foster care in Lafayette County. This study assesses the true needs of the Lafayette County Foster Care system by exploring its complexities through conducting a needs assessment, contributing to the current research, and making recommendations based on the county's current practices. Its purpose is to both highlight the victories that Lafayette County Foster Care System gets to celebrate and to advocate for meeting the challenges it continues to encounter. This project's intention is to give a strong voice to a frequently overlooked group in Lafayette County and make information regarding foster care localized and accessible.

The Importance of Exploration

There are an estimated 423,997 children in the foster care system in the United States (U.S, 2020); roughly 5,362 of these children are residing in the state of Mississippi (MS Bureau, 2020). Children are placed in foster care for a number of reasons, but most frequently children are removed from the custody of their biological parents due to circumstances that are arguably preventable (MS Court, 2020). Simply, children are placed into custody as the result of abuse or neglect. Many have sought to find answers to questions surrounding the difficulties and complications of the foster care system. Repeatedly, findings have shown that the foster care system can fail the children it seeks to aid. Foster America, an organization that advocates on behalf of foster children, emphasizes the extent of the system's failure (Foster America, 2020). It reports that "one in eight American children is abused or neglected by age 18 and one in 17 kids enters foster care." It also recognizes the societal disadvantages that foster children face, citing

that “50% of foster youth will not graduate from high school on time, 48% of girls in foster care become pregnant by age 19, and 60% of child trafficking victims have histories in foster care.” These statistics highlight the urgency of organizations to aid and advocate on behalf of children and families.

Key Actors and Organizations

The Lafayette County Foster Care System is composed of key actors and organizations. Below are brief explanations of these important groups as they pertain to the LCFCS.

Children

Children ages zero through seventeen come into custody of Lafayette County as the result of reported abuse and/or neglect. Often, children enter county custody following a direct report to the police department and/or child protective services.

Child Protective Services

The Mississippi Department of Child Protection Services (MDCPS) “prevents the abuse, neglect and exploitation of children, strengthens families and promotes permanent family connections and well-being” (Family & Social Services 2022). Often, MDCPS is the first group informed of an abuse or neglect case. The organization works closely with children and families throughout and beyond the duration of a case.

Court Appointed Special Advocates

Court Appointed Special Advocates, commonly abbreviated as “CASA,” consists of staff and volunteer advocates who “are appointed by judges to advocate for children’s best interests” (National Organization, 2022). CASA is a national organization that was founded in 1977 by court judge David W. Soukup, after having insufficient information in court to make a life-changing decision for an abused child. He felt that children needed trained advocates to

represent their best interests in the courtrooms, and he began the CASA/GAL program. Today, there are 950 state CASA/GAL (see “Guardian ad Litem” below) organizations located in 49 states. Lafayette County is currently served by CASA of North Mississippi. The local organization has three full time staff members, 15 board members, and 45 volunteers. CASA currently advocates for 100% of the children in Lafayette county.

Foster/Resource Parents

Resource Parents, commonly known as “foster” parents, provide temporary homes for children who have been removed from their biological homes as they await reunification or the termination of parental rights. These parents must go through thorough background checks and apply for licensure through the Department of Child Protection Services.

Guardian ad Litem

A Guardian ad Litem is a qualified attorney appointed by the court to “represent children's interests in cases involving adoption, child custody, child support, divorce, emancipation of minors, and visitation rights” (Guardian Ad Litem, 2022). Often the Guardian ad Litem serves to be a “factfinder” for the court. The GAL is designated to gather information regarding cases to aid the Youth Court Referee in making decisions in the best interest of the child.

The Youth Court

The Youth Court holds the legal proceedings regarding the abuse and neglect of children. It also handles offenses committed by juveniles. As stated by the Youth Court, “young people who have not reached the age of 18 may be subject to the Youth Court, although there are some exceptions. Some offenses which would be treated as crimes if committed by adults are known as delinquent acts when they involve juveniles” (Youth Court, 2022). The Youth Court meets to

hold shelter hearings, placement hearings, foster care reviews, and other key meetings in determining the status of progress within families. Based on the population size of Lafayette County, at the time of publication of this study the Youth Court is held within the Chancery Court.

Youth Court Referee

The Youth Court Referee acts as an appointed judge in matters regarding the Youth Court. This position is served by a part time, qualified appointee. According to Title 43 of the Mississippi Code, the Youth Court Referee “shall be required to receive judicial training approved by the Mississippi Judicial College and shall be required to receive regular annual continuing education in the field of juvenile justice” (2013 Mississippi Code, 2022). The referee possesses “all powers and perform[s] all the duties of the youth court judge in the hearings authorized to be heard by the referee.”

Each of the aforementioned groups work in tandem. The following is an example scenario of how each actor and organization work together within the foster care system is given as follows:

A report of abuse and neglect is made to CPS. A CPS caseworker confirms the instance of abuse/neglect. A child enters the custody of CPS, and an investigation is opened. In the Youth Court, the investigation is discussed at a shelter hearing. During the hearing, the Youth Court Referee formally assigns CASA and the GAL to be placed on the case and the parties begin to work together in cooperation. A foster home is then assigned to the child, as necessary.

Many are involved within the local foster care system. Both governmental and nongovernmental actors are pivotal to the system. Understanding the role, responsibilities, and importance of each

further aids in both understanding and satisfying the needs of the current system in Lafayette County. This basis is also integral in recognizing the role of an independent needs assessment. With multiple parties involved in a complex system, an independent needs assessment has not been conducted prior to this publication, as no one party has had the inherent responsibility to do so.

Chapter 2: Review of Literature

This chapter includes a review of literature with an overview of needs and needs assessments, syntheses of foster care state needs assessments, and an overview of texts identifying needs within the system.

Needs and Needs Assessments

One of the earliest academic discussions of needs was initiated by Abraham H. Maslow, in his paper “A Theory of Human Motivation,” published in 1943. His entry was an attempt to “formulate a positive theory of motivation” (Maslow 371). Maslow states that we universally share at least five goals that he deems “basic needs.” These needs are “physiological, safety, love, esteem, and self-actualization” (Maslow 394). He organizes each need into a hierarchy, and he explains that once a need is “fairly well satisfied the next prepotent ('higher') need emerges” (Maslow 395). For example, one’s physiological needs are described as the starting point of human motivation. These needs include, but are not limited to, air, water, shelter, sleep, and clothing. Maslow argued that until these basic needs are met, “all other needs may become simply non-existent or be pushed into the background” (Maslow 373). Therefore, safety or love are not prioritized in human motivation, until one’s physiological needs are satisfied first.

James W. Altschuld and Ryan Watkins’s “A Primer on Needs Assessment: More Than 40 Years of Research and Practice,” recognizes Maslow’s theory as being pivotal in popularizing the concept of need in psychology. They credit the work of Maslow for the term “need” entering the national discourse on education (Altschuld and Watkins 2014). In their work, Altschuld and Watkins explain the foundation of needs assessments, address models and tools of implementation, and draw connections between the history of needs assessments and the current

practice. Altschuld and Watkins provide a table of the timeline of modern needs assessments. It can be found in appendix A of this study.

A key point of the timeline is the passage of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), which called for the determination of the needs for programs and projects within education. This led to the implementation of numerous needs assessments within primarily public school systems, serving as arguably the first formally conducted needs assessments. The assessments aimed to identify each system's current needs, which Altschuld and Watkins define as "a measurable gap between two conditions—what currently is and what should be" (Altschuld and Watkins 2014). Though the educational field was the starting point for needs assessments in practice, the two emphasize that needs assessments are conducted and influenced by both the public and private sectors. For this study, the literature synthesized and shared within this chapter will primarily pertain to the public sector, as it most closely relates to the field of foster care.

State Needs Assessments

In November 2020, the state of Texas's Department of Family and Protective Services (DFPS) released their "Foster Care Needs Assessment," a needs assessment to fulfill the requirements of "Senate Bill 11 (85th Texas Legislature, 2017). The bill requires Child Protective Services (CPS) Regional Directors within the DFPS to use data collected on substitute care needs and availability "to develop an annual, collaborative, regional substitute care capacity needs plan for areas in which Community-Based Care (CBC) has not been implemented" (Texas 2020). The state appears to have annual foster care needs assessments conducted by DFPS. The published assessment does not include methodology or implementation, but it does list findings as well as strategic plans for addressing mentioned needs.

In its executive summary, the assessment revealed a prominent need for a higher foster home capacity across the state of Texas for youth 14 and older with basic and moderate service levels, all higher needs children and youth, and all ages and service levels in rural areas (Texas 2020). In addressing this need, the study mentions that “building capacity still depends largely on contracted provider efforts. Contracted providers develop and manage 90 percent of all foster homes across the state, all foster homes for higher needs children, and all congregate care.” The influence of contracted providers directly impacts the ability of DFPS to meet these needs. As a result, the assessment suggests that to best support the contracted providers in understanding and utilizing the needs assessment, the director of each region will host a “regional strategic capacity building meeting including not only foster care providers but local faith-based entities, child advocates, and other organizations” (Texas 2020). The intention of the meeting is to facilitate “a collaborative discussion about the data in this needs assessment and any needed revisions or updates to last year’s regional strategic capacity building plan.” Based on the report, it seems as though these meetings have been effective in continuing conversation and incorporating multiple parties into achieving change.

The report also states current practices and their degrees of success. CPS is recognized for developing and implementing multiple strategies to build substitute care capacity. Though efforts were strong, COVID-19 deeply impacted their implementation. The assessment acknowledges the challenges and impacts the pandemic had on placement options available for children. Despite the setbacks, not all impacts of COVID-19 were negative: the pandemic strengthened partnerships between multiple parties, and it allowed for higher meeting attendance, as virtual platforms removed travel barriers for participants. The state of Texas will continue to utilize virtual platforms in hopes of perpetuating accessibility. Alongside these findings, the

study concludes by explaining that “DFPS will continue to partner with contracted providers and other stakeholders to address substitute care capacity needs by identifying and expanding strategies that are working, changing or discontinuing those that are not and exploring and incorporating new strategies, as appropriate.”

The Texas DFPS’s “Foster Care Needs Assessment,” is simple and well-organized.. The document includes an executive summary, DFPS strategies, data on substitute care demand and supply, placement with kinship caregivers, non-relative foster care, and a conclusion. The information is accessible and exists in a format that seems to prioritize the average reader. Terms that may be unfamiliar to those outside of the foster care system are defined and abbreviated. Charts and appendices are also included, where information can be expanded upon for the better understanding of the reader. I found this study to serve as a key example of a needs assessment on the state agency level. Though it did not include methodology or implementation methods of the assessment as a whole, I still found its style and findings relevant to this study. In connection with Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs theory, it appears the intention of the agency is to first fulfill physiological needs. Shelter is emphasized as the most critical need across the state, through its emphasis of need in expanding foster home capacities.

Though a published foster care needs assessment does not exist on the state level for the state of Mississippi at this time, the Mississippi Department of Child Protection Services (MDCPS) has released its “2020-2024 Child and Family Services Plan (CFSP).” The 94 page document is available on the MDCPS website, and is organized into seven primary chapters as follows:

- I. Organizational Structure, Collaboration and Vision
- II. Assessment of Current Performance in Improving Outcomes

- III. Plan for Enacting the State's Vision
- IV. Services
- V. Consultation and Coordination Between States and Tribes
- VI. John H. Chafee Foster Care Program for Successful Transition to Adulthood
- VII. Attachments-CFSP Targeted Plans

The text is produced by MDCPS, which is the Mississippi state equivalent to Texas's DFPS. The agency's mission is "to lead Mississippi's efforts in keeping children and youth safe and thriving by strengthening families, preventing child abuse, neglect, and exploitation, and promoting child and family well-being and permanent family connections" (MDCPS 2020). The section of the report titled "Assessment of Current Performance in Improving Outcomes" contains information comparable to that of a formal needs assessment. Its assessment highlights safety outcomes, permanency outcomes, well-being outcomes, a self-assessment of the child and family services review (CFSR) systemic factors, a case review system, a quality assurance system, staff training, service array, agency responsiveness to the community, and foster and adoptive parent licensing, recruitment, and retention.

The first four sections of this chapter addressing "safety outcomes" through "self-assessment" mentioned that the conclusion and response to findings would be found in the "CFSR PIP." There is no mention of what the CFSR PIP stands for within the text, but after searching "CFSR PIP" in a search engine, I found it is a "Child and Family Services Review Program Improvement Plan Development, Implementation, and Monitoring." At the time of the study it was reported that "the State has developed and submitted its CFSR PIP to the Children's Bureau and is awaiting approval." As a result, the first nineteen items addressing needs are matched with statistics that are not expanded upon in this document.

Items 20-36 categorize tasks as either being strengths or needing improvement. Each item is listed and followed with a response. I have organized the provided items into paragraphs based on section, beginning with needs and ending with strengths in order of mention.

Within the “Case Review System,” it is mentioned that current practice regarding written case plans “does not effectively ensure that parents are engaged in the development of initial and ongoing case plans” (MDCPS 2020). Pertaining to permanency hearings, MDCPS has faced challenges in “ensuring that permanency hearings are occurring as required.” Lastly, notice to caregivers of hearings and reviews need improvement. Strengths in this section are that review of each child is occurring no less frequently than once every six months, and the filing of termination of parental rights appears to follow quality assurance procedures.

The “Quality Assurance System” identifies the current practice as “Continuous Quality Improvement” (CQI). CQI was developed to “monitor and inform practice in such a way as to lead to timely services to clients, improved outcomes for Mississippi families and to inform agency leadership and stakeholders of the well-being of the agency”(MDCPS 2020). The report recognizes that the CQI activities have significantly grown over the past few years, yet it plans to enhance its current system through “ongoing collaboration with the various program units, field operations and stakeholders” (MDCPS 2020).

“Staff Training” encompasses standards pertaining to initial staff training, ongoing staff training, and foster and adoptive parent training. Initial staff training of MDCPS was rated as a strength. Ongoing staff, foster, and adoptive parent training, were rated as needing improvement, as none of the programs had systems for feedback in place at the time of publication.

The “Service Array” section indicated a need for improvement in the variety of services provided, as well as needing improvement in individualizing services. This is stated to be addressed in the CFSR PIP.

“Agency Responsiveness to the Community” recognized both the state engagement and consultation with stakeholders and the coordination of CFSP with other federal programs as a strength.

Regarding “Foster and Adoptive Parent Licensing, Recruitment, and Retention,” licensure standards were identified as being applied equally; this was deemed a strength. An additional strength is that the system is in compliance with the requirements for criminal background checks. Both the diligent recruitment of foster and adoptive parents as well as the state use of cross-jurisdictional resources for permanent placements were categorized as needing improvement.

The aforementioned strengths and needs reflect the recognized sufficiencies and gaps in practice of the Mississippi Foster Care System. While there is no mention of Lafayette County specifically, these trends may also exemplify local strengths and needs, and the text can be used as a point of reference in the basis of this study. Beyond chapter 2 of the CFSP, other sections may serve as references for future evaluation or strategic plans, yet are not fully relevant to the needs of this study.

In terms of personal evaluation, the 2020-2024 Child and Family Services Plan does not prioritize the accessibility of its findings and plans. The document is filled with unexplained charts and empirical data, references to undisclosed studies, and lack of expansion on generally unfamiliar terms and concepts. Though I was able to sift through key points, the information is not expressed and formatted in a way that promotes accessibility to Mississippians. This

criticism comes alongside a hope that my study will serve as an accessible point of research to readers beyond those within the foster care system.

Beyond formal needs assessments, other research addresses the needs of the foster care system. The following articles address needs within the foster care system, yet not necessarily the system as a whole.

Needs Within the Foster Care System

“Cumulative Risks of Foster Care Placement by Age 18 for U.S. Children, 2000–2011” was published by Christopher Wildeman and Natalia Emanuel in 2014. The study “uses synthetic cohort life tables and data from the Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS)” to estimate the number of U.S. children being placed in foster care between birth and age 18. The study concludes that up to 5.91% of all children in the United States were ever placed in foster care, and Native American and Black children were at a significantly higher risk of placement. The findings emphasize that “foster care is thus quite common in the U.S., especially for historically disadvantaged racial/ethnic groups” (Wildemen and Emanuel 2014). Risk of placement between boys and girls was not statistically significant and differences between the sexes were minimal.

Wildeman and Emanuel’s research utilized AFCARS published data and caseworker reports. They used measures of age, sex, race/ethnicity, and first admission to foster care; this allowed for results to be compared across numerous demographic measures. Understanding the national demographic trends of foster care, needs may help address the needs of specific groups of children and families within the system. For example, the study finds that “children had the highest risk of first foster care placement during infancy, with 1.09% of all U.S children entering foster care before their first birthday” (Wildemen and Emanuel 2014). Recognizing the high rate

of infants entering foster care could allow organizations to implement preventative placement measures during pregnancies, be prepared with infant resources, or better prepare to meet the special needs of infants accordingly. The research provided also demonstrates that foster care is arguably more common than generally perceived; the results show that up to 1 in 17 children will spend time in foster care. The study's conclusion calls for researchers and policymakers to "give far greater attention to this vulnerable group of children" (Wildemen and Emanuel 2014).

Brittany Beyerlein and Ellin Bloch's "Need for Trauma-Informed Care Within the Foster Care System: A Policy Issue" focuses primarily on trauma as it pertains to children within the foster care system. Trauma is widely prevalent within the system, as it is experienced both prior to entering the system and during placement. Beyerlein and Bloch's work emphasizes the need for "the support of public policy to ensure that children and families who encounter the child welfare system receive the care that they need" (Beyerlein and Bloch 2014). Alongside these efforts, they emphasize a need for continued funding for these initiatives, in hopes of implementing various practices throughout organizations and conducting research on the evaluation of such initiatives (Beyerlein and Bloch 2014).

Beyerlein and Bloch identify one of the main issues regarding foster care as placement instability, which brings "additional traumatic stress upon an already vulnerable population" (Beyerlein and Bloch 2014). Their suggested solution to this need is recognized as "trauma-informed care," which is defined as "a practice in which everyone involved within an agency or service system develops and maintains an awareness of the impact of traumatic experiences on children, caregivers, and service providers, leading to the application of appropriate responses, training, practices, and policies" (Beyerlein and Bloch 2014). They urge

that trauma-informed care be prioritized and put into practice nationally, as it has the opportunity to aid in creating placement stability and best care for all involved.

In relation to my study, Beyerlein and Bloch's research provides important information regarding trauma throughout the foster care system and in identifying a universal challenge faced by those involved. Their research recognizes trauma experienced not only by children, but also caseworkers and other staff members. It is not only important to recognize this in assessing needs, but also to be sensitive to these topics in my interviews.

A more general account of foster care needs within the United States is reported in Sandra Stukes Chipungu and Tricia B. Bent-Goodley's "Meeting the Challenges of Contemporary Foster Care." Chipungu and Bent-Goodley discuss the state of the foster care system, as of 2004, and analyze its major challenges. These challenges are expanding caseloads with complex needs, high staff turnover, and difficulties recruiting foster parents. The disproportionate representation of children of color is also stated as a challenge, which aligns with the findings of Wildeman and Emanuel.

Beyond the listed challenges and their explanations, the authors emphasize the difficulty of the foster care experience for both children and parents (Chipungu and Bent-Goodley 2004). In their section on the difficulties of foster care for children, Chipungu and Bent-Goodley state that children who are removed from their homes "experience detrimental short- and long-term effects" (Chipungu and Bent-Goodley 2004). Research has shown that children exhibit emotional/behavioral problems, grief, emotional and psychological challenges, and often signs of depression, aggression, and withdrawal. Similar to the work of Beyerlein and Bloch, they emphasize the high levels of trauma children experience. Foster parents also face challenges. Financially, foster parents are frequently reimbursed at low rates and expected to pay for

expenses out of pocket (Chipungu and Bent-Goodley 2004). This makes it difficult for foster parents to meet the complex needs of children. Beyond lack of financial support, foster children tend to require extra care and attention, but foster parents are frequently without proper resources and capacities to address such needs. The authors recognize a need for better case management support and better training for foster parents.

After addressing the challenges and needs within the system, Chipungu and Bent-Goodley discuss potential solutions and recommendations. They first recommend ensuring safe, stable, and supportive homes for children, which aligns with Maslow's emphasis on physiological needs, as well as the needs identified by both Texas's and Mississippi's state assessments. Beyond the provision of homes, recommendations include responding to children's developmental needs, addressing disproportionality and differential treatment, diffusing cultural competence throughout the system, strengthening families, ensuring competent staffing, improving data collection and accountability, and experimenting with innovative models. The study ends with a hopeful conclusion, being cognizant of current gaps, yet encouraged by future solutions.

Though this study was published in 2004, it addresses and encompasses present needs and challenges through its analysis of numerous sources and firsthand experience. It is a diligent and thorough source, yet is organized and accessible. It gives solutions in many formats; some solutions are policy-driven, while some can be completed by community members. The needs pertain to general trends within the US, but the text seems to be applicable across the country. In relation to the Mississippi assessment discussed earlier, there are many overlapping challenges and areas of growth. Improved training practices, resource availability to parents, and staff

presence are emphasized across both resources. In terms of relevance, it appears as though the key points of this study still hold true.

As a reader, I appreciated the honest recognition of shortcomings and gaps of the system, with tangible recommendations and charismatic hope incorporated into the findings and conclusion of Chipungu and Bent-Goodley. The literature also included photos, simplified charts, defined terms, well-organized sections, and well-rounded information. It covered many corners of the foster care system directly and concisely, yielding a document that could be utilized by both national policymakers and curious community members.

Beyond policy-based and state-mandated literature, I also found key sources by researchers. In Loring Paul Jones's *Life After Foster Care: Improving Outcomes for Former Foster Youth*, Jones explores a number of topics regarding foster youth and their needs. The first section of the literature examines policy, research, and practices over the past three years as they pertain to foster care; the second section focuses primarily on the functioning of youth post-foster care. Jones identifies a number of needs such as resources in transition out of foster care, independent living services, health resources, and mental health resources. The needs mentioned in the text are primarily in dialogue with children who have transitioned or are transitioning out of foster care. He finds that youth aging out of foster care have common needs "to become employed, to be financially independent, to acquire the skills to enable them to live autonomously, to develop satisfying relationships with others, and to be integrated into the community as productive and valued members" (Jones 2018). These needs are shared by all emerging adults, but Jones emphasizes unique challenges former foster care youth face

In "The Needs of Foster Children and How to Satisfy Them: A Systematic Review of the Literature" Anne Steenbakkers, Steffie Van Der Steen, and Hans Grietens reviewed 64 empirical

articles from six databases to provide an overview of needs and to suggest what can be done to satisfy such needs. They categorize foster children's needs into four categories: medical, belongingness, psychological, and self-actualization. Medical needs include requirements for both physical and developmental health; they suggest personal treatment plans to satisfy this need. Regarding belongingness, they state that children in foster care need "continuity of the relationships with their birth family members" (Steenbakkens, Van Der Steen, and Grietens 2018). Providing a stable and safe environment is a way to further satisfy this need. Psychological needs are mentioned in regards to everyday well-being and functioning; the primary need acknowledged is that of self-esteem in children. To satisfy this need, authors stress the importance of attentive and sensitive parenting. Lastly, self-actualization needs primarily pertain to education: Stability and connection to the same school help children meet this goal..

The study concludes that "most articles focus on how to satisfy the needs of foster children and provide no definition or concrete conceptualization of needs." Beyond this, many articles focus on the problem of children rather than their needs, with needs and problems used interchangeably. Steenbakkens, Van Der Steen, and Grietens agree that "future research should employ a proper conceptualization of needs, which could also initiate a shift in thinking about needs instead of problems" (Steenbakkens, Van Der Steen, and Grietens 2018).

Chapter 3: Research Design

This chapter explains the objective, design, interview structure, implementation timeline, data collection and evaluation methods, limitations, and Institutional Review Board status of this study.

Objective and Overview of Study Design

This project serves to (1) explore and assess the needs of the foster care system in Lafayette County and (2) make a meaningful contribution to the current literature.

The design of this study is a *needs assessment*. A needs assessment can be defined as “a systematic approach to studying the state of knowledge, ability, interest, or attitude of a defined audience or group involving a particular subject” (McCawley, 2009). Commonly, needs assessments are conducted on specific programs’ needs and their capacity for community impact. As of this time, no one has conducted a needs assessment specifically regarding the Lafayette County Foster Care System.

This study is based on a series of interviews with local partners who work directly with the foster care system, including CASA (Court Appointed Special Advocates), Lafayette County Youth Court, and Child Protective Services. CASA currently consists of staff and volunteers who work to represent children in the greater Oxford area who are a part of the foster care system; volunteers work hands-on with children and their cases. The Youth Court conducts the legal proceedings of foster cases, and within the court the Youth Court Referee makes legal decisions regarding each case. Child Protective Services works directly with children in local custody; the organization interacts with biological parents, foster parents, and children. The interviews with these individuals focus on common themes of their experiences within the foster care system. They each agreed to be named in this study, and the IRB approved such naming.

Sample Selection

I completed a total of six interviews chosen through *purposive sampling*. Purposive sampling is a selection method that involves the “deliberate choice of a participant due to the qualities the participant possesses” (Tran and Alkassim, 2022). Based on the preexisting relationships I have with CASA as an intern and volunteer, I was able to reach out to schedule interviews with Erin Smith, who serves as the CASA Director, and Terrica Roberts, who supervises all CASA volunteers in Lafayette County. I also sent inquiry emails to the Youth Court Referee, David Bell, and the Guardian ad Litem, Brett Thomas, both of whom I had previously met in the Chancery Court. CASA Director, Erin Smith gave me the contact information for David Calder, a local law school instructor with relevant legal experience, and Katy Moss, the Lafayette County Child Protective Services supervisor.

A list of those interviewed, in order of interview date, is below:

Erin Smith, CASA Director

Terrica Roberts, CASA Volunteer Supervisor

David Calder, Associate Clinical Professor and Director of the Child Advocacy Clinic

David Bell, Youth Court Referee

Brett Thomas, Guardian ad Litem

Katy Moss, CPS Area Social Work Supervisor

Interview Structure

I conducted each interview in-person or via the online meeting platform, Zoom. I gave each participant the option to choose their preferred meeting platform, with the intention of maximizing convenience and comfort. Smith, Roberts, Moss, and Bell chose in-person meetings, while Thomas and Calder chose Zoom.

Each interview followed a semi-structured format. I asked participants guided questions, yet they also had the opportunity to direct the interview as they saw fit. This allowed for organic conversation surrounding specific insights and interests. To begin, I asked the following three questions to each participant:

- Are you above the age of 18?
- Do you provide consent for the recording of this interview?
- Please provide a brief introduction of who you are and your role as it pertains to foster care in Lafayette county.

I then asked the following questions to facilitate conversation and assess needs:

- How many children are in the LCFCS?
- How is the LCFCS currently defined?
- What are the strengths of the LCFCS?
- How are the needs of children being met?
- What are the needs of the LCFCS pertaining to:
 - children
 - family
 - organizations (own and perceived)
- What are the challenges found in the LCFCS?
- What are three changes or ideas that you think would make the most significant difference in meeting these needs?

Though every participant did not answer the exact same questions, each were asked questions regarding needs and strengths of the Lafayette County Foster Care System.

Timeline of Implementation

I intended each interview to yield organic conversation surrounding the system in order to best assess current needs. As a result, each interview varied in length. The average length of interviews was roughly 45 minutes, with the shortest lasting 24 minutes and the longest lasting 61 minutes.

I conducted my primary research in the spring of 2022, with secondary research conducted beginning in the fall of 2021. I conducted interviews at the end of January through the beginning of March of 2022. I synthesized and analyzed my data in March and April 2022, edited my writing over the course of May through August, and presented the findings of this research to a group of University of Mississippi faculty in September of 2022.

Data Collection and Evaluation

I audio recorded each interview, following granted permission by each participant. I also took handwritten notes during each interview, and transcribed each audio, via Zoom transcription software, which I then verified for accuracy. After each transcription file was completed, I summarized each interview into a simplified document, highlighting the primary findings from each participant. I then sent the document to each participant for approval. These documents are found in the “findings” section of the study. Beyond individual findings, I conducted thematic extrapolation and evaluation. I analyzed common themes, points of discussion, and recurring needs across participants by comparing notes and audio transcripts to search for common data. Thematic findings are located just following the individual participant summaries.

Study Limitations

Despite strong efforts to yield a fully unbiased and well-rounded study, this project does have limitations. Based on the importance of confidentiality and sensitivity in nature of the study, I did not include children and families directly involved in the Lafayette County Foster Care

System. Though their perspectives and opinions could have added tremendous value to the foster system's assessed strengths and needs, protection of identity and sensitivity to the challenges each are actively facing took precedence. As a result, I elected only community leaders comfortable with sharing their identities to participate in this study.

Second, beyond serving as the primary researcher of this study, I currently volunteer with CASA in Lafayette County. I have interned with the organization since November 2020, and I was sworn to represent children as a CASA in October 2021. Though this involvement let me see strengths and needs firsthand, such acknowledgment does raise the potential for bias.

Another point of limitation in my study is lack of confidentiality. As a result, my interviewees likely upheld a degree of self-censorship.

Based on the scope and feasibility of this project, I do not go into depth on the needs not met by the legal system in this report, though I do think it would be beneficial to explore in another project.

Last in the acknowledgment of limitations, I did not use qualitative data analysis software programs to code or extrapolate themes. The findings of this study were analyzed by my color-coding transcripts and drawing larger themes. Though I was present in each interview, and I created and implemented the entirety of the study design, personal bias is inherent. These methods further raise the possibility of personal bias.

Institutional Review Board

The University of Mississippi Institutional Review Board approved this study in November 2021 and deemed it exempt under 45 CFR 46.101(b)(#2).

Chapter 4: Results

Using the framework and implementation strategies noted above, I obtained the following results. I divided the results into two sections: The first section is devoted to individual findings, with a summary of each participant's interviews. The second section is organized thematically, focusing on common themes across interviews.

Individual Findings

I conducted a total of six key informant interviews with the following participants: two CASA staff members, the director of a local child advocacy clinic, the youth court referee, the Guardian ad Litem, and the CPS supervisor. Each of the six participants actively play a significant role in the Lafayette County Foster Care System. The intent of their selection was to gain a diverse range of perspectives regarding the current needs of Lafayette County, as it pertains to participants' roles and experiences. Each participant is above the age of 18 and gave consent for the audio recording of his or her interview. Four of the interviews occurred in person, and two were conducted via Zoom, an online meeting platform. Interviews ranged from 24 minutes to 61 minutes, with most meetings lasting approximately 45 minutes. Questions were asked in a semi-structured format with a list of primary questions located in the Research Design chapter of this study. Below is an overview of each interview, based on in-interview notes and transcript analysis.

Erin Smith

Erin Smith currently serves as the Director of Court Appointed Special Advocates. I have worked closely with Erin since November 2020. Her role is to “to advocate for the best interests of children,” alongside CPS and the Guardian Ad Litem.

Erin states that as of February 2022, there were 77 kids in CPS custody in Lafayette County. This is nearly double the number of children in custody in 2020. In Mississippi overall there were 3826, which is higher than in 2021. At the beginning of her interview, Smith highlights high CPS turnover as a challenge in the system, as social workers have high caseloads with low pay. She also mentions that the goal of the youth court is always reunification, but that sometimes that is not possible, as she explains that the law does not always advocate for the child's best interests.

Following the introduction of our interview, when asked to define the foster care system she says:

It's essentially a space or I guess it's a space in a child's life ... where they have been removed from all they've known could be just their home, their school, their town. It just really depends on what that looks like for them. I would say it's just that it's when a child is removed from the home due to abuse and neglect that's happened in the home and placed in a system that essentially the state is their legal and physical guardian, and they essentially have a say over everything they do.

She emphasizes the dichotomy of the system for children; on one hand it is a safe place, while on the other it is perpetuating trauma. She emphasizes the resiliency of children in the system.

In terms of needs, Smith says that beyond advocacy, children need people to trust them. Many children have experienced deep pain and trauma and do not have a space to share the truth and be believed. Smith emphasizes that it is important to also rely on children for information.

Smith identifies a need in Lafayette County for more foster parents. She says “we need more foster parents, but not just more foster parents, more foster parents that are open to all ages,

race and sex as a foster parent.” She explains that many children who come into custody in Lafayette County are being placed outside of the county, due to a shortage of local foster homes.

Regarding needs for biological parents, Smith states that resources and support are important. Specifically pertaining to cases that involve drug abuse, resources in education and addiction care can aid families. Currently this need is often met by a local organization, Communicare, yet there is still room to grow and expand. Smith also explains that the creation of additional parenting class opportunities, as well as domestic violence and children’s shelters, could aid tremendously in filling resource gaps. She identifies housing as a frequent barrier within the foster care system; while the Oxford Housing Authority has made significant community contributions by providing low-income families with safe and affordable housing, the waitlist is long and there is not sufficient space for families in need.

When asked how the community may be able to help fill some of these gaps, Smith states that “the foster care system changes everyday.” As a result, tangible donations such as clothes or toys can be helpful in some instances, but as needs are ever-evolving, such donations may not be the most effective way to make an impact. CASA provides opportunities to make a direct impact by volunteering to advocate specifically for a child in court. Community members can volunteer through CASA as a more long term way to be involved. Smith also states that the organization runs primarily based off of community donations and funding. LOU community members can therefore support CASA, and children and families, by giving financially.

Terrica Roberts

Terrica Roberts currently serves as the CASA of North Mississippi Volunteer Supervisor. I have known Terrica since November 2020. She has worked in this position for roughly one

year, but she has over fifteen years of experience in the foster care system. She has been in Lafayette County specifically for around four years.

Roberts defines the Lafayette County Foster Care System as simply “a system that is composed of children that have been abused and neglected.” Regarding current strengths of the system in Lafayette County, Roberts thinks that “Oxford does an amazing job of basically coming together for the needs of children in the community...” She states that “if we put a post out about a child needing something, then it’s within the hour that the community comes together to be able to provide for the children that are in need.”

Roberts also highlights the cooperation across agencies and organizations as a strength. She states that the local police department works closely with CPS, and both of those agencies work closely with CASA. All parties aim to meet the needs of children. Roberts emphasizes specifically that these needs are being met with community resources. She gives examples of resources such as mental health evaluations, drug and alcohol assessments, and other services that can be provided to families.

When asked about the needs of children and families within the system, Roberts states that housing is a crucial need. She emphasizes that beyond a physical structure, housing must be safe and “free from anything that could possibly harm the child or family as a whole.” She also adds the need for parental employment opportunities and basic needs of children such as clothing and food. She emphasized children’s psychological needs as well.

In terms of community involvement, Roberts states that it is easy to turn a blind eye to the foster care system and its needs. She urges that families in need “shouldn't feel ashamed to come out and ask for help.” She emphasizes the importance of the community in creating a comfortable space to seek aid. She also suggests that often the members of the Lafayette County

community are unaware of the depths of foster care locally. She adds that a resource that compiles local statistics, community resources, and updates could be a helpful way to distribute information to the community about how to best be involved and aid in meeting specific needs. Roberts urges that more resources need to be made accessible to families and community members. She recommends a forum to recruit foster parents and promote local resources.

Roberts urges the community to get involved and if there was one thing she would want the LOU members to know about the foster care system it is that they are needed. She says, “we need them. I would say we need the community to continue to be a support for the children that are currently in custody and the families that are currently in need.”

David Calder

David Calder currently serves as a Clinical Professor and Director of the Child Advocacy Clinic at the University of Mississippi School of Law. The Child Advocacy Clinic equips students to serve as Guardians ad Litem to represent and advocate for children involved in custody disputes in both chancery and youth court proceedings. He works on numerous issues of Mississippi law regarding the Youth Court and child advocacy. Mr. Calder and I met for the first time at the beginning of his interview.

Calder explained the legal complexities of the foster care system, with foster cases typically lasting a minimum of six months and frequently extending beyond a year. The duration of cases often contributes to the trauma of children and families, yet based on the legal timeline as well as family progress, it is often inevitable.

Regarding legal jurisdiction, Calder shares that the Mississippi statutes and Youth Court Rules define the proceedings of the Mississippi Youth Courts. He also explains that the Mississippi Department of Child Protection Services has adopted administrative regulations

governing the placement and treatment of children in foster care, set forth in the Mississippi Administrative Code. These regulations and guidelines establish standards for the handling of child protection cases. Access to these codes and regulations can be found online.

In addressing needs, Calder emphasizes that “support from the local community helps provide more resources to the children who are in foster care.” He further argues that increasing the awareness of local communities of the need for resources and funding can generate assistance for children and families, where currently state and federal funding may fall short.

Calder states that despite increased awareness, there remains a significant need for more licensed foster/resource homes. Frequently, children in Lafayette County are placed in foster homes in other counties due to lack of licensed homes locally. It is a large commitment to take on additional children in one’s home, by completing the necessary training and background checks required for certification as a licensed resource home, but it can make a significant impact in the lives of children who are victims of abuse or neglect.

Calder briefly touches on the difficulties of discernment of needs of children and families in some instances. There is a lot of gray area when it comes to determining whether or not children should be removed from parental custody, and often CPS workers are having to make decisions quickly. There are many instances in which families lack basic needs because of inadequate financial resources, and Calder believes that such homes should not be deemed neglectful if access to appropriate resources could prevent the initial removal of a child from their home. He suggests that providing resources and assistance to low income families on the front end could limit the unnecessary removal of children from their homes.

David Bell

David Bell currently serves as the Lafayette County Youth Court Referee, as appointed by the Chancery Court judge. Mr. Bell and I had been introduced previously and have interacted in court settings, through my involvement with CASA. He acts as a judge in Youth Court proceedings and seeks to make decisions regarding the best interest of a child. Bell states that foster care exists because:

One of the paramount rights in this country, probably just about every country, is the right of a parent to raise their own child and for the child to be raised by their own parents. So the concept is the creation of the state as an alternative to that, and it should only occur when absolutely necessary.

The removal of a child from his or her home is the result of abuse and/or neglect, a clear violation of the aforementioned rights.

Beyond obvious cases of abuse and neglect, often poverty contributes to the “neglect” classification of removal. Bell emphasizes that community resources can be particularly helpful in instances of poverty. Resources can help fill gaps and aid in the prevention of initial removal. Bell suggests that providing insect removal, food preparation information, and household safety recommendations could tremendously aid families, specifically those in financial need. Bell also shares that the majority of cases in Lafayette County are not outright physical abuse cases. Many removals are the result of drug abuse in the home. Bell emphasizes the importance of drug education and substance abuse aid through counseling and further resources.

When asked about the needs of the Lafayette County Foster Care System, Bell replied that there is a large need for resource homes. He states that there are more local children living outside of Lafayette County during their cases, due to a lack of resource homes within the county. Another need Bell identified was a space for parents to be able to take a break. He

suggests a community opportunity to rally around parents who are working all day, everyday, to be able to have a healthy break or have someone watch their kids. A potential challenge in the initiation of this is confidentiality, as the identities of those in the foster care system remain legally confidential.

Bell recognizes that a strength of Lafayette County Foster Care is cross-organizational trust. He believes that he has a significantly easier time making difficult decisions based on his relationships with GAL Brett Thomas, CASA, and CPS. He believes that the organizations work well together to fill informational gaps, and that each agency seeks to work for the best interest of the child.

When asked, “In a perfect world, what could meet the gaps of the needs of Lafayette County?” Bell responded with an emphasis on a shift in community engagement and attitudes toward the system. He would advocate for a change in the general assumptions made of CPS and foster care in Lafayette County. He urges the community to step in and celebrate the work of current social workers and nonprofits in the foster care sector, and he invites members of the community to become engaged. He recognizes that in a generally affluent and well-educated town, it is easy to skip over some of the challenges and needs of the less-seen side of the community. Bell quoted *the Great Gatsby*, calling the LOU community to recognize its advantages, and with such recognition to use one’s advantages to make an impact.

Brett Thomas

Brett Thomas currently serves as an attorney, specifically as the Guardian ad Litem in Lafayette County. Mr. Thomas and I had been introduced previously and have interacted in court settings, through my involvement with CASA. He actively represents nearly every child in foster care in Lafayette County, and he simplifies his role as “the best interest attorney for a child.” He

says he primarily acts to “advocate for the child's best interests.” He states that as the GAL, he also has a secondary role to serve as an “investigative arm.” He is a separate source of information, beyond Child Protective Services, from which the court can draw from.

Regarding strengths of the local system, Thomas highlights the experience of Judge David Bell as a major asset to the county. He states the importance of Bell’s role, as he makes the final decisions regarding the outcome of a case. Thomas states that Bell embodies an important balance of competence, motivation, and compassion. Thomas also recognizes the presence of CASA as a key strength of the LCFCS. He says that CASA is instrumental in advocating for children, matching them with homes and resources, and providing additional information regarding the status and progress of cases. Thomas also highlights communication as a strength. He points out the clear lines of communication between agencies and organizations, school employees, health care providers, and other resources such as Communicare.

When asked about the current needs of the LCFCS, Thomas indicated a need for more affordable and accessible drug testing. Though drug tests are actively available, their cost can slow down the process of reunification or termination of parental rights, prolonging a child’s time in foster care. Specifically, the cost of follicle drug testing inhibits its ability to be distributed as frequently as necessary. Thomas also expresses a need for continued mental health services for parents and children. While Communicare serves the LOU community actively, there is still a need for an increased number of private clinics that take Medicare and Medicaid.

Thomas states that housing is a large need for many families involved in the LCFCS. He says that “we need more homes in affordable housing.” Currently, there is a waitlist for families and oftentimes they are on the waitlist for multiple months. An increase in the availability of affordable housing could allow for families to be reunified significantly faster.

Regarding the community, Thomas states that awareness can be pivotal in creating necessary change. He urges the importance of recognizing the needs and challenges faced by members of the LOU community that are not inherently acknowledged. He emphasizes that accessibility to information about the realities of the LCFCS and its proximity to everyone allows for important conversations to take place. He suggests a simplified platform containing valuable information regarding needs and resources within the community could be extremely beneficial for best supporting children and families.

Katy Moss

Katy Moss currently serves as the Area Social Work Supervisor, commonly abbreviated as ASWS. Ms. Moss and I had been introduced previously and have been connected through my involvement with CASA. She has been supervising in Lafayette County since December 2022, but had prior experience as a frontline worker in Child Protective Services. Moss explains that frontline workers, titled “Social Service Specialists,” work directly with children and families on cases and are frequently the first person associated with a case. As a supervisor, she makes large-scale decisions regarding cases.

Moss explains that reunification is the primary goal of CPS, yet this is not always possible. The intention of the agency is to act in the best interest of the child. CPS also matches children with temporary placements. When it is not possible to place a child with a family member, placement then occurs with a certified foster home. Moss expresses a deep need in Lafayette County for more licensed foster homes, and specifically homes that are open to taking older children. She says that “it's a lot easier finding a home for our children who are under school age than it is for kids that are older.” Moss explains that the licensure process occurs through CPS and interested families can begin by applying online.

Moss expresses that another need regarding foster care in Lafayette County is awareness. She says there is a lot the general public is unaware of, but with further education and recruitment, the community can make a tremendous impact. Moss reiterates that there is space for the community to help beyond tangible donations of items such as diapers or clothes. Involvement can take many forms including foster home licensure, weekend childcare through respite care, and financial assistance.

Moss also emphasizes the importance of reporting suspected cases of abuse and neglect. There is an online reporting platform through the CPS website as well as an 800 number. She states that reports can be left anonymously, but leaving contact information can be helpful in follow up regarding a potential case. Identities remain confidential beyond the agency's awareness.

In meeting current needs of families, Moss explains that she and her agency are working to focus on front-end help, rather than "waiting until it's too late." She says she works to match families in need of services with community resources. Moss also highlights the cooperation between CPS, the GAL, and CASA, as a strength of the LCFCS.

Thematic Findings

In order to place each interviewee's responses in a larger narrative, the following are the key findings organized thematically. Though each participant offered his or her own perspective, various common themes were found throughout the interviews. The themes have been analyzed across handwritten notes and audio transcriptions, with the intention of highlighting repeated mentions in the categories of both strengths and needs of the LCFCS.

Strengths

Each participant identified strengths of the Lafayette County Foster Care System. The most common strengths recognized by the six respondents are described below.

Cross-organization Collaboration. The well-established trust and communication across the key organizations regarding the LCFCS were listed as a strength by the majority of respondents. Many participants recognized their relationships with one another as a pivotal strength of the system. They repeatedly mentioned the same goals of “reunification” and advocating for the “best interests of the child.” Participants depicted cross-organization trust as key in advocacy for children and families, as being able to trust one another aids in filling gaps in both resources and information. Specifically, the interviewees mentioned relationships between CASA, CPS, the GAL, and Youth Court Referee. The four parties appear to work closely together to best meet the needs of children and families in the LCFCS.

Court Appointed Special Advocates. The nonprofit Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA) is mentioned numerous times by participants as an asset to the way Lafayette County is able to serve children and families. The organization matches volunteer advocates, known as a CASA, with a child in foster care. The volunteer then works closely with the child, his or her biological parents, and his or her resource parents. As a result, a CASA is able to help gather additional information regarding a case, build personal relationships with children and families, and help match individuals with resources. Currently, CASA advocates for 100% of the children in foster care in Lafayette County. Because CASA is primarily built of volunteers, interviewees recognized CASA’s role as passionate advocates who deeply invest in the lives of children in need of support. Participants added that CASA is not a resource that is currently available in every county, but it has made a significant impact in Lafayette County.

New Child Protective Services Hire. In December of 2021, Katy Moss was hired as the local CPS supervisor. Her entry into the position has been seen by numerous participants as an integral addition to the county. Moss has been described as “doing an excellent job” and “turning some things around.” It was also stated that there is “really positive energy around her being there.” Moss currently oversees all frontline workers of CPS in Lafayette County. She supervised Lee County for four years prior to moving to Lafayette and offers important insight and experience, as she has worked for CPS since 2012. There has been a lot of recent turnover in CPS, which is mentioned to be a national trend, as often CPS workers are overburdened with cases and underpaid. As highlighted by participants, frontline work can be extremely physically draining and emotionally demanding. Based on participant responses, Moss has brought new energy and care for staff into the local CPS and has been advocating closely for both current staff and active cases. Moss also served as a participant of this study; her responses to questions regarding current strengths of the LCFCS did not involve her hire, yet she responded with passion and care for the community and it is clear that she has a vision for the future of the system.

Current Resources. Participants acknowledged the local resources that currently serve children and families. Roberts stated that the community quickly and frequently comes together to provide tangible items such as clothing and toys. Moss similarly stated that her agency is frequently given diapers and clothing as well. Thomas notes that an additional key resource available in Lafayette County is the drug court. The drug court is a program in which “adult criminals who typically have crimes that are nonviolent in nature, in order to avoid time in the penitentiary, are allowed to participate in, if they qualify for it.” The program provides drug testing, oversight, and further resources, and it works closely with the LCFCS. Thomas adds that

the program does not exist in every county, but is an asset to Lafayette County. Additional resources mentioned are existing nonprofit organizations, church ministries, and resource drives. Based on participant responses, it is evident that many aspects of the LCFCS are strong; there is clear advocacy for children and families. Beyond the various strengths mentioned above, participants were also asked to express their perspectives of the current needs of Lafayette County. Their responses, organized thematically, are below.

Needs

Increased Number of Resource Homes/Parents. There is an overwhelming need for more licensed foster parents in Lafayette County, often also referred to as “resource parents” or “resource homes.” When asked about the needs of Lafayette County, one hundred percent of participants expressed that there is currently a shortage and more licensed resource parents are needed. Children in the custody of Lafayette County are frequently placed in temporary placements outside of the county lines, due to lack of local licensed homes. This makes visitations, appointments, and court dates particularly difficult, as transportation can be challenging for all parties. Smith specifically mentions that “we need more foster parents, but not just more foster parents, more foster parents that are open to all ages, race and sex as a foster parent.” Moss adds that “we are always needing more foster homes and specifically for kids that are older.” She states that “it’s a lot easier finding a home for our children who are under school age than it is for kids that are older.”

Further Resources. Though there are various resources that serve as key strengths of the LCFCS, many participants mentioned that there is space for further resourcing in various aspects of the system. Two primary types of resources were mentioned: preventive resources and current case resources. Preventive resources are resources that could aid families in preventing the

removal of children from the home. Numerous participants acknowledged that poverty heavily contributes to cases being deemed “neglectful,” when in reality resources on the front end could tremendously aid families in need. These resources may include, but are not limited to, aid in paying utility bills, pest control, and cleaning services. Often financial barriers prevent families from having access to these resources, and the budget structure of child protection and foster care organizations and agencies cannot independently meet these needs. Regarding children and families within the system, expanded resources in mental health and counseling, drug addiction support, and food/home education were suggested by various participants. Though facilities such as Communicare work diligently to meet these needs, participants express the need for further investment and expansion of resources. Beyond resources themselves, participants noted the need for accessibility to such resources. Many existing resources can be challenging to be informed of or to obtain.

Affordable Housing. A need for affordable housing within Lafayette County was repeatedly cited by participants. Currently, the Oxford Housing Authority exists to provide low income families with access to safe, affordable housing. Participants acknowledged it as a beneficial resource within the LCFCS, but it has reached capacity and currently has a waitlist that can last months. Sometimes the last step for parents to regain custody of their child(ren) is to obtain safe housing. Parents can be working, have completed necessary psychological evaluations and drugs screens, and still be unable to afford and/or find housing in Oxford. Participants mentioned that the lack of affordable housing in Oxford can prolong the duration of a child in county custody, furthering heartache and trauma for both children and their families.

Beyond family housing, Smith suggests a need for a domestic violence and/or children’s shelter in Oxford. Regarding a domestic violence shelter, Smith believes this resource could aid

in preventing removal, as well as offer a space of protection and care for families in need. In terms of a children's shelter, Smith explains that the nearest option is nearly forty-five minutes outside of the county; she adds that a local facility could create significant impact.

Community Support. A majority of participants mentioned a need for further community support. Whether it be to recognize the realities of the foster care system in one's local community, or the opportunity to support financially, participants saw a need for deeper support from the LOU community. Roberts states that often "people kind of turn their heads to abuse and neglect thinking that 'well, that's not my problem.'" She believes engagement of the community and recognition of the current needs of families and children can aid tremendously. Smith states that while tangible donations can be helpful in some cases, she hopes to see community involvement through volunteering to be a CASA or providing various services. Bell believes that "community solutions can work." He states that community engagement is important and hopes to see a shift in general community attitudes toward both families and agencies surrounding foster care. Thomas recognizes the abilities that community organizations, such as church ministries or nonprofit projects, can have in filling resource gaps.

Beyond resource support, participants also urge compassion and personal support. Smith states that many parents "simply need that support from someone in probably what is their most desperate time..." Roberts adds that people are needed who "genuinely want to be able make a difference."

The findings above lead to an important question of how these experiences and identifications fit into the larger scope of current literature. The next chapter of this study seeks to answer this question, as well as contextualize the findings of this study into a larger narrative.

Chapter 5: Discussion and Recommendations

The discussion section of this study includes an interpretation of results, this study as it pertains to previously mentioned literature, and recommended next steps.

Interpretation of Results

The individual findings of this study reveal that each participant offers a unique perspective of both the strengths and needs of the Lafayette County Foster Care System. Interviews with each participant were intended to create a space for open dialogue regarding the ways to celebrate current victories of the county, yet also to acknowledge truths and needs that may otherwise go unspoken.

The results of this study show firstly a wide array of strengths. Cross-organizational cooperation is highlighted by numerous participants. The ability for participants to depend on, trust, and advocate alongside their peers across organizations and agencies showed to be significant to one another. This aligns with previously published literature, as the Mississippi state assessment also recognized the importance of organizational cooperation (MDCPS 2020).

Another strength identified by participants is the presence of Court Appointed Special Advocates. CASA advocates for every child in custody in Lafayette County, builds direct relationships with children and families, and is able to gather information regarding a case. CASA has appeared to make significant impact in the LOU community, and it is mentioned that not every county has a CASA program or has a program that is deeply-established. Though CASA is not directly mentioned as a strength in the state assessment, the organization directly impacts the system's responsiveness to the community; responsiveness is defined as a strength on the state level and this holds true for the county as well (MDCPS 2020).

Many participants celebrated Katy Moss as a recent hire for CPS was expressed. Moss began her position as Area Social Work Supervisor in December of 2021, and participants recognized that she has positively impacted both CPS and the LCFCS. Both her experience and passion are identified as key assets for advocacy and change. This seems to oppose state trends, in positive ways for Lafayette County. The state assessment recognized staffing gaps within MDCPS (MDCPS 2020). Not only is this a state trend, but Chipungu and Bent-Goodley also point out gaps in committed staff on a national level (Chipungu and Bent-Goodley 2004). Though Lafayette County is still in the midst of filling open positions within the CPS office, it appears that the current staffing is strong.

Finally, pertaining to strengths, participants acknowledged the current resources available in Lafayette County aid tremendously in their primary goals of reunification and advocating for the best interests of the child. Resources such as donations, drug testing, collection drives, and nonprofit/church involvement are highlighted as helpful to participants and their organizations.

Though Lafayette County has much to rejoice in when it comes to the way that children and families connected with foster care are advocated for, participants expressed evident needs of the county. Unanimously, participants shared that there are an insufficient number of licensed foster or resource homes in Lafayette County. As a result, many children are placed in homes outside of the county, yielding further trauma as well as complicating appointments, visits, and court dates. Participants strongly argued for more local licensed resource parents and homes. This aligns with the current literature, as both Texas and Mississippi's state assessments, as well as the work of Chipungu and Bent-Goodley, noted the scarcity of foster homes.

In addition to an increase in the number of resource parents, participants also added that there is a need for an expansion of current resources. Though each participant highlighted

various and sometimes differing resources, a majority of participants recognized a need for an expansion of both preventive and current case resources. Preventive resources include resources that can aid families prior to the removal of a child from their homes, in hopes that removal is prevented altogether. These resources often fill financial gaps such as funds to pay utility bills, the extermination of homes, or deep cleaning services. Current case resources are those that are beneficial for children and families actively involved in a case. These resources include, but are not limited to mental health and counseling, drug addiction support, and food/home education. The current literature argues that this is a need on the national level, as Wildeman and Emmanuel and Chipungu and Bent-Goodley similarly urge for resource expansion.

An increase in available, affordable housing was also recognized as a need, as the Oxford Housing Authority (OHA) has reached capacity and much of the housing outside of the OHA is financially inaccessible to families in need. This need is particularly important because securing housing is often the last step in regaining custody. Lack of affordable housing prolongs time in custody, which furthers trauma for both children and families. Shelter is defined as one of Maslow's fundamental physiological needs, suggesting that until this need is met, others do not have priority. Alongside expanding foster homes, providing and finding housing should, and arguably has to, be prioritized to meet such physiological needs.

Beyond the aforementioned tangible resources, an urge for further community support was expressed by the majority of participants. Participants share that there are evident gaps the community can fill, but that ultimate change begins with a shift in attitude towards the LCFCS and an effort to make meaningful contributions through community engagement.

Regarding the direct findings of this study, I believe that it is also important to discuss what was not found. The concept of children "aging out" of foster care was very rarely discussed

during this set of interviews. Though this term is found across basic searches pertaining to foster care, it was not heavily prevalent in this study. I called Erin Smith to ask her a follow-up question regarding this information. She stated that age demographics fluctuate and at the time of interviews, there were not many older-aged children in Lafayette County custody. This might explain why interviewees did not focus on this information. She said that often within the county, if children are on the verge of aging out, they are either matched with a transition home, reunified, or given a new plan before formal “aging out” occurs.

Another point of discussion regarding what was not found in the primary research is the abundance of needs that are not directly the needs of children. Many of the needs found in this study are infrastructural and more adult-centered. I attribute this finding to two potential causes. The first is that the interview questions pertain primarily to the system as a whole. The language of the questions used “system” first, before following with questions on children and families. This could have impacted the responses of participants, by asking them to think large-scale first. Second, assuming that each interviewed party is seeking to act in the best interest of each child, I believe that participants see that children need the adults in their lives to receive support. Though it is not a need that pertains directly to a child, the adult needs being met allow for children’s needs to be met. In a sense, this follows Maslow’s hierarchy of needs principle. Once the basic needs of a parent are met, then he or she can adequately provide more for their child.

Overall, the results of this study aid in better understanding the current strengths and needs of the Lafayette County Foster Care system. The collection of interviews with key leaders within the LCFCS allow for multiple perspectives to be combined to formulate an overarching analysis of current practices and needs. The similarities found in the answers of participants highlight unanimous strengths and shed light on needs that are clearly recognized by leaders that

may not be as apparent to general community members. Overall, Lafayette County tends to align with national trends regarding strengths and needs; in some instances, it positively exceeds the state baseline.

Recommended Action

It is arguably difficult to identify a starting point when it comes to addressing the needs of the Lafayette County Foster Care System. Each participant shared varying viewpoints when it came to specific needs, and the unanimous needs may appear unattainable or unfeasible. Based on my interviews, this discussion culminates with suggested action.

Though there is not a “golden” answer or finite formula to filling the gaps and mending the system in its totality, there is an opportunity to try. The exploration and examination of the results of this study point to an answer and solution in meeting needs: *the LOU community*. Based on the open dialogue of participants, the LOU community can be an impactful asset, following three primary steps: awareness, acknowledgment, and action.

Awareness of the current realities of the Lafayette County Foster Care System is crucial in gaining community support. Lafayette County often appears to be affluent and thriving, as it is home to the flagship University of Mississippi, draws many visitors, and has a charming downtown square that is frequently described as a “Hallmark town.” As a result, needs of the foster care system can easily be overlooked, both intentionally and unintentionally. Currently there are upwards of 80 children in custody in the custody of Lafayette County, yet participants share that many community residents are unaware of both this specific statistic and the amount of need found locally. Beyond the general lack of awareness of the reality of foster care in Oxford, many are also uninformed of the key organizations involved in the LCFCS. Abbreviations for agencies and organizations may either hold negative connotations or sound

completely unfamiliar to local residents. Alongside this challenge, support of the community is not fully utilized or available. Thomas, Smith, and Roberts each suggest a consolidation of statistics, explanations, and resources to aid in community awareness.

In gaining further community support, beyond awareness is the hope for *acknowledgment*. As previously mentioned, the foster community is often overlooked. Roberts states that she frequently sees and hears attitudes of a “kind of turn of their heads to abuse and neglect thinking that, well, ‘that is not my problem.’” She pleads that as a greater LOU community instead of turning away, “we should turn in; we are a community.” Once aware of the presence of need in LOU, a shift in both attitude and perception could tremendously aid in meeting needs. Participants urge more community compassion and an acknowledgment through the softening of hearts. Smith emphasizes a need for support beyond tangible donations, but empathetic and personal support through acknowledgment. In terms of implementing acknowledgment, community dialogues and forums to discuss, ask questions, and facilitate a space to learn could aid in opening the doors of community support.

Once the community is aware of and then acknowledges the current needs of the LCFCS, there is a space for *action* in multiple capacities. Primarily, the county desperately needs more licensed resource parents/homes. Recruitment of resource parents can begin in small settings such as local clubs and organizations, ministries, and personal conversations. Larger-scale recruitment can take place in across-town posters, social media campaigns, and open-forums. Moss also mentions that licensure in “respite care” is an option if families do not feel led to become resource homes. Respite care licensure follows a similar background process, yet the result is certification to care for a child in foster care for a weekend or afternoon while the primary resource family may be unavailable. Another need an engaged community member can

fill is that of a CASA volunteer. Smith shares that passionate and dedicated individuals are always needed to continue advocacy, as new cases can begin at any moment. Similar recruitment tactics as previously mentioned regarding resource homes can be utilized in CASA volunteer recruitment. A final way that community members can be involved is through filling resource gaps. Though a variety of resources are listed as needed across participants, many short term resources such as tangible items and local services can be provided by the community. As needs are ever-evolving, connecting community members with both CPS and/or CASA can allow for LCFCS leaders to share where individual contributions may be made. A consolidation of thematic findings can be found in appendix B of this study.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

The questions I asked at age 15 have yielded both incredibly heartbreaking, and beautifully hopeful answers. I do not believe that there is a seamless formula that I wished to spend my life finding when I was sitting in the sanctuary that Sunday. Or perhaps that I even hoped to find when constructing this thesis six years later for the Sally McDonnell Barksdale Honors College.

Despite my initial disappointment with this answer, throughout the last six years, and specifically within my research as an undergraduate student, I have found that there is hope. Abundant hope. There is a powerful group of people working together to advocate for children who may otherwise be voiceless. There are opportunities as a community to become aware, to acknowledge, and to become involved in supporting families and organizations. There are small actions that can yield large change, and it matters. There are needs, and I believe that there always will be, but with needs come the opportunities to meet needs. With challenges come the opportunities to face challenges. And with gaps come the opportunities to fill gaps. I believe that the people of Lafayette County can and will be the solution to every need, every challenge, and every gap.

Future research

When analyzing interviews and their results, it is very clear that Lafayette County is people-driven. The group of participants have incredible drive and motivation to support, care for, and come around a frequently overlooked group in our county. Based on these conversations, as well as my personal experience as an undergraduate student at the University of Mississippi, it became clear to me that many community members are unaware of the gaps and needs of the

system that exists right in front of us. This led my findings and recommendations to point towards a solution that seemed both hopeful and accessible: the people of Lafayette County. This answer may not appear to be the most quantitative or scientific. It is not formatted in a direct action of policy change or organizational restructuring, but I believe that it is significant.

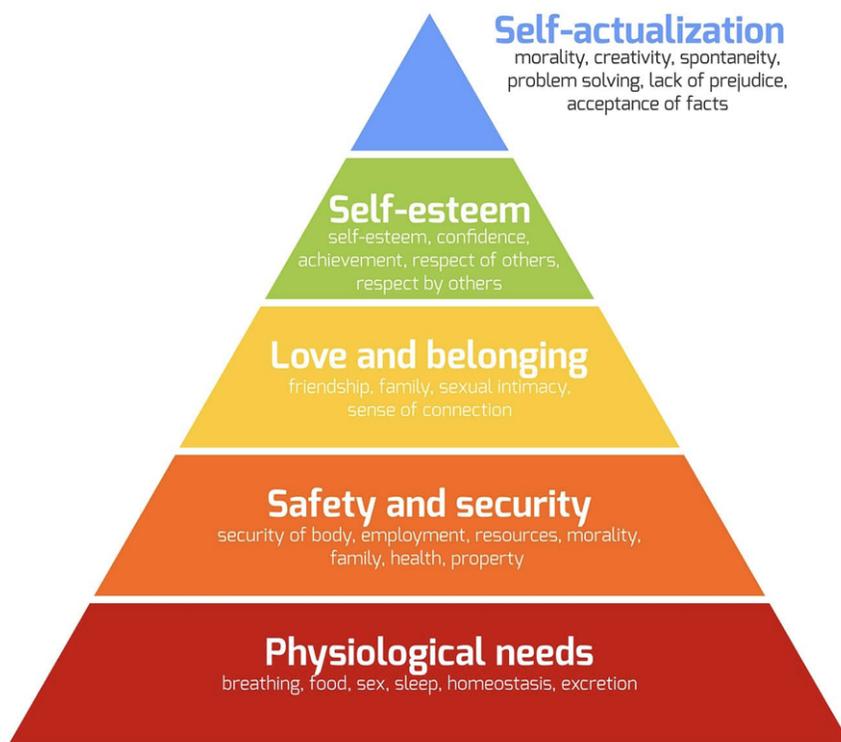
I both recognize and hope that this needs assessment is by no means a conclusion to exploration of the foster care system, specifically in Lafayette County. I believe that there are still gaps in policy, accessible information, and quantity of published literature pertaining to Lafayette County. It remains difficult to find direct information about the LCFCS as a member of the LOU community.

As a result, I have aspirations to compile the information of this study and formulate a “Community Guide to the Lafayette County Foster Care System” in hopes of yielding accessibility to the results of this study and engaging community members. I would love to partner with the participants of this study and local community members in order to directly incorporate the findings of this study into a simplified format. This guide would simplify the LCFCS by explaining involved organizations, current strengths and challenges, engagement opportunities, and community resources.

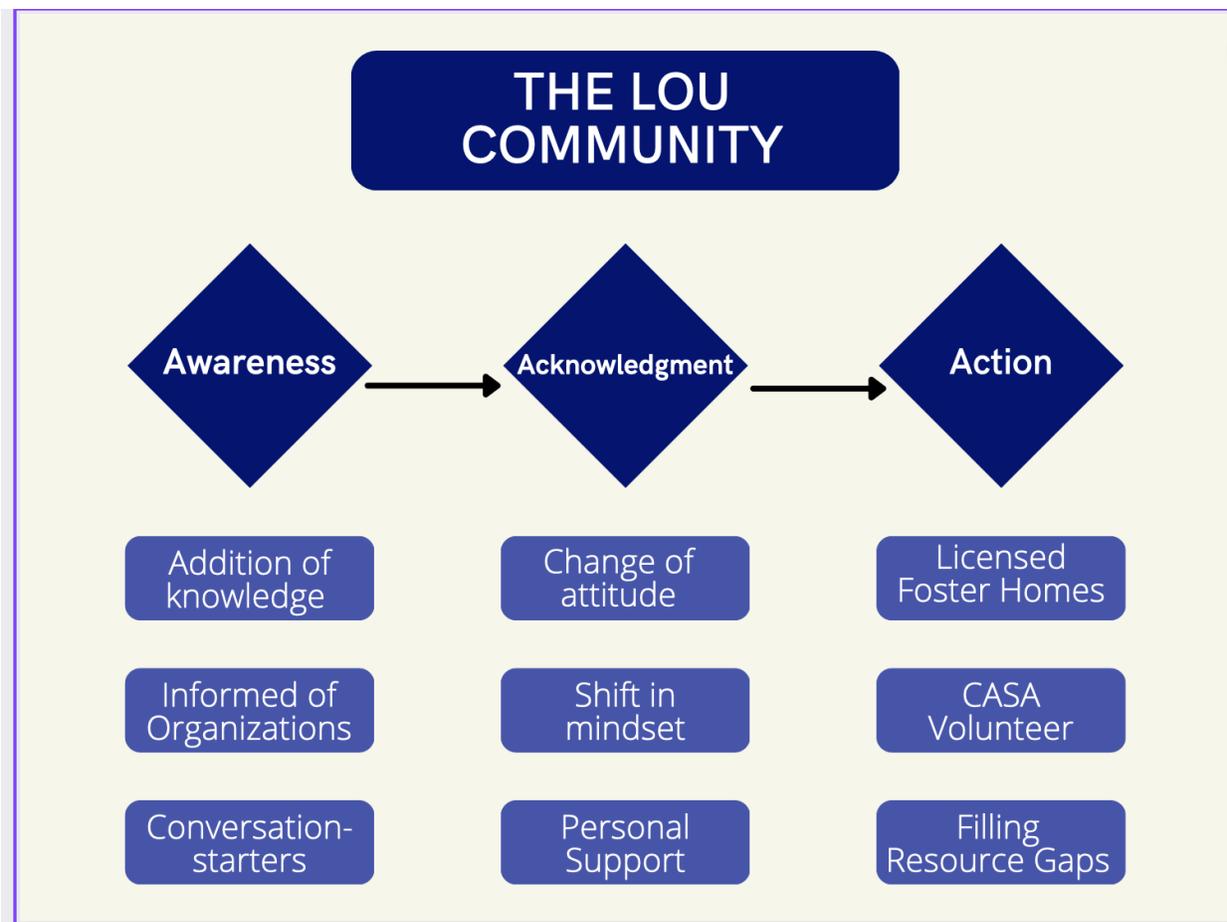
On a larger scale, I would urge the creation of a strategic plan, grant research, and current policy analysis by a third party. Though at this point in time I do not have the required time and skillset capacities to take on these projects, I believe that there are significant strides that can be made by investing in these policy opportunities. A more knowledgeable group/organization may be able to access current policy initiatives, such as grants, that can expand the current infrastructure of the system.

Appendix A

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs



Appendix B



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