

Stay with the child: Rethinking how Kentucky serves vulnerable children

BY NORMA HATFIELD

Stay with the child. It sounds simple, but it may be the most important principle Kentucky can bring to serving vulnerable children and families.

At the Aug. 19 Interim Joint Committee on Families and Children meeting, Sen. Danny Carroll shared that he has filed a bill request to establish a working group to study how Kentucky’s children and family services are structured, including whether some services should be better aligned, consolidated or possibly separated from the larger Cabinet for Health and Family Services.

The committee heard a presentation of how Ohio reorganized services under its Department of Children and Youth. I found it compelling that their restructuring also focused on the quality of service to children and

families. I hope both legislative chambers will support Kentucky taking a serious look at our own systems.

Two years ago, I advocated for HCR 117, which would have created a kinship care task force. It didn’t pass. But perhaps this broader study offers something more meaningful: a holistic look at how programs work together for children removed from unsafe homes.

And while we study the larger picture, let’s keep working on the problems in front of us.

SB 151 is one example. Much of the 2024 kinship law addresses the initial placement of children with relatives or fictive kin caregivers. So, in considering the July 2026 policy implementation, are we accomplishing all that was intended from the beginning? From my perspective as a caregiver and advocate—not yet.

In fact, I’ve submitted

two rounds of comments and asked the IJC on Families and Children for a public review and discussion — not to prolong the process or be a pest, but to ensure the policy works as intended. Initial child placement matters to the larger system and to the child.

Kinship caregivers don’t get advance preparation to take in children. The challenge is making it possible for that person to say yes — short term and long term.

As for traditional foster homes, let’s not forget the fact we have a shortage. Let’s ask what would encourage more families to foster and help retain the homes we have. We need to stay focused on this issue.

Most importantly, as we ask people to step up and take in these children, we can’t forget that other families hear how the system is working. If caregivers aren’t supported

well, others may be less inclined to step up too.

Financial decisions should be examined through the same lens. When Kentucky reduces assistance such as KTAP, do we really grasp what that means for families raising children or their ability to continue providing care? A dollar saved in one program isn’t necessarily a dollar saved for Kentucky if it creates a bigger problem somewhere else. Forty-two percent of kinship caregivers rely on KTAP.

Also, Kentucky has spent years discussing children with high-acuity needs across our systems. Some children in CHFS custody have slept in office buildings because appropriate treatment placements weren’t available.

In juvenile justice, Senator Carroll has repeatedly tried to address high-acuity needs with SB 242 in 2024 and SB 111 in

2025 and SB 125 in 2026. All three passed the Senate but not the House. If he comes back again, who in the House will help push it across the finish line? We need to stay with these children too.

If a 2023 CHFS Request for Proposal didn’t result in a workable solution for these challenging child placements, let’s revisit the approach and determine what else might work. The children’s needs remain.

Some solutions will cost money. Good stewardship means maximizing federal dollars, examining other appropriate funding sources and using community partnerships where they make sense. But sometimes, after doing all of that, we have to write the check.

That’s why I hope Kentucky takes this broader study seriously — and doesn’t make it an exercise in rearranging government. We need to carefully review how children are initially placed and what happens from kinship care, foster care and treatment through permanency or adulthood. Let’s examine services inside and outside of government. Let’s look at the service criteria, funding, funding sources and how one program affects an-

other.

In doing all this, there should be administrators and legislators at the table alongside front-line workers, providers, funding experts, foster parents and kinship caregivers. Bring the real voices, not just the figureheads. The goal is solving problems.

In the interim, don’t wait for restructuring. Keep working on SB 151. Keep addressing the foster-home shortage and high-acuity placements. Examine financial supports and services like KTAP. Measure success by what happens to the people we’re trying to serve — not by simply checking a box.

Children don’t experience organizational charts, funding streams or program names. They experience whether they have somewhere safe to go, whether the person caring for them has the resources they need and whether the right help arrives when they need it.

And whatever Kentucky ultimately modifies or builds, we have to stay with the child.

Norma Hatfield is a longtime Kentucky kinship advocate. She’s been raising two grandchildren in Kentucky since 2014.

Those putting industrial solar on agricultural land misunderstand the nature of our trouble

BY REVA RUSSELL ENGLISH

On Aug. 18 at the LFUCG council work session, dozens of community members and monied interests made the case for and against allowing large-scale industrial solar panels to be placed on prime farmland in Fayette County. For many, it was a David Vs. Goliath moment, where the part of David was played by concerned environmentalists with normal amounts of money who want to help the city reach its 2050 Net Zero goals, while the part of Goliath was played by Fayette Alliance and the rich horse farmers they represent.

Except the drawing of those stark lines misses — as most stark line drawing does — the messy middle and a whole lot of yucky truths. The messy middle is composed of the land itself, which gets no say and cannot vote, but is very much alive and sequestering carbon. The messy middle is also composed of non-rich Fayette County farmers like me, who partner with the land to generate food and medicine.

Now for the yucky truths. Here’s one: The majority stakeholder in



A wind turbine and solar panels are photographed at LG&E and KU's Renewable Integration Research Facility at the E.W. Brown Generating Station in Mercer County, Ky.

the solar company behind the push to put up solar panels on farmland is global fossil fuel company Shell, hardly a David (by the way, Shell has no plans to reduce the fossil fuel side of their business). Here’s another: Two councilmembers voiced the need for more renewable energy generation because of the data center boom. Why is that yucky? Because throughout the two-year process to get a

zoning ordinance text amendment on the books regarding industrial solar on our farmland, we’ve been told time and time again about how many homes an industrial solar array could power. Now we’re hearing we need it to “cleanly” satisfy the energy demands of AI.

How did we go from ruining farmland to power homes to ruining farmland so we can shovel energy into the hungry mouth of

AI? How does a roomful of self-declared environmentalists go to bat for a company on the balance sheet of one of the world’s greatest polluters and drivers of climate change?

To put it plain, those championing industrial solar in the agricultural zone misunderstand the source of our trouble, which is the unfettered pursuit of capitalistic growth on a finite planet. The yuckiest truth — be-

cause it offends our deeply held belief that if the right thing were available to buy (e.g. solar power, carbon offsets, etc.) we could fix the climate — is that we have to live differently.

Which brings us to the Jevons Paradox. It states that any efficiency gains around a resource lead to more production and consumption, which in turn leads to more extraction and waste generation.

In other words, without an outright ban on fossil fuels, we will never be able to generate enough “clean” energy to end the burning of fossil fuels, because renewable energy just adds to the pot, while making energy cheaper and more accessible overall. This is the paradox. More solar, more wind — in a country that loves growth more than its future — doesn’t lead to resource conservation; it leads to us using more energy overall.

So what do we do? We square up to our reality. We live, build, travel, eat, heat, and cool in ways that reduce our overall energy use — not the *type* of energy we use. We stop incentivizing growth. We fight the data center boom. We start treating land as a partner in addressing climate change instead of an exploitable surface for whatever development we’ve dreamed up. We’ve had 50 years of increasing renewable energy production and use that has kept pace with 50 years of increasing fossil fuel production and use. If renewable energy was going to lessen the burning of fossil fuels, we would have seen some evidence of that by now.

Call your council member, tell them the land deserves better and so do we.

Reva Russell English is a writer, musician, and farmer in Lexington.

Van Tatenhove’s hands-on expertise made him a good pick for law school dean

BY WILLIAM M. LEAR, JR.

As a proud graduate of the University of Kentucky College of Law, a member of its Alumni Hall of Fame, and the former managing partner of the law firm that has employed more UK Law graduates than any other, I applaud the selection of Judge Greg Van Taten-

hove as the new law school dean.

Judge Van Tatenhove brings to the position 10 years of real-world experience as a trial lawyer and U.S. Attorney for the Department of Justice, and 20 years as a U.S. District Court Judge. His hands-on expertise in the application of practice and procedure, evidence, constitutional law, criminal law

and a host of other subjects, as well as his administrative abilities, will make him an effective leader for the Law School.

I understand from media reports that Judge Van Tatenhove’s appointment was opposed by the Law School faculty. That is regrettable in my view. He is, to be sure, not the kind of academician typically selected. To my

mind, that’s a good thing. Great lawyers are produced by a combination of legal knowledge — the wheelhouse of law schools — and skills that are only borne and honed in the law office and the courtroom.

Having a Dean with Judge Van Tatenhove’s background will help the College of Law to offer a healthy dose of both.



Exterior of the University of Kentucky J. David Rosenberg College of Law

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