

Santa Cruz Sentinel

Senate panel examines why California foster care system “addicted to psychiatric drugs

By Karen de Sá, Bay Area News Group

POSTED: 02/24/15, 7:08 PM PST |
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Iris Hoffman, 18, center, a member of the California Youth Connection, testifies on Feb. 24, 2015 in a hearing in the state Capitol to address the misuse of psychotropic medication in the child welfare system. (Dai Sugano/Bay Area News Group)

SACRAMENTO >> California’s foster care system “has grown more addicted to mind-altering medication,” the chair of a powerful Senate committee told a packed public hearing in the state Capitol Tuesday, adding that “here in California, we’ve done little to act on this alarming issue.”

Vowing change on the eve of a new legislative season, state Sen. Mike McGuire said past failures to act are now “simply unacceptable,” resulting in thousands of California foster youth who “have fallen victim to inaction, and at times politics.”

Tuesday’s four-hour hearing before the Human Services Committee highlighted a package of bills being introduced this month, following Bay Area News Group’s investigation “Drugging Our Kids,” which revealed nearly one in four teens receive psychiatric drugs in foster care — often to control their behavior, not to treat mental illnesses. Most are prescribed antipsychotics, a powerful class of the drugs with the most harmful side effects.

Will Lightbourne, director of the state’s Department of Social Services, acknowledged “there’s a very deep concern about the volume” of psychotropic drugs prescribed to foster youth and vowed, “Yes, we do want to bring that number down.”

Lightbourne said two state-sponsored panels have spent years working to develop guidelines that would protect foster children from the excessive use of psych medications and to decrease the reliance on the drugs at residential group homes, which house some of the toughest to place foster kids. Foster children deserve “non-medical treatments whenever possible,” Lightbourne said.

But McGuire, D-Healdsburg, pressed state officials to explain why so little has changed since state lawmakers held a hearing nearly a decade ago on the very same issue. On Tuesday, former foster youth, child psychiatrists, a leading juvenile court judge and the director of a powerful lobby of child welfare directors said solutions are long overdue. They are urging state lawmakers to pass a series of bills that — among other issues — would step up court oversight of prescribing, expand the role of public health nurses to better monitor medicated children, and train caregivers to defuse disruptive or self-destructive behaviors without the use of sedating drugs.

“We need to shift our thinking away from the primacy of psychiatric medications toward relationships,” testified George Stewart, a Berkeley child psychiatrist who has spent much of his career tapering severely traumatized children safely off high-risk drug cocktails. “We are going to look back on this era of great enthusiasm for psychiatric medications and either scratch our heads or beat our heads. We will look back in 20 years and say: ‘What were we doing?’”

Former foster youth Iris Hoffman, 18, of Sonoma County spoke to senators on behalf of youth in the child welfare system who are scared to refuse medications because they will be punished in residential group homes. “It’s really hard to trust someone who’s forcing you to take pills that you don’t feel is right for you to be taking,” said Hoffman, a member of the advocacy group California Youth Connection. “Seroquel, Abilify, Ativan — all of the things I was prescribed before I was 16 — they never helped me heal from the trauma I suffered.”

On the local level, some counties are already looking at alternatives.

Toni DeMarco oversees a program for San Mateo County foster youth that includes drumming, yoga, and swimming — “the kinds of interventions,” she said, “that make the need for psychotropic medications go away.”

Lori Medina, director of Santa Clara County’s Department of Family and Children’s Services agreed. “The symptoms around these children’s trauma cannot just be remediated with medication — there has to be other approaches,” Medina said. “Social workers are trained to ask questions, but there has to be more of that.”

Senators also said they were alarmed by the newspaper’s analysis that showed how pharmaceutical companies lavish the state’s foster care prescribers with millions of dollars for meals, gifts, travel, speaking engagements and research grants — a practice Lightbourne called “deeply troubling.” The newspaper found the doctors who prescribed the most, typically were rewarded the most.

State Sen. Bill Monning, D-Carmel, expressed outrage that drug companies promote prescribing of powerful psychiatric drugs that have not been approved for use on children.

“How do we avoid there being a monetary incentive for prescribing these drugs?” he asked.

At Tuesday’s hearing, senators McGuire and Monning discussed whether new regulations to outlaw conflicts of interest that could be harming foster youth are now needed. The head of social services responsible for California’s roughly 63,000 foster youth agreed.

“To the extent that we can as a state restrict that,” Lightbourne said, “I think that’s ultimately very good.”