

June 13, 2018

Kathleen McHugh
U.S. Department of Health and Human Services
Administration for Children and Families
Director, Policy Division
330 C Street SW
Washington, D.C. 20024

RE: Proposed rulemaking for Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS) data elements, 45 CFR 1355 (Mar. 15, 2018) [RIN 0970-AC72]

Submitted via email to CBComments@acf.hhs.gov.

Dear Ms. McHugh:

I am writing on behalf of Mazzoni Center to comment on the Notice of Proposed Rulemaking at 83 Fed. Reg. 11449 proposing to streamline the Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS) [RIN 0970-AC72]. We urge HHS to retain the voluntary sexual orientation questions for foster youth and foster and adoptive parents and guardians, as well as the data element on the reason for removal of a child from a home due to “family conflict related to child's sexual orientation, gender identity, or gender expression.” Studies show that approximately 19% of foster youth identify as LGBTQ, and they experience worse safety, well-being and permanency outcomes than non-LGBTQ youth. For states and tribes to improve these outcomes and identify best practices for doing so, data collection on the state and national level is urgently needed. Same-sex couples foster at six times the rate of their opposite-sex counterparts, and can provide loving, supportive homes for America’s 400,000+ foster youth.

We also urge HHS to retain the data elements related to the Indian Child Welfare Act, as American Indian and Native Alaskan foster youth are another vulnerable population overrepresented in foster care with worse safety, well-being, and permanency outcomes than non-Native youth.

Further, we ask HHS to add voluntary gender identity questions for foster youth over the age of 14 and foster and adoptive parents and guardians to AFCARS. Collecting gender identity data as well as sexual orientation data will help states and tribes develop streamlined, comprehensive services.

Founded in 1979, Mazzoni Center is the only health care provider in the Philadelphia region specifically targeting the unique health care needs of LGBTQ community by providing comprehensive health and wellness services in an LGBT-focused environment while preserving the dignity, and improving the quality of life of the individuals it serves. Mazzoni’s Pediatric & Adolescent Comprehensive Transgender Services program, also known as PACTS, is a comprehensive approach to addressing the specific needs of trans youth and their families. Our collaborative approach to care draws on the input and expertise of multiple departments within Mazzoni Center - medical providers, social workers, therapists, and legal staff - to provide the best possible care for clients. PACTS currently serves more than 350 young people, ranging in age from 4 to 20, along their families.

Throughout our continuum of care, service providers at Mazzoni Center see the harm and mistreatment that LGBTQ youth face when other service providers are absent or lack the cultural competence to

engage this vulnerable population in a supportive manner. Failing to ask voluntary demographic questions will only serve to increase the invisibility that many of these young people already fear and experience. Only by gathering information about this population can organizations and families meaningfully evaluate the scope of their needs and address them. Sadly, many youth are in need of foster care and adoption because of family rejection issues, and failing to ask these questions hinders efforts to address this chronic and population-specific problem stemming from lack of family acceptance. And asking demographic questions about sexual orientation of foster and adoptive parents is the best way to ensure that they receive the support that they need, and also that they are not being denied services provided through foster care and adoption service providers.

For the foregoing reasons, we urge you to retain, or add, the important data collection questions listed above.

Sincerely,

Thomas W. Ude, Jr.

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The mission of Mazzoni Center is to provide quality comprehensive health and wellness services in an LGBT-focused environment, while preserving the dignity and improving the quality of life of the individuals it serves.