October 4, 2023

To: Montana Legislative Auditors Radovich and Maciver:

My name is Charlie Wellenstein, and I am the Chief Operations Officer for Youth Homes; a non-profit agency that works with at-risk children and families across Western Montana. I have been asked by CFSD to provide public comment regarding the benefits of Family Support Teams (FST), as well as ongoing prevention efforts by CFSD throughout Montana. I and another Youth Homes colleague attend FST meetings twice per week on a regular basis. We find the meetings are beneficial to both parents and service providers.

The FST benefit parents by informing them of what services are available and allowing them a choice rather than have the options prescribed to them. The parents have an opportunity to ask questions on what are the benefits of the service, expectations for the families on participation, and logistics to use the service. This all allows for a goodness of fit between parents and service providers, and avoids parents trying to utilize a service that does not meet their needs or does not fit into their schedule. Finally, FST educate parents to see the overall welfare and well-being of their child as primarily their responsibility and their choice, and CFSD is there to help guide the process.

From a service provider's perspective, FST work well. They are held on a regular basis and CFSD informs providers of the needs of the family prior to the meeting. The FST also allow providers to partner with families from the start.

Although my perspective is anecdotal, my agency's experience has been positive. I will be curious to discover if MSU 's evaluation will mirror other research on the positive effect of FST in preventing child removal.

Thank you for allowing me to provide this comment and please reach out if you have questions.

Respectfully,

Charlie Wellenstein, LCSW

Chief Operations Officer