MU, University of Nebraska journalism schools to seek drone permits

By ALAN SCHER ZAGIER/The Associated Press

September 24, 2013 | 9:28 p.m. CDT

ST. LOUIS — The journalism schools at MU and the University of Nebraska-Lincoln plan to ask the Federal Aviation Administration for permission to resume using aerial drones for news-gathering purposes, school officials said.

Even if that permission is granted, researchers fear that existing rules will severely hamper the ability of the flying robots to actually cover breaking news events.

The FAA ordered the universities in July to stop flying the drones outdoors until they obtain government authorization. Scott Pham, content director for MU's university-owned radio station KBIA-FM, said the school will apply for a federal permit known as a certificate of authorization. Nebraska journalism professor Matt Waite has said the school also plans to seek the permit.

"There are so many unanswered questions about using drones for journalism that it hardly makes sense to stop now," Waite wrote in an open letter in response to the grounding of the drones.

Waite and Pham said they are optimistic they will eventually receive the permits, but are discouraged that the permits will restrict their ability to use the remote-controlled aircraft to gather news in a timely fashion. The permit requires applicants to indicate in
advance where they wish to operate, which would make responding to breaking news impractical.

"We don't want to say that journalism is impossible, because that's an absolute that's pretty easy to disprove," Pham said. "But it's hard to imagine how it could be done."

The crackdown comes as unmanned drones move from the battlefield to civilian and commercial use. MU and Nebraska were relying on rules for amateur hobbyists' use of remote-controlled model airplanes, but the FAA considers each university a public operator similar to local police departments.

Under amateur rules, unmanned aircraft must stay lower than 400 feet and conduct flights away from populated areas. The more restrictive rules would require the universities to designate a smaller area of up to 2 square miles while providing proof of the airworthiness of each vehicle. Pham said one of the sites he is considering seeking approval for is the Columbia Regional Airport, located about 10 minutes south of campus.

In late October, drone researchers will meet in Lincoln for a drone journalism conference at the university. Participants include privacy, legal and ethics experts. The weekend event also will include an indoor drone demonstration.

Journalism researchers and their students were using the airborne robots to shoot aerial photos and video from difficult-to-reach news scenes. The Missouri School of Journalism program had produced stories on bird migration, archaeological excavations and the use of Missouri River water for fracking operations in North Dakota.

Pham called the FAA's certification process a "stop-gap measure" and an "extremely blunt tool" that draws little distinction between military drones and those now being tested by journalists, which he said more closely resemble "flying toys with an iPhone attached." He hopes the certification process will give way to more nuanced rules by 2015, the deadline Congress has set for the FAA to develop standards for commercial drone use.

"It's not just that we need to be filling out this paperwork to get back to where we were before," he said. "It's that the whole landscape has changed. ... If I was them, I would overhaul the whole thing."
MU researchers confirm food insecurity on the rise
Sep 24, 2013  BY KRISTI MCCANN

COLUMBIA, Mo.— Food insecurity in Missouri almost doubled from 8.6 percent in the last decade of the twentieth century to 16 percent between 2009 and 2011. More than one in five Missouri households with children have to worry about sufficient food supply for their families. These statistics were published in the 2013 Missouri Hunger Atlas, which was issued by the University of Missouri’s Interdisciplinary Center for Food Security.

“Many of our findings—including deeper food insecurity rates in inner cities and rural areas, and greater lack of participation in food programs in some highly populated regions near urban centers—are comparable to national trends,” says Sandy Rikoon, the director of the MU Interdisciplinary Center for Food Security and co-author of the Hunger Atlas.

The atlas breaks down the statistics by county, confirming that the issue is concentrated in the south central and southeast regions of Missouri. An increase in food insecurity was found in St. Louis and parts of southeast and north central Missouri.

“Some families in Missouri would need to greatly increase their income to have enough money to purchase food,” Rikoon says. “However, families with less income often have to make tradeoffs between buying food and paying for other important necessities, such as housing and medical expenses.”

The 2013 Missouri Hunger Atlas identifies the percent of income needed to sufficiently supply a family with food resources. And although Missouri spent $1.4 million in 2012 on food supplies, it isn’t covering the economic cost of food insecurity and hunger.

Rikoon and his team make suggestions to fight for food security, including raising income through other job opportunities, government assistance program or increasing minimum wage, developing education programs directed at consumers to help them use resources efficiently, and providing more opportunities to buy nutritious food at low prices.

Officials in other states are looking at the Missouri Hunger Atlas and using the same methods to track what is happening in their communities concerning food security, according to Rikoon.
Provost Brian Foster announces retirement

By Ashley Ulsh

As a first-generation college student, Provost Brian Foster never imagined his career playing out as it did.

“I went to undergraduate school in my late 20s, and I had no idea what I was getting into,” Foster said. “I literally could not have imagined the life I’ve had because I didn’t know what it was.”

Throughout his 30-year career, Foster had experiences all over the United States.

Prior to MU, Foster held the provost position at the University of New Mexico. Before that, he was the dean of the College of Arts & Sciences at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. He started his career as graduate dean at Arizona State University, as well as being the chairman of anthropology for ASU.

Foster has also spent time in Thailand doing anthropology research.

For the last nine years, Foster has called MU his home.

“He’s brought a tremendous national perspective on what we do here,” Chancellor Brady Deaton said. “He also works to extend the university throughout the state. He’s made a big contribution.”

One of Foster’s lasting contributions is Mizzou Advantage, developed to help the university compete with top schools. The program focuses on strengthening the university’s human and animal health programs, media, energy and food production departments.

“We compete with the very best; we’re a very high-quality school,” Foster said. “But we don’t have the same critical mass. So for us to compete successfully in this world of the very best of high education, we have to choose the areas where we have really notable strengths.”

Along with Mizzou Advantage, Foster has been working to help connect the university with community colleges across the state.

“The thing that’s so important to me is that we do things that they can’t do, and they do things that we can’t do,” Foster said. “But when we come together, we can do things that neither of us could do alone.”

Foster plans to bring his nine-year career as provost to a close, retiring Jan. 1, 2014. He said he plans to spend more time with his wife and grandchildren, as well as have more time to pursue anthropology research.
He still plans on working part-time for the university.

Deaton said Foster’s presence will be missed.

“I’m going to miss him,” he said. “I fully understand in regards to his personal and professional reasons, but he was a great asset to the university.”

Until Foster’s replacement is chosen, Deputy Provost Kenneth Dean will temporarily take the provost position. Dean has been the associate dean of the School of Law for 20 years and has served as the deputy provost for more than seven years.

Dean said he feels both of these positions have helped give him academic experience and will help to assist him as the temporary provost.

“My goal is to maintain and strengthen our academic programs during this time of transition,” Dean said. “We cannot afford to lose the momentum that has been created over the past several years.”

While Foster’s colleagues are sad to see him go, they are also excited to see what the future holds based on the foundation that Foster’s work as provost laid.

“MU is lucky to have had Brian as provost,” Dean said. “He has been a good friend and mentor.”
MU increases two scholarships, adds new award

By Crystal Duan

**MU announced Sept. 6 the class of 2018 would see increases in two scholarships and an additional award.**

The university will increase the Curators Scholars Award for Missouri residents from $3,500 to $4,500 per year for incoming freshmen starting in the fall of 2014.

Out-of-state students will have the opportunity to receive either the Mark Twain Nonresident Scholarship or the newly added Chancellor’s Award. The Mark Twain scholarship will now range from $5,000-$10,000 per year; the scholarship previously had a range of $2,000-$5,500. The Chancellor’s Award will be worth $6,500 per year and will be given to students in the top 10 percent of their graduating class who also earn a composite ACT score of 31 or higher or the SAT critical reading and math equivalent score of 1360.

“We have been looking at the possibility of increasing our scholarships for a few years as part of our long-range enrollment plan to at least maintain our current enrollment and with the goal of continued modest growth,” Director of Admissions Barbara Rupp said in an email.

The increases, however, will not apply to currently enrolled students.

“To fund the new scholarships will require additional revenue from student enrollment growth so unfortunately the cost structure makes it so that we are unable to increase the amount of scholarships for our current students,” Ann Korschgen, vice provost of enrollment management, said in an email.

Korschgen said the university had not made significant changes to scholarships in the last 20 years.

Rupp said making the scholarship changes retroactive was not financially feasible for universities and is rarely done.

“Another way to look at it is that when we reduce scholarship amounts, which we do from time to time, we also never make that retroactive,” Rupp said in an email.

Rupp said research analysts have been modeling what scholarship increases would best help the university attract high-achieving students without going into debt.
“Mizzou is excited to be able to offer increased scholarships for students entering in the fall of 2014,” she said in an email. “New scholarships are always developed as part of an enrollment plan that is looking forward to the potential for enrolling new and additional students. We have been actively working on this project for a significant amount of time as the funding model is complex.”

Currently enrolled students had mixed reactions to the news.

Sophomore Kara Tabor said she was surprised to see huge increases in scholarships.

“In the case of the out-of-state scholarships especially, it’s definitely obvious that the school is looking to gain more interest from students around the country,” she said.

Some current freshmen said not making the increases retroactive was unfair.

“As a student at Mizzou, you would expect equality for everyone concerning tuition or scholarships,” freshman Daniel Chacko said. “It’d be kind of cruel for the class of 2017 and other students to not get the equivalent amount as new students coming in because all the extra work that people have put in is not being rewarded like the new students are.”

Freshman Daniel Kim said he thought the university could spend that money in other ways.

“The school can invest their money on academics to improve their education system, which can allow all the students to benefit from the money equally, instead of just increasing scholarships to attract students,” he said.

However, some students, like junior Bryndon Minter, said they appreciate the university recognizing the increasing cost of higher education.

“Although it's unfortunate that we won't see that change in our scholarship packages, it's a nice gesture to entice students that were in the same situation as I was, graduating from a Kansas high school,” he said. “I think we'll see even more out-of-state students coming to the university after the changes.”
Researchers and professors from UM System schools attended the 2013 Missouri Technology Expo on Sept. 19, where they pitched their inventions and research breakthroughs to potential investors.

The expo opened its doors to researchers, venture capitalists and entrepreneurs, who mingled over a continental breakfast served in the Life Sciences Center atrium.

Presentations were held throughout the day in Monsanto Auditorium in the center.

Chris Fender, director of the Office of Technology Management and Industry Relations, and Provost Brian Foster opened by welcoming all visitors to the fourth annual Missouri Tech Expo.

Han Chen, managing director of Kapyon Ventures, LLC., took the stage for a keynote presentation, in which he addressed what it takes to raise venture capital for research projects and inventions.

“Good science that could have become good products, and even greater companies, often do not reach their full potential because the science could never be translated (to investors),” Chen said. “In my experience, science will only get you 30 percent of the way there.”

Chen’s keynote speech was followed by Tiger Cage Elevator Pitches, in which each researcher was given 10-15 minutes to present projects and inventions that have not yet been developed.

Brady Gall, an electrical and computer engineering graduate student, presented an invention he called the Piezoelectric X-ray.

In its early development stages, this small, handheld device will be able to take X-ray images without relying on bulky machinery. The device will cost $1,000 per unit to manufacture and will sacrifice processing speed for a lower cost and convenient size.

Gall said the product garnered attention from companies and government agencies for its potential application in industrial quality assurance, mobile medical imaging in medical emergencies, combat situations and homeland security.

“The FBI contacted us to see our technology and compare it to the current X-ray source they use for explosive ordnance disposal,” Gall said. “Their current X-ray source can be very bulky and
cumbersome in those high-stress situations. They saw how much smaller our device was in comparison and were very eager to have the technology.”

Professor Donald Spiers presented ThermalAid, an app developed by the College of Agriculture, Food and Natural Resources to help determine livestock heat stress levels.

The app can help producers measure the stress level of livestock based on temperature and humidity measurements. The ability of the app to measure current temperature and humidity levels is a unique feature that sets it apart from competing apps, which require a manual input of data, Spiers said.

The app developers at CAFNR are seeking investors that will finance the app’s future plans.

“We hope to develop a cost-effective temperature and humidity sensor independent of weather station data, sensors for that go into the animals and alert the producer when stress levels reach a critical point and expand the scope of the app for other animals like dogs,” Spiers said. “We are also thinking about pursuing a National Science Foundation grant.”

The first round of elevator pitches came to a conclusion as the attendees gathered back in the atrium for lunch.

Chancellor Brady Deaton spoke over lunch, applauding the Office of Technology Management and Industry Relations and its work in coordinating the expo. He also congratulated presenters for their inventions and accomplishments.

Deaton later commented about the expo’s benefits.

“It calls attention to some of the cutting-edge ideas that our students and faculty are working with and connects them to entrepreneurs and investors to create jobs and highlight the role of a research university,” Deaton said.

Fender stated that the expo had a record number of nearly 200 attendees at the event.

Chen also commented on the expo’s success.

“I was surprised about their record turnout,” Chen said. “There were many great projects showcased here that interested me.”

Later Tiger Cage pitches included the production of synthetic diamonds for industrial applications and transfection, the transfer of DNA and RNA into cells.

The event came to a conclusion with a student elevator pitch competition coordinated by the Collaboration, Leadership, Innovation for Missouri Business organization.

The top three pitch presenters won cash prizes to spend toward their business ideas.
Midwest Air Taxi, an air transportation service for Missouri customers, won the third place prize of $500. Dual Cases — slim, durable and customizable iPhone cases targeting college students — won the second place prize of $750.

The grand prize of $1,000 was awarded to The Gauntlet Initiative, whose goal is to engineer prosthetics using 3-D printing technology.
COLUMBIA MISSOURIAN

Flag procession part of MU International Day celebration

By Kevin Cook

September 24, 2013 | 5:59 p.m. CDT

COLUMBIA — Brightly colored flags fluttered in the breeze as about 50 MU international students carried the flags of their home countries Tuesday morning from Jesse Hall to Lowry Mall in celebration of MU International Day. The event has occurred annually at MU since 2008.

Bonnie Ngo of Vietnam, president of the Missouri International Student Council, said the day is an important one for international students at MU.

"This day gives every international student on campus the opportunity to celebrate their country’s pride and be a part of such diversity, globalization and internationalization at MU," Ngo said.

Students in the International Day Flag Ceremony represented countries such as China, Vietnam, Israel, Iran and Great Britain.

Following the flag ceremony, students and community members were invited to enjoy food and beverages from countries around the world, see cultural displays and collect small souvenirs at the International Bazaar in Memorial Union. The bazaar has been an MU tradition since 1974.

Supervising editor is Brian Kratzer.
Missouri economic report shows increase in unemployment

By Daniel Henderson

Out of all the counties that comprise central Missouri, Boone County holds the lowest unemployment rate at 5.5 percent, according to the most recent economic report by the Missouri Economic Research and Information Center.

Unemployment in Missouri jumped above 7 percent in July, according to the report.

The biggest employers in Boone County are education, health care and insurance. These industries have historically been relatively recession-proof, said Marty Steffens, professor of business and financial journalism.

“All three of those industries have a reputation of being very stable, unlike manufacturing in general,” said Steffens.

Yet, a number of hospitals have announced layoffs, and nationally more and more people are being discouraged, so they are not filing claims, according to the report.

“Because (Columbia) is a university town, people don’t stay in the area and keep looking,” Steffens said. “They will move elsewhere to find jobs, so that also has an effect on the unemployment rate.”

The growth of Columbia College and MU is a major driver of the hiring and health care. MU alone hires more than 8,000 workers, the vast majority of which live in Boone County, Steffens said.

Missouri got a lot of reinvestment act money for retraining, and a lot of that went to people who lost manufacturing jobs, Steffens said.

“We’ve seen people who have lost really well paying jobs in that industry, (and they) have been reabsorbed into the economy doing something else,” Steffens said.

She said a star of the Boone County region is United Home Loans, a mortgage company that caters to home loans for veterans.
“They have really significantly added hiring in the last two years, which has helped Boone County unemployment,” Steffens said.

Statewide, Missouri unemployment stood at 7.1 percent, a 0.2 percent increase from June, the report said.

Missouri’s unemployment rate is still below the national unemployment rate of 7.4 percent, making July the 48th consecutive month that Missouri’s unemployment rate was less than the national average.

“Manufacturing has been a highly volatile industry, so that’s why we are generally below average. We aren’t overly dependent on manufacturing like the Northeast is,” Steffens said.

Missouri has a number of growth industries, such as biosciences, and these have helped pick up the slack Missouri has lost from manufacturing. While Missouri has a significant amount of manufacturing, it is not like Detroit, an area that is over-reliant on manufacturing, the report states.
Chef blurs the line between food and art

By Marcia Vanderlip

Tuesday, September 24, 2013 at 2:00 pm

Most chefs hope you will happily eat their food, attending primarily to its taste. Rey Duey takes a somewhat different view. "We eat with our eyes," he said. The professionally trained chef is a food-carving expert who has carved, among other figures, Spiderman and the face of Jesus into melons, and made of homely potatoes and turnips fabulous bouquets of roses.

Friday morning, he demonstrated why he is so passionate about his profession. He entertained chefs, culinary students, food writers and home cooks at the Art of Food conference in the Reynolds Alumni Center on the University of Missouri campus. His nearly two-hour food-carving extravaganza was among many events that brought visiting chefs, as well as food writers and editors, to the MU campus.

Among the topics he discussed during his lively monologues was the importance of valuing true artists. His case in point: "Cops" is the No. 1 show on television, a show that reveals other people's misfortune, he said. "Why aren't we promoting good things," elevating art, rather than supporting lesser talent, rather than fixing on things gone wrong?

Even as he talked about art, he transformed a table of fruits and vegetables into exotic flowers and intricately designed sculptures. At one point, he coaxed cooks and chefs in the room to try this at home, or in the restaurant.

"You just have to do it," he said.

"Let your staff play with the food," he urged chefs in the room. And if that weren't enough to prod the audience, he explained that as an experienced food carver, he makes good money simply "doing what my mom told me not to do: play with food."

Donna Pierce, a former food editor for the Tribune and contributing editor for Upscale Magazine, quickly realized that her role as moderator for this demo would be minor. She smiled and deferred to Duey, who clearly could have had a successful career in stand-up. He seamlessly cracked jokes and told stories, stopping only for three-minute intervals during which he cued up music on his tablet computer before fixing again on his craft, carving in a way that seemed to be in sync with "A Hard Day's Night," Bette Midler's "The Rose" or Boston's "Long Time."
"I use music as I teach because it gets people excited," he said.

He warned, moreover, that in the culinary world, it is important to keep up with technological advances "or you will be left behind." Not to put too fine a point on this, he then transformed a green apple into a turtle as "Life In the Fast Lane" blasted from the sound system.

While his compost pile, he admitted, is fairly substantial, filled with some odd fruit scraps, he said, "Never throw the scraps away." He sliced the green top off a pineapple, turned it upside down and carved a star out of a slice of pineapple for a tree topper. "In December, I go to grocery stores and collect pineapple tops" to make versions of "the world's smallest Christmas tree" for holiday table decorations, he said.

Duey began to carve his own niche in the culinary world nearly 30 years ago when a chef asked him to carve out a garnish. "You fake it till you make it," he said. His first potato rose took him 30 minutes and looked more "like mashed potatoes" than a flower. Now it takes him about 3½ minutes. While he has won a gold medal for his carving work in a Food Network challenge, he assured the audience that the Food Network has no actual link to the real world. "It is no more real than an episode of Star Trek."

He gets his inspiration from being in the world, he said: "Inspiration is all around." Admire the other flowers you glimpse along the way to the rose that you are on your way to see, he said. The produce aisle alone offers plenty of inspiration. "I can hardly walk through a produce aisle without thinking I'm dying to carve something," he said.

After he had carved into cantaloupe and honeydew, he sliced into some pretty red Swiss chard. With the many elements he carved on the table, he assembled a final sculpture that would later grace the artful spread that night for the dinner reception at the Missouri Theatre.

Maybe we do initially eat with our eyes. Friday, I did so at first — but with such an exceedingly delicious bounty before me, it didn't take long before all my senses were deeply involved.

Check out [chefgarnish.com](http://chefgarnish.com) for a gallery of Duey's work, as well as carving resources.
COLUMBIA man rescues a bald eagle from Missouri River's current

By Marine Delacroix

September 24, 2013 | 8:16 p.m. CDT

COLUMBIA — Roger Giles took his small boat up the Missouri River on Sunday morning to check the fishing lines he'd put out Saturday evening. About two miles upstream from Cooper's Landing, he saw a bald eagle on the bank.

"It caught me by surprise," Giles, retired manager of hazardous material services at MU, said Tuesday. "It was 10 to 15 yards away from me." Giles took a picture. Right afterward, he saw the eagle jumping on the bank.

"I was not sure if it was in distress," he said. But then he saw the eagle dive into the water and struggle to swim. It grasped a twig that was attached to the bank.

"I had started taking my clothes off to go help it when the twig broke and the eagle got caught in the current," Giles said. It took him about 90 seconds to get his boat going and reach the bird, he said. He placed a landing net he uses for fishing under the eagle to take it out of the water.

"It did not try to hurt me," Giles said. "I think it was worn out."

He went back to Cooper's Landing and placed the bird in the bedroom of his other boat so it could dry out.

After making several phone calls, starting with the Missouri Department of Conservation, Giles ended up taking the eagle to the MU College of Veterinary Medicine, which is in charge of the Raptor Rehabilitation Project.

Giles' wife drove to the veterinary school Sunday afternoon while he held the bird on his lap.

Project members at the veterinary school examined the eagle and did not find any apparent injuries.
"The bird presented lethargic and a little skinny," said Amber Edwards, volunteer coordinator of the Raptor Rehabilitation Project.

The eagle has been resting and eating since its arrival at the clinic, Edwards said. The workers are waiting for blood test results, which could show toxicity from lead in the food or other problems.

Edwards said it's too early to say when the eagle will be released because clinic workers are still not sure why the bird was struggling and because each creature recovers at its own pace.

She said that the clinic sometimes does public releases for raptors but that they do not yet know if they will hold one for this bird.

"When I gave the animal to the veterinary school, the people in charge knew exactly what to do," Giles said. "We are lucky to have such a resource in town."

The Raptor Rehabilitation Project has worked with at least five other bald eagles this year, Edwards said.

Giles put the story of the rescue on Facebook, and he said a lot of people have shared it.

Giles does not have a lot of experience with raptors — he just read a lot about them as a child. But he said that throughout the whole rescue, he was not afraid of the bird.

"I just thought the eagle needed help," he said. "Also, I believe it understood I was trying to rescue it."

*Supervising editor is Elizabeth Brixey.*
Some fear that the elimination of adoption specialist unit jeopardizes quality

September 21

By LAURA BAUER and JUDY L. THOMAS

The Kansas City Star

For years, it was the position that employees aspired to attain in the Jackson County Children’s Division.

The seven-member adoption specialist unit was a select team of veteran workers whose mission was to help children find a permanent home. It was one of the few opportunities that represented a career ladder within the local office.

“It was considered the elite unit in Jackson County,” said Michael Kelly, a University of Missouri professor who has studied the Missouri child welfare system for more than three decades. “It was rewarding. You were rebuilding families.”

But that ladder has been yanked away, mainly to reduce caseloads for other workers, former employees say.

The Jackson County office dissolved the adoption team last year, then parceled out foster care cases to the former specialists in an attempt to ease the caseload — and improve the statistics — of other employees. The adoption cases, meanwhile, were divvied up among the foster care workers, creating more duties and responsibilities for them.

“Some of them have caseloads in the 40s, and they have no idea how to do this job,” said Sharon Becker, a former program manager who resigned in April after 15 years. “It’s just ludicrous.”

It’s a two-edged sword, she said. The quality of adoption services is now jeopardized, and the former specialists must take on duties they aren’t familiar with. Same goes for the front-line workers who are now counting adoption cases among their responsibilities.
In an emailed response Friday, a department spokeswoman said they stood behind regional director Tanya Keys’ decision to eliminate the specialty unit.

“Every manager must make decisions about how to best use available resources to accomplish their objectives,” spokeswoman Rebecca Woelfel said. “In the case of the adoption specialist unit, many of the functions were duplicative of what foster care case managers are expected to do.”

She said Jackson County, in its most recent reporting year, had finalized 222 adoptions, more than in any of the previous five years.

Still, the loss of the unit hurts children and families, attorneys and advocates said.

Adoption specialists “knew the questions to ask,” said Jill Katz, a Kansas City attorney who has worked child welfare and adoption cases since 1990. “They also knew the value of contacting birth parents … knew how to get parents an attorney if they needed one. Anytime there’s a specialized position, it’s going to be better.”

The workers now carrying adoption cases “don’t know how to do the process, and there’s nobody to teach them the process,” Katz said. “They are relying on counsel for the parents who hope to adopt.”

One woman who has adopted three children said she has already seen the effects of eliminating the specialty positions.

“My worker, she looked me straight in the eye in the beginning and said, ‘I’ve never done this before, and I don’t know what I’m doing, but I’ll do my absolute best,’” said the woman, who didn’t want to give her name for fear of reprisal. She said the worker did a great job but added that “most of them do not have her attitude.”

Adoption specialists are critical for a child welfare agency, said Marcia Robinson Lowry, executive director of Children’s Rights, a national advocacy group.

“You do need specialists. When you put those responsibilities onto workers with high caseloads, it’s bound to result in very bad consequences for kids.”
Once heralded as a model for Missouri, the Jackson County Children’s Division has spiraled into such dysfunction that many insist the agency has lost sight of its mission — standing up for the county’s most vulnerable children.

In the past two years, veteran workers with 10, 20, even 30 years of experience have left the office at an alarming rate. New hires have shown up in family court with little knowledge of their assigned cases, attorneys and former workers say. Others don’t even know when the hearings are.

And too often, foster children are shuffled from caseworker to caseworker, eroding what little stability exists in their lives.

Jimel Hogan, a Jackson County foster mom since 2006, said one of her foster daughters recently had eight caseworkers in eight months.

“How do you learn to trust people who are supposed to be there for you when they’re not there for you?” said Hogan, who has watched the system deteriorate in recent years. “We’re giving them so much loss in their life when they’ve already experienced so much loss.”

A six-month investigation by The Kansas City Star, based on agency records and other public documents and reinforced by interviews with current and past workers, reveals an office drained of more than 1,000 years of experience and knowledge in the past two years.

Those losses, coupled with what workers describe as a sharper focus on meeting rigid policy guidelines, have undercut much of the success achieved while the county spent three decades under court order to improve the lives of foster children.

The turmoil inside the Jackson County office comes as Missouri’s child welfare system is seeking renewal of its accreditation, an honor the state spent millions to achieve four
years ago. A national team of professional reviewers is scheduled to be in Kansas City early next month.

Among The Star’s findings:

• More than 180 employees in the Jackson County Children’s Division — including supervisors, front-line investigators and program managers — have quit or been forced out since a new director took over in October 2011. Although social service agencies often see turnover, experts say the rate in the Jackson County office, and the departure of so many longtime workers, is anything but ordinary.

• Most of the children’s service workers in the Jackson County office have less than two years of service, according to a review this summer obtained by The Star. That’s a revelation that experts and advocates say is appalling in a system where it can take two years just to fully understand the job.

• The caseloads of many child welfare workers in the county exceed the standard set by the Council on Accreditation, the national accrediting body for child and family agencies. When case files stack up, workers can’t spend as much time rooting out abuse or other problems inside a troubled family.

• Current and former investigators say Children’s Division leaders have cracked down on a 30-day deadline to close cases. Although the deadline is mandated by state law, Department of Social Services annual reports show that local offices across the state regularly fail to meet it. And investigators insist 30 days is not always enough time to complete the work when a child’s safety is at stake. Workers say they have felt pressure to cut corners and rush cases to improve their statistics.

The upheaval in the Jackson County Children’s Division has escalated so much in recent months that local lawmakers initiated meetings with DSS leaders. In response, state officials sent in a three-member organizational review team.

“This has gotten to an alarming level,” said Sen. Jolie Justus, a Kansas City Democrat who, as an attorney, often represents parents whose children have been removed from their care. “These kids have absolutely no stability in their cases. … Something is broken in Jackson County.”

Brian Kinkade, the acting director of DSS, said the county operations aren’t broken, but in transition. He defended the state and county Children’s Division directors during an interview in July. The two — state director Candace Shively and Jackson County regional director Tanya Keys — previously worked in management roles for the Kansas Department of Social and Rehabilitation Services.

“The issues, we aren’t unaware of them,” Kinkade said. “The key is to know that Candy (Shively) and her team are tuned in. They know that they have the support at the top to do what they need to do to ameliorate that situation as quickly as possible. That’s our goal.”

Yet a little more than a week ago, Kinkade announced that Shively would retire at the end of this month. A search has begun for her replacement.
Those who work in the system say that if officials are trying to improve the local office, concentrating on case statistics and investigation deadlines is the wrong approach.

“I resigned from my position with the agency when I could no longer compromise my own integrity,” said Marni Scott, who left the Children’s Division office in December after 17 years.

“This administration appears to be attempting to apply a business model to a human services agency.”

Turnover

The week before Christmas in 2011, Tim Feiertag wrote a resignation letter to Jackson County Children’s Division managers.

“I can no longer in good conscience remain a part of the toxic, abusive system that this agency has devolved into,” wrote Feiertag, who spent 12 years off and on with the agency, some as a front-line supervisor.

“I’m no longer willing to accept the personal blame for not meeting the needs of my clients to the degree that they deserve.”

He wasn’t alone. Resignations piled up after Keys took over the Jackson County office in October 2011.

Through August, 184 workers had left, according to records DSS provided The Star. That’s for an office with 246 current staff members.

Although 61 workers who left did so during their one-year probationary period, many had decades of experience: Twenty-nine had 10 to 20 years on the job, and 10 had more than 20 years of experience.

According to DSS, Jackson County had a turnover rate of 46 percent in fiscal year 2013, which ended June 30. That was nearly double the statewide average of 24 percent. St. Louis city’s rate was 28 percent, and St. Louis County’s was 14 percent.

Working for a social services agency is a tough job, with immense pressure. Workers confront long hours and often gruesome cases, from child sex abuse to severe neglect. All that can become too much.

That’s why, experts say, many child welfare agencies churn through workers.

“We do see a lot of young people go into child welfare work and feel like they’re going to work with kids and do really nice things, and the gritty nature of things gets to them,” said Michael Kelly, professor of the University of Missouri School of Social Work. “Turnover’s high in the first two years.”

Another reason for poor retention is that established workers who have a few years on their resume realize they could make more money elsewhere, he said.

But what Jackson County has experienced in the past two years isn’t typical.

STORY CONTINUES...