

Voice

Spring 2004 Volume Five Issue Two

May is National Foster Care Month



*Blue Ribbon
Campaign
celebrates National
Foster Care Month*

*KIDS COUNT to
highlight
transitioning youth*

*Casey youth wins
national award*

From the Executive Director's Desk



Voice

When any young person finishes high school it is a cause for celebration and, for many parents, a sigh of relief. For foster youth, whose childhoods have been punctuated with upheavals and uncertainties, it is a special achievement.

As the nation marks National Foster Care Month 2004 this May, we have an important opportunity to express our appreciation to all those, from birth and foster parents to social workers and mentors, who have helped to guide these teenagers along their journey.

There is little that inspires as much pleasure as seeing a child step across the threshold of young adulthood with courage, confidence and purpose. Whether that "crossing" means college, technical school, a job, or a career in the military, we all know that the road to independence and adulthood can be as tricky as it is rewarding—for everyone. And for more than 20,000 young men and women who officially leave foster care to begin that journey this year, the trip will be especially challenging: Many if not most of these young people will have no one watching them with pride, or watching out for them, as they navigate life's twists and turns.

Over the nearly 30 years that Casey Family Services has worked with foster children and families, we have learned that children succeed in life most often because they have experienced strong and stable family support not only during childhood but also, and importantly, well into their young adult lives and beyond. We believe that every child needs and deserves a lifelong permanent connection to a family.

In this issue, we pay special tribute to the courage and resilience of our young transitioning foster youth, to the strength and commitment of their foster and adoptive parents, and to the growing legions of volunteers who have stepped in to play a critical and supportive role for youth at risk of veering off track.

The issues are complex; the challenges, very real. Yet the possibility of success is greater than ever. There is a building momentum in this country for a change in the way we see and invest in young people, especially those in foster care, and within that movement we can see and hear the faces and voices of foster youth and foster families. To all of them, we say a resounding, "Well done."

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Raymond L. Torres".

Raymond L. Torres

MAY IS NATIONAL FOSTER CARE MONTH

Boston Event Echoes National Blue Ribbon Campaign

The National Foster Care Month Partnership has launched a nationwide Blue Ribbon Campaign to celebrate foster families and call attention to the need for more caring adults to play a meaningful role in the lives of America's foster children. States are hosting similar events throughout the month of May, displaying blue ribbons to represent the numbers of children in foster care in each individual state or community, and echoing the campaign's slogan, "Foster Our Future."

"The blue ribbons connote 'best effort' and 'first place' – symbolic of the dedication and commitment of so many foster parents," explains Cheryl Haddad, National Foster Care Month Partnership member and president of the Foster Parent Association in Massachusetts. "The image of the ribbons tied in trees at each location or worn on lapels is also a strong visual reminder of the kids in foster care who deserve our support," says Haddad.

And the need for that support is growing. Every jurisdiction in the country has experienced a shortage of foster homes, and estimates for the number of homes needed range into the hundreds of thousands. Most agencies are perpetually recruiting new foster parents at the same time that they seek to retain the ones they have.

"The 'May is National Foster Care Month' effort provides an opportunity for people all across the nation to show their appreciation for the dedication of our foster families and workers," explains Karl Brown, project



The Blue Ribbon Campaign poster, brochure and toolkit are available online at www.fostercaresmonth.org or www.nfpainc.org.

manager for the National Foster Care Month Partnership. It is also an opportunity to get more people involved, whether as foster parents, volunteers, mentors, employers or in other ways, Brown adds.

Blue Ribbon Campaign events are being held in Alabama, California, Idaho, Kansas, Massachusetts, New York, Tennessee, Texas, Washington and Wyoming.

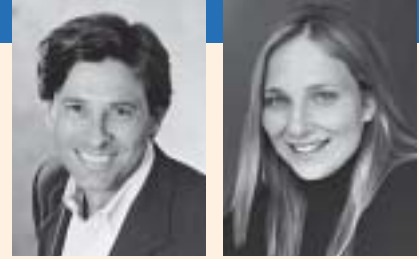
Casey Family Services' Lowell Division joins the Massachusetts Department of Social Services (DSS) and other community partners on May 5 at the Massachusetts State

House in recognition of the state's nearly 11,000 foster children. Casey's growing partnerships with child welfare organizations in the state, collaborative efforts with DSS, and the Boston location of the New England Regional Foster Parent Association made Massachusetts a strong choice as the event's host state. Massachusetts Lt. Gov. Kerry Healey, DSS Commissioner Harry Spence, state legislators, Casey Family Services Executive Director Raymond Torres, foster parents and foster youth are expected to take part in the program. "This [Blue Ribbon] event brings everyone together in a common purpose," says Torres. "Foster kids are part of our collective community, and we must each do our part to help them reach their full potential."

Every year, about 170,000 families care for over a half million children whose parents can't take care of them. These resource families and the social workers, volunteers, educators and professionals who support them take on one of the greatest challenges our society generates. "Few people know how much strong love, strenuous work and sympathetic perseverance lie at the heart of 'the system,'" says Brown. "It is hard to imagine a group of people more deserving of appreciation and recognition."

The National Foster Care Month Partnership consists of more than a dozen national child welfare organizations and government agencies.

JCYOI UPDATE



Documentary & Book on Aging Out Released

What happens when you've grown up in foster care and suddenly you're on your own?

The difficult and often painful answers to this question are brought to life in a new film commissioned by the Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative (JCYOI). Written, co-produced and directed by two-time Academy Award nominee Roger Weisberg, *Aging Out* chronicles three young people making the transition from years in the foster care system to independent living. Like the movie *Antwone Fisher* and recent events held on behalf of foster children and sponsored by Bruce Willis and Victoria Rowell, *Aging Out* is the latest example in a sweep of national efforts to bring foster care issues into the mainstream.

In many ways, the lives of Daniella Anderson, Risa Bejarano and David Griffin mirror those of the more than 20,000 youths in America who age out of the foster care system every year, facing overwhelming odds. The film is an intimate portrait of these three young people before, during and after they become disengaged from the foster care system and begin to learn what it takes to fend for themselves. After a troubled childhood with multiple foster care placements, and with little or no family support or financial stability, each is poorly prepared to survive on his own. *Aging Out* follows these three veterans of "the system" as they battle drug addiction, face homelessness, become parents, and spend time in jail. But while it chronicles the steps taken as they fight for their independence, the film also takes a deeply personal and moving look into their hearts and their hurts,

and ultimately offers an uplifting profile of teens who find the inner strength to take control of their lives.

In addition to the film, JCYOI also has commissioned a book on the same topic of foster youth in transition, *On Their Own: What Happens to Kids When They Age Out of the Foster Care System*. Co-authored by best-selling author and journalist Martha Shirk and JCYOI Executive Director Gary Stangler, the book reveals the compelling stories of 10 young people whose lives are full of promise, but who face economic and social barriers stemming from the disruptions of foster care.

Aging Out chronicles three young people making a transition from years in the foster care system to independent living.

On Their Own calls for action to provide youth in foster care the same opportunities on the road to adulthood that most of our youth take for granted – access to higher education, vocational training, medical care, housing and relationships within their communities.

Both the book and the film coincide with JCYOI's purpose to get the issues of foster youth "front and center," according to Joy Moore, manager of *Making Connections* communications and media projects for the Annie E. Casey Foundation. The Foundation, JCYOI, Casey Family Services and Casey Family Programs are collaborating in the promotion of the film and

the book in their ongoing efforts to increase opportunities for foster teens as they enter independent adulthood. The agencies hope readers and viewers will realize what Roger Weisberg says he learned in producing *Aging Out* – that what David, Risa and Daniella need is what all kids need as they face independence: "some ongoing financial support until they can stand on their own two feet, a safe place to call home, and most of all, adults who truly care about them."

More information on *Aging Out* is available at www.pppdocs.com. *On Their Own* will be published by Westview Press in July 2004.

Three youth, featured in the film Aging Out, share their struggles battling drug addiction, homelessness and early parenthood as they transition out of the foster care system.



CROSSING INTO ADULTHOOD

KIDS COUNT 2004 TO CALL FOR A UNIFIED APPROACH TO HELPING YOUTH SUCCEED

Every year, legislators, policymakers, state and federal officials, and the media alike await the release in June of the annual *KIDS COUNT Data Book*, considered by many as the enduring gold standard of comparative state-by-state data on the well-being of children.

This year, at a time when there appears to be growing public attention concerning issues facing the nation's most vulnerable youth, the *KIDS COUNT Data Book* will focus on the factors that these youth face in crossing the threshold into adulthood.

The public release of *KIDS COUNT 2004 Data Book* and essay, authored by Annie E. Casey Foundation President Douglas Nelson, is scheduled for June 3 at George Washington University's Cafritz Conference Center in Washington, D.C. What will distinguish this year's event from others in past years is that national experts in the area of transitioning youth – including many youth themselves – will take part in a Youth Summit. The event will feature presentations by several well-known “graduates” of the foster care system.

“The large majority of America's young people enter their early 20s with the skills, education, experience, and family support to make it through what is an anxiety-provoking but nonetheless exciting transition to adulthood. They're relatively stable economically, and when they have difficulties, usually have a decent social network to support them through this period,” explains Tony Cipollone, vice president for evaluation and advocacy for the Annie E. Casey Foundation, publisher of the *KIDS COUNT Data Book*. “But far too many young people who grow up poor and in iso-

lated communities don't have the same – or anywhere near the same – experiences and supports. For them, this transition can be downright terrifying and, too often, unsuccessful,” Cipollone continues.

For those young people, moving to adulthood becomes less a process filled with anticipation than one engendering a sense of real hopelessness, according to Cipollone. This year, there are 3 million young adults who have hit their early 20s and who are neither in the workforce, in school nor in

This year the KIDS COUNT Data Book will focus on the factors that these youth face in crossing the threshold into adulthood.

stable economic or social situations. *KIDS COUNT 2004* will look back at their life experiences – particularly during their teen years – that created current risk factors and barriers to success.

Four Critical Factors

The report specifically will examine four critical factors:

1) *Educational experiences*: There are a large number of kids who are dropping out, without the literacy, computational skills and general skills that they need to get or hold a job, or even to qualify for training offered at the post-secondary level.

2) *Young parents*: When a teenager becomes a parent, he or she is rarely able to complete school or build significant work experience, because of the responsibility of child care.

3) *Child Welfare*: When adolescents have spent a significant time in foster care, turning 18 can be a harrowing experience.

4) *Juvenile Justice*: Youth who have spent time in the juvenile justice system are at peril of not having their health, mental health and educational needs met. They often find themselves caught in the system and transfer quickly into adult facilities.

“We know a lot about these kids,” offers Bill O'Hare, who coordinates the research and production of the report. “We know that they are mostly of color, mostly male (with the exception of teenaged moms), and we know that as a group they are overrepresented in the southern states,” he says. “We know what the risk factors are. We know where these kids live; we even know where they are in the systems.”

How to Help Youth at Risk

The report will frame a response, the emphasis of which will be that communities must begin to think comprehensively about how to work with youth, those who are adolescents now and those who are moving into adulthood. Promising programs and policies will offer suggestions for action. For example, in highlighting better foster care programs, the report will showcase the approaches of organizations like Casey Family Services and the good quality care that goes beyond foster care into young adulthood. It will also describe the groundbreaking work of the Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative (JCYOI) with older former foster youth, especially those in their early 20s.

In the area of education, the report will highlight efforts that have helped more adolescents graduate, as well as those that have

CROSSING INTO ADULthood



What does KIDS COUNT aim to do?

It aims to:

- *help the public understand who's at risk of unsuccessful adult transition;*
- *put a more public, human face on the issues that young people face;*
- *help the public recognize the need to think more comprehensively about youth and their needs; and*
- *help policymakers recognize that investing in foster care and child welfare systems eventually does translate into gains for society. Such investments will help to lower the high cost of incarceration and other clear signals of failure and ultimately will increase the real contribution young people can make to their families and communities.*



KIDS COUNT highlights the Juvenile Detention Alternative Initiative and its strategies for reducing the number of teens incarcerated and assisting youth in the community once released.
(Photo by Carol Highsmith)

helped dropouts reconnect to educational opportunities that can provide them with the skills and experiences to succeed in the workforce. It will describe efforts to restructure large comprehensive high schools into smaller, more personal and more effective learning environments, as well as quality alternative and charter schools. It is expected that the report will underscore the relationship between a youth's strong connection to family and community and a higher chance of finishing school. The report will follow older adolescents as they progress through the pipeline, by discussing innovative partnerships between community colleges and community organizations that help dropouts connect to post-secondary opportunities, and innovative employment training programs.

The discussion surrounding teen parents will include a focus on prevention, through, for example, the Foundation's Plain Talk Initiative. Plain Talk has been successful in reducing teen pregnancy by helping communities create opportunities for parents, teachers and teens alike to talk honestly about responsible behavior and supporting efforts to make adolescent health support more accessible. It will also look at Fatherhood programs and at how effective they have been in reaching out to older adolescent males who have no real job opportunities or chance to build skills and talents ... in part because they are dads.

The juvenile justice section will highlight the work of the Juvenile Detention Alternative Initiative (JDAI). It will demonstrate that a high proportion of youth are being detained inappropriately in high security settings despite their never having committed a violent offense. It will showcase the

work of cities and counties that have put JDAI's principles and strategies to work to successfully reduce the numbers of incarcerated teens and provide more effective community-based detention alternatives. It will also spotlight efforts to help formerly incarcerated youth be more successful when they return to their home communities.

A core message in the report is expected to be that while the categories of needs or groups of kids are not mutually exclusive – there are few efforts in place to comprehensively and systematically address this vulnerable population. “In spite of that inter-relatedness, there is no one comprehensive system that deals with older adolescents and young adults,” notes Casey Family Services Executive Director Raymond Torres. Casey is playing a role in shaping and disseminating the report. The challenge with this report, experts predict, will come in not painting a picture of this population so bleak as to induce hopelessness instead of action. Given this, it's important that it provide clear, effective solutions.

Perhaps the most important thing that this year's *KIDS COUNT* message can do, Cipollone suggests, is help the public and policymakers understand just who these young people are, what they represent to all of us, and that there are, in fact, ways of effectively helping them succeed as adults. “They're no different from other, more advantaged kids in their dreams and aspirations. But they are different in that through no fault of their own, they've lost lots of ground. The contributions they can make to the next generation of kids, to their communities, and to society as a whole, is enormous. We can't afford *not* to help them.”

Child Welfare League of America Honors Casey Youth

A highlight of the Child Welfare League of America's Annual Conference in Washington, D.C., was the presentation of the fifth annual Kids-to-Kids National Service Awards. The 1,500 advocates who attended the conference celebrated young people who are making exceptional contributions to their communities.

Daniel Rosado Christopher, a 17-year-old from Terryville, Connecticut, received one of the four awards. He was honored for his wide range of community service including volunteering with Casey Family Services' Hartford Foster Parent Support Group, mentoring second graders at the Prospect School, serving on the Terryville Mayor's Advisory Council and the Board of Education, and even building a house in Hartford with Habitat for Humanity.

"Service is part of his everyday life," said Steve Hoffer, Casey Family Services' Hartford team leader who has been working with Danny for nearly four years. "Some kids need to be taught to do it. Danny is a great role model."

Terry Harrak of the Child Welfare League agrees that Danny is someone special. In addition to the number and variety of his service activities, they chose Danny because of his drive and commitment. "The passion just jumped off the page" of his essay, she said. Harrak thinks the awards are an important way to recognize and nurture young people. "People sometimes overlook that children can be champions for other children," she said.



Casey youth Danny Christopher travels to Washington, D.C., with his social worker, Steve Hoffer, to receive a Kids-to-Kids National Service Award.

Hoffer agrees. "There are so many kids with talents and resources. If you recognize their talents and abilities, they flourish. This award focuses on the positive and gives [the recipients] a sense of purpose and stature. They can be proud of who they are."

And what does Danny think about all this? "It's important because everyone's cooperating to make a strong community and a successful one," says Danny. "Even the least amount of effort gives you more self-confidence; knowing you can make a difference and feeling your voice is heard."

Danny's achievements and generosity are especially striking in light of his own childhood. He was adopted shortly after his

birth but was taken out of that family when he was 5. He lived in a residential facility until he was 11. He was then referred to Casey Family Services, which matched him with the Christophers, a couple who served as his foster parents for five years before adopting him in 2003 on his 16th birthday.

"When I took his case, he wasn't even considered 'adoptable' because of all the time he had spent in residential care," says Hoffer. "Now he's received this award and is planning to go to college. It's a wonderful thing."



FAMILIES COUNT AWARD

TO HELP AGENCY MOVE INTO PUBLIC POLICY ARENA

FSW, a Connecticut-based health and human services agency that recently won the 2004 Families Count Award presented by the Annie E. Casey Foundation (AECF), already has plans to use the \$500,000 award to further its involvement in public policy initiatives.

The Bridgeport Division of Casey Family Services nominated FSW, formerly known as Family Services Woodfield, for the award.

“FSW is a pillar within the greater Bridgeport community,” says Tom Murphy, Bridgeport division’s deputy director.

The 150-year-old agency is the largest human services agency in the greater Bridgeport area. It employs about 300 people and directly aids some 23,000 clients annually through a wide range of services and programs, which include everything from mental health and social services to economic and financial development.

The awards are part of the Families Count: The National Honors Program, which celebrates extraordinary organizations that improve the lives of America’s most vulnerable children.

The award has brought FSW national recognition and the ability to extend its reach, says FSW President Brian Langdon. “This award will allow us to take our work to the next level by becoming more involved in public policy initiatives to help low-income families become more self-sufficient.”

The agency has already met with several Washington, D.C.-based think tanks and AECF staff to discuss strategies for establishing connections with key policymakers and funders, says Langdon.



The Youth Business Center, founded by FSW, enables community and foster youth to learn new skills, including guitar-making.

“Also, we want to position ourselves so that FSW program models can be replicated by others who are interested in a strengths-based and holistic orientation to the delivery of services to families.”

“This award has brought FSW national recognition ... and will allow us to take our work to the next level.”

However, the agency must first strengthen its infrastructure of gathering and analyzing data on its programs, he concedes. The award will provide the financial resources for FSW to achieve this.

Langdon believes his agency received the Families Count award, in part, because it offers a comprehensive range of services, and while FSW is a human services agency, it is also very connected to the business sector. Its subsidiary, Family Assets, LLC, helps community members realize their dreams of owning a home, earning a college degree or starting their own business. The agency has more than 80 collaborative relationships with public and private organizations, as well as with national coalitions and task forces to assist FSW clients.

A unique program, Workshop and Business Opportunity, offers a 16-week curriculum about starting and operating your own business – both the positive and negative aspects. Since it began, 200 people have graduated and 80 businesses have been launched – two-thirds by African-American and Hispanic individuals.

The agency, Langdon points out, also serves populations that are oftentimes overlooked by other organizations. Since 1985, FSW has been assisting individuals with HIV/AIDS, the deaf community and older adults.

And throughout the 1990s, the agency was a strong advocate for youth in the juvenile justice system. “Kids in the juvenile justice system had no place to go. We launched the Youth Business Center to address the needs of that population, and the program has since become a model for the state.”

The agency has since expanded its program to include foster youth. This year, Casey foster youth will be participating in the program. The Center is located in Bridgeport’s Innovation Center, which houses more than 150 different businesses, giving youth an opportunity to experience various fields. Professionals at the Center teach youth how to build guitars, repair boats, even how to write and record their own music CDs, which they can then sell.

FSW provides outreach to the deaf community, employee assistance, financial literacy training and assistance to individuals with HIV/AIDS, along with housing, mental health and senior citizen services. It also provides eldercare, literacy volunteers, Meals on Wheels and youth development programs.

GENERATION EXCELLENCE:

A New Foster Care Alumni Network is Born!

by Ginny Stephan, Casey foster alumna

The late journalist Erma Bombeck once stated, "Don't confuse fame with success. Madonna is one; Helen Keller is the other." So often society tells us we need to be "famous" in order to influence the world. I have often thought I could not change the way the world sees foster children because I was not an actress, professional athlete, author, lawyer, doctor or judge.



Ginny Stephan entered foster care at the age of 5. She recently joined the national alumni network to help advocate and change the image and future prospects of all foster children.

I have come to realize that success for those of us who have experienced foster care comes from conquering our struggles and pursuing opportunities that have come our way. And as alumni, we also must try to become a voice for the voiceless among us.

I have long believed that we need to create a better image for those of us who are survivors of foster care. In fact, I was feeling ready to do my part when I received a surprise phone call inviting me to attend the national alumni network convening in Washington, D.C. I accepted quickly.



More than a dozen foster care alumni, representing 15 states, gather in Washington, D.C., for the first meeting of the national alumni network, a newly formed advocacy group.

Eighteen foster care alumni representing 15 states and child welfare agencies, including Casey Family Programs (a private agency also created by Jim Casey and based in Seattle, Washington) and Casey Family Services, attended the event. Alumni ages ranged from near-20 to near-50, yet we felt no divisions. We were all there for one purpose: to become one loud, triumphant voice seeking to change the image and future prospects of all foster children.

The alumni met with officials from Casey Family Programs to look at the possibilities of launching the national alumni network as an advocacy group for alumni across our nation. A steering committee, consisting of alumni representing numerous agencies, will develop the network as an independent nonprofit agency by the end of this year.

The Steering Committee recently agreed to accept \$210,000 in funding from Casey Family Programs to support the network in 2004. A full-time, 10-month interim director position was created to support the launch of the network and will be filled by alumnus Jerry Hobbs. And the group plans to begin compiling a five-year business plan, discuss possible allies and future board

members, and implement a marketing strategy.

George Allen, the Pro Football Hall of Fame coach, once said, "Health, happiness, and success depend upon the fighting spirit of each person. The big thing is not what happens to us in life – but what we do with what happens to us."

Recently, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services found that only one in six teens they tracked after leaving care were self-supporting. It is time for the alumni in our nation to become a "Generation of Excellence." And while we are paving our path to success, we are also helping other foster youth explore their future and begin their own journey.

For more information on the national alumni network visit www.fostercare-alumni.org or email Ginny Stephan at ginnystephan@msn.com.

Ginny Stephan entered foster care at the age of 5 and spent the next 17 years in care. She graduated from St. Louis University in 1990 with a B.A. in Education and is currently working on her master's in special education. Ginny lives in Missouri with her husband of 12 years and three children (ages 11, 7 and 5). Since 1994, she has been a frequent presenter at foster parent conferences and other meetings hosted by Casey Family Services. She has written articles for the Bridgeport Division's newsletter and writes a regular column for foster youth, entitled Ask Ginny, for the agency's website. Ginny teaches third grade at First Baptist Christian Academy in O'Fallon, Missouri, and is working on a book about her foster care experience.



MARTHA SHIRK

Close-up

Each year, as many as 25,000 teenagers “age out” of the foster care system, usually when they turn 18. Many find themselves suddenly on their own, with no family support or personal connections. Award-winning journalist and author Martha Shirk spent two years interviewing dozens of foster care alumni who were struggling to become happy, successful adults after childhoods marked by chaos. She recorded her findings in a soon-to-be-released book, *On Their Own: What Happens to Kids When They Age Out of the Foster Care System*, co-authored by Gary Stangler, executive director of the Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative. Published by Westview Press, with a foreword by former President Jimmy Carter, the book will be available in mid-August.

VOICE: *What inspired you to start a career as a social journalist?*

MARTHA SHIRK: I grew up in a small, economically depressed town in eastern Pennsylvania, where it was very apparent to me, even as a child, that my classmates’ future prospects were shaped not just by their talents and abilities, but by their environments. Then, in my first reporting job after college, I covered the impact of apartheid on daily life in South Africa. In the context of apartheid, the impact of public policy on personal opportunity was so clear that it permeated all news coverage. When I returned to the United States, I continued to seek out stories about how public policy affects personal opportunity in this country. Throughout my 22-year reporting career at the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, and in the years since, I have specialized in writing stories that put a human face on public policy issues.

VOICE: *When did your writing become centered on the needs of children?*

MARTHA SHIRK: For my first 10 years as a journalist, including three years in Washington as a national correspondent for the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, I wrote about a

variety of topics. Then, when I returned to work after my second maternity leave, an editor suggested that I consider building a beat around child and family issues, which were just beginning to interest the media as news topics. I was reluctant at first, because I didn’t want my work to be relegated to the feature sections, as stories about children and families usually were. But I set out to write them as front-page news, and I’m happy to say that is where they usually appeared. I was one of the first reporters in the country to write about family issues full time. I have often been told that my reporting helped change child and family policy in Missouri, which is one of my proudest accomplishments.

VOICE: *Why did you want to write a book about foster youth in transition?*

MARTHA SHIRK: Most media attention has focused on the needs of young foster children and efforts to either reunite them with their parents or find them adoptive families. The spotlight has rarely been aimed at the challenges faced by older teens in foster care who haven’t been reunited with their families or adopted. When Gary Stangler became director of the new Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative a few years

ago, he asked me to collaborate with him on a book about the issue. I greatly respected Gary’s work as director of social services in Missouri and was thrilled to be asked to take on the project. I had some firsthand experience with the issue because I had once taken a girl into my home after she aged out of care, and then helped her enroll in college. Gary and I hope that this book brings more attention to the needs of youth in transition and lets people know there are things they can do to help.

VOICE: *You traveled across the country, interviewing former foster children who represented a wide range of demographics. What did these young people have in common?*

MARTHA SHIRK: Although each of these young men and women had very different backgrounds and personal stories, they all shared a common struggle. They all desperately wished they had experienced a “normal” parenting situation, and most were still suffering great emotional pain from the events of their childhoods.

Each of the young people I interviewed also had difficulty moving from a life of dependence on the foster care system to independence. They wanted to take responsibility

CLOSE-UP: AGING OUT



for their own lives and yet struggled with self-doubts about whether they could succeed. Most were woefully unprepared for living on their own.

*VOICE: What did you learn in your research for *On Their Own* that concerned you most?*

MARTHA SHIRK: My three boys were all teenagers when I began the research for *On Their Own*, so I was acutely aware of how much support and guidance young people need from adults as they make the transition to adulthood, no matter how much they want to be independent. Even now that my oldest is 22 and about to graduate from college, he still calls me for advice (and, of course, money!). My 18-year-old, who is just finishing his first year in college, calls several times a week with questions about how to navigate the world. The questions range from “How do I avoid these outrageous overdraft fees?” to “Where can I buy a trout for a classroom project?”

It concerns me greatly that many youth who age out of foster care have no significant relationships with adults whom they can consult about either the mundane or the profound, let alone a physical place they can call home. Many of the problems they encounter in their first years out of foster care are those that all 18- and 19-year-olds encounter. They make mistakes out of ignorance or wrong information or bad judgment, as do all our children. But the consequences of their mistakes are much worse than they are for my children, because most don't have the safety net that an involved family provides.

On Their Own takes an in-depth look at the challenges most youth face transitioning out of the foster care system. The lives of several foster youth are profiled.

VOICE: Some of the people you interviewed were finally overcoming the challenges of their childhood, while others' lives ended in tragedy. What do you think makes the difference between success and failure for foster youth?

MARTHA SHIRK: Most young people coming out of foster care want to make peace with their biological parents and establish some sort of relationship with them, even if it's limited. Until they do that, I think it's difficult to move forward. And like everyone else, young people who have aged out of foster care need to believe that they mean something to someone. They need someone to care about them, and not just someone who is paid to do that. In the first few years out of care, the keys to not just surviving,

but flourishing, are good preparation for independence, especially in financial matters, supportive family and social connections, and engagement in the larger world. It goes without saying that these young people also need secure housing and participation either in higher education, skills training, or a career-path job.

VOICE: We often hear the heartbreaking stories of foster youth. Tell us some of the success stories.

MARTHA SHIRK: Interestingly, of the nine young people whom I profile in *On Their Own*, the three who are doing the best are those who were most successful at developing relationships with adults while they were in foster care. Holly Moffett, who was in care through Casey Family Services from seventh grade onwards, relies heavily for emotional support and advice from what she calls her “constructed family,” including her longtime caseworker Ginny O’Connell. Holly recently graduated from college and will be starting on her master’s degree in education this fall. Another of my subjects, Lamar Williams, benefited greatly from a highly acclaimed mentoring and work-experience program offered at Children’s Village, the institution where he spent his teen years. Through college, his mentors provided him with the kind of support that most college students get from their parents. He’s now a very successful computer programmer, as well as happily married. And despite a series of bad foster placements, Giselle John found purpose in her life and a surrogate family in the newsroom of a youth-written publication, “Foster Care Youth United” [now called “Represent”]. Giselle is now finishing her bachelor’s degree while working as an organizer and

“It concerns me greatly that many youth who age out of foster care have no significant relationships with adults whom they can consult about either the mundane or the profound, let alone a physical place they can call home.”

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trainer for a foster youth empowerment project. Just as importantly, she’s conquering the emotional pain left over from her childhood.

VOICE: *Who do you hope will read the book?*

MARTHA SHIRK: The book should definitely be of interest to policymakers and foster care practitioners. But we also hope the book will find a general audience. Most people have never thought about what happens to young people after they leave foster care. Many assume that they simply stay on with their foster families, which actually happens very rarely. Most people are appalled when they find out that so many youth leave foster care with no continuing support, and that so many end up homeless. I think the issue will resonate with people whose own children have recently made the transition into adulthood, or who are in the middle of it.

VOICE: *How do you hope your book will effect change?*

MARTHA SHIRK: We hope that it helps policymakers realize that Congress didn’t fix the transition problem when it passed the Chafee Act. Although the Chafee Act doubled the federal financial commitment to helping youth who have aged out of care, the resources available basically went from one drop in the bucket to two, as many others have pointed out. But I don’t want to leave the impression that all that is needed is more money. The agencies that have custody of youth through their teen years need



Having a supportive and lasting relationship with her Casey social worker has helped Holly Moffett achieve her goals, including graduating from college and embarking on her master’s degree in education.

to give serious thought to what kind of support intact families provide their children, and figure out how to deliver that to youth in foster care. The goal should be for their transition to adulthood to be as normal as possible.

What’s also needed is a commitment from individuals and communities to providing the emotional and logistical supports that these young people need in the absence of family support. We hope that the book makes people want to look for opportunities in their communities to help increase the prospects of youth who have aged out of care. There are many options out there, from simply helping a young person through the daunting college application process to mentoring him through the turbulence of young adulthood to offering workplace internships or job-shadowing opportunities.

Anyone who devotes a little time to thinking about the role they play in their own children’s lives as they transition to adulthood can easily see how they could help a young person who doesn’t have parents to count on.

Martha Shirk spent more than two decades covering social issues for the St. Louis Post-Dispatch, where she received numerous awards for her reporting, and is now a freelance writer based in Palo Alto, California. She has twice been a Casey Journalism Fellow and was also a Knight International Press Fellow in Hong Kong and China. She is co-author of Kitchen Table Entrepreneurs, which describes the impact of microenterprise on the lives of low-income women in the United States, and of Lives on the Line: American Families and the Struggle to Make Ends Meet. She holds a master’s degree in social sciences (urban studies) from the University of Chicago and a bachelor’s degree in psychology from Swarthmore College.

Casey Family Services operates divisions throughout the Northeast and in Baltimore, Maryland, offering support services and programs for vulnerable children and families.

News

Lift Off: The New Haven Direct Services Grants Program

Early this year, New Haven, Connecticut—home of the administrative office of Casey Family Services—became the third city to be included in the national Civic Site Initiative of the Annie E. Casey Foundation (AECF). New Haven, Atlanta, Georgia, and Baltimore, Maryland, all are cities in which the Foundation has a unique institutional connection and a long-term commitment. In each city, the Foundation develops relationships with a broad array of partners, including grassroots organizations, local government, funders and community leaders, to advance a community-based family-strengthening agenda. The Foundation identifies resources and opportunities for technical assistance, draws in national resource consultants to work with local resident experts and, in some circumstances, provides direct grants.

In mid-April, Casey Family Services and the Foundation announced the winners in the first round of direct services grant awards. The group represents a wide range of organizations serving the city's children and families, according to New Haven Direct Services Grants Program Director Debra Delgado.

"This program is our primary vehicle for providing grant assistance to community-based organizations that work directly with disadvantaged children, youth and families," Delgado explains. She notes the tremendous diversity in the pool of applicants: "everything from helping kids learn to ride horses to providing camps for children with HIV/AIDS—from small grassroots organizations to major nonprofits."

The New Haven grants program is modeled after the Foundation's Baltimore Direct

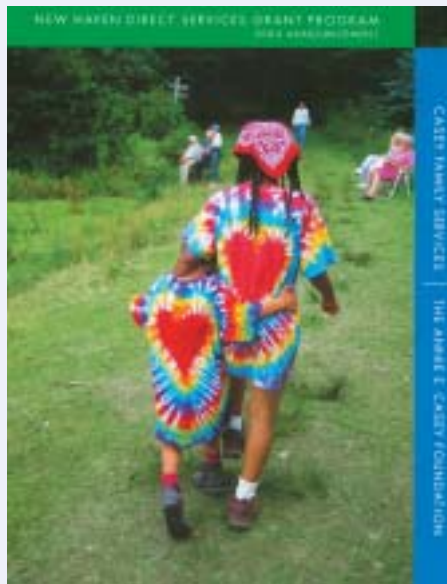
Services Grants Program with some distinctions. Casey Family Services staff will constitute two-thirds of the Review Committee for the first two years of the New Haven program while technical assistance is fully integrated into the process. In a series of community information sessions, the New Haven Casey Family Services/Annie E. Casey Foundation Work Group helped applicants prepare their proposals and offered extensive written feedback. Successful applicants will be invited to assist the Work Group in developing a technical assistance program for grantees.

The grant-making initiative will make 10 to 20 new awards each year. Successful applicants will be funded for one year and will then be eligible for a second year of support equal to 50 percent of the first-year award. Thus, successful applicants will be eligible for a maximum of two consecutive years of funding.

Although Connecticut is one of the wealthiest states in the country, New Haven and Bridgeport are among the nation's poorest cities. According to the Foundation, children in America with the worst outcomes are most often inner city children of color who live in declining, disinvested and troubled neighborhoods most isolated from the healthy parts of our metropolitan economies.

Casey has found that the most disadvantaged children are typically those of urban mothers and fathers who are themselves poor and who have limited economic opportunity, earnings and assets, limited work experience, criminal records, and often limited hope for their families' economic success. "Put even more plainly, the kids in this country who are likely to be in the greatest trouble tomorrow are the kids whose parents today do not have the opportunities or ... social support systems to consistently meet their children's needs," says Patrick McCarthy, AECF vice president for system and service reform.

In addition to the Direct Services Grants Program for community-based organizations, Casey's New Haven strategy includes larger investments and leadership to promote the theme of Family Economic Success and partnership with local funders to encourage a neighborhood-focused approach to strengthening families. Since resources are limited, Casey will work with local funders such as the Community Foundation of Greater New Haven to increase philanthropic giving, leverage investments through Program and Mission Related Investments, and develop a targeted neighborhood strategy.



EITC PROGRAM EXPANDS

Divisions to Offer Financial Management Workshops

Casey Family Services has substantially expanded its free income tax preparation program to help low-income families, resulting in significantly higher Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) refunds for a greater number of families. Many divisions are expanding the program to include year-round financial management workshops.



Staff at Casey's Bridgeport Division assisted more than 57 families this tax season, generating more than \$100,000 in refunds, including over \$37,000 in EITC credits.

Divisions in all New England states and in Baltimore, Maryland, took part in Casey's second annual National Tax Assistance for Working Families Campaign. The effort is an integral part of the Annie E. Casey Foundation Family Economic Success national initiative which stresses helping low-income working families build strong financial futures in strong neighborhoods. Maximizing EITC refunds is key to Casey's effort to improve family economic supports and the ability of families to establish credit, resolve past credit problems, reduce debt,

learn about financial budgeting and increase financial security through savings and investment.

The federal EITC program started in 1975 to help working individuals and families with low to moderate incomes. For the 2003 tax year, qualified families can earn up to \$4,204 in earned income tax credits, depending upon their income level and number of children. The tax credit is used to offset any taxes owed, with the remaining balance issued as a refund. Historically, the EITC has lifted nearly 5 million people above the poverty line.

Casey's Maine Division doubled its program outreach this year to include centers in four counties: Franklin, York, Cumberland and Androscoggin. By the end of February, the centers had prepared nearly 800 returns. The division has worked closely with Western Maine Community Action and the University of Maine Farmington School of Business, as well as with many area and statewide community groups, to ensure the program's success.

"Casey's EITC program has done much more than just put dollars back into the pockets of low-income working families," explains Mark Millar, Maine division director. "It develops powerful links to mainstream financial services and asset-building opportunities, and establishes durable connections between families, neighborhoods and the mainstream economy – one of the most important building blocks for family strengthening and neighborhood transformation."

"The sheer magnitude of citizens taking advantage of [this] service shows how important the Earned Income Tax Credit is

to members of this community," said Sarah McCarthy, who represented U.S. Senator Susan Collins at the division's Super Saturday free tax preparation event in Lewiston.

Vermont, which expanded its program to a second site this year, is emphasizing asset building and financial literacy as it works with families. In addition to the expanded tax preparation program, volunteers are also working with the Vermont Refugee Resettlement Program to provide interpreters to help Vietnamese, Somalis, Russian- and French-speaking Congolese families understand the tax preparation process.



Many Casey divisions are expanding the EITC program to include year-round financial management workshops.

By early March, the Massachusetts EITC programs had matched the number of families helped through April of last year. At one site alone, families saved \$27,000 in tax preparation fees, which can total several hundred dollars per return. The Casey-sponsored campaign encourages the use of free or low-cost tax preparation to avoid

“The coalition strongly believes that EITC money for working families can make a big difference in their lives and in the community. People can start savings accounts, pay off high-interest loans, or put a down payment on a home.”

EITC Program Expands

unnecessary fees and high-interest “rapid refund” loans. Division Director Al Casad, who has served as a volunteer tax preparer for the past two years, describes the experience as both personally rewarding and uplifting. This year, he says, he was particularly moved by one Salvadoran family. “They were so appreciative of our help,” he recalls. “The family had an income of less than \$10,000, and we were able to qualify them to receive a credit refund of \$3,000 – and that’s a very significant amount to them.”

New Hampshire’s Franklin Asset Building Coalition worked with 43 families and helped 25 families qualify for \$37,539 in EITC refunds. Volunteers played with children while their parents met with trained tax preparers who completed tax returns on laptop computers donated by the IRS and the Annie E. Casey Foundation.

“The coalition strongly believes that EITC money for working families can make a big difference in their lives and in the community,” says Lynn Stanley, New Hampshire EITC site coordinator. “People can start savings accounts, pay off high-interest loans, or put a down payment on a home.”

In one month, Casey’s Bridgeport, Connecticut Division worked with 57 families, generating \$108,323 in refunds including \$37,316 in EITC credits. Flyers were distributed at schools and door-to-door in neighborhoods to raise awareness of its seven-site EITC program. Outreach efforts extended to the city health department, juvenile court, family resource centers and

shopping plazas. The division even put a large sign on the front of the Casey building to encourage families to attend. Volunteers from the division’s tutoring program, including an 18-year-old high school senior, contributed their time as well. Partnering with People’s Bank and Citibank, the Bridgeport tax preparation program included a series of workshops on topics ranging from “making good money decisions” to “how to stretch the dollars you have.” The division hopes to continue these workshops throughout the year.

CASEY’S EITC PROGRAM DEVELOPS POWERFUL LINKS TO MAINSTREAM FINANCIAL SERVICES AND ASSET-BUILDING OPPORTUNITIES AND ESTABLISHES DURABLE CONNECTIONS BETWEEN FAMILIES, NEIGHBORHOODS AND THE MAINSTREAM ECONOMY.

In Hartford, Connecticut, volunteers working in eight sites more than tripled the refunds expected over last year, from \$1.2 million to over \$3 million, according to Juan Gonzalez, Casey community liaison. Working with the Boys and Girls Club, other local organizations, and the Foundation, the Division conducted extensive intake and exit surveys in order to design asset-building services for next year’s campaign. For their efforts, volunteers were presented with a certificate of appreciation

by the Hartford City Council and Mayor Eddie Perez.

In Connecticut, Maine, Rhode Island and Vermont, volunteer tax preparers speaking as many as four languages proved especially valuable to the increasing diverse population of local neighborhoods.

Nationally, 23 urban communities and rural tax assistance projects in seven states participated in the Foundation’s 2003 EITC campaign. Nearly 97,000 tax returns were filed at the tax preparation centers, generating more than \$115 million in federal and state refunds, including \$55 million in federal EITC credits, \$16 million in child tax credits, and \$11 million in state tax refunds. The median EITC refund was \$1,322.

“We were very pleased with these results,” says Bonnie Howard, senior associate with the Foundation’s Family Economic Success Program. “However, we discovered that many people just wanted help with their taxes and did not take advantage of the financial literacy and investment assistance programs. Of the 3,800 families that did participate in these programs, more than 2,000 opened new savings plans and 29 purchased homes. We learned that bringing financial opportunities to families needs to be emphasized year-round and not just during tax season.”

While the final numbers of families served, the total refunds, and tax preparation fees saved as a result of the 2004 Casey EITC program are not yet known, early numbers indicate a significant increase as many Casey divisions increased the number of tax preparation centers while others joined in the effort for the first time.

LET IT SNOW, LET IT SNOW, LET IT SNOW!

by Gregory M. Simpson, CIS Administrator

Casey Human Resources Director Marie Keeton likes snow and lots of it. As the season allows, she loves it so much that she makes a point of spending at least nine hours weekly going up and down mountains of it. Marie spends winter Sundays on Sundown's ski patrol in New Hartford, Connecticut, where she has held National Ski Patrol certification for five years.

Marie shares that the most rewarding aspect of both her job with Casey and her avocation "has always been helping people." When not volunteering on the ski patrol, she donates her time as a board member of Family Services of Central Connecticut and the Bristol United Way and is on Bristol's Planning Commission. Most recently she has become a Big Sister.

Taught by her aunt to ski while in the fourth grade, Marie reflects, "I can still remember that first experience and how it felt to go fast. I still like to go fast to this day." She elaborates, "Skiing is a fun, safe sport if you do it in a respectful way." Asked if she has ever been injured skiing, Marie chuckles, and says simply, "Oh, yeah." Her major injury was breaking her thumb, and she's had some twisted knees. One other time she fell and scraped her face. She offers sardonically, "My fellow ski patrollers found this funny—that the ski patroller was bleeding." Overall, though, she says, "I've been lucky. I wear a helmet."

Not all are so lucky, though. Marie sees, on average, five accidents each shift on the slopes. Most involve broken wrists and head



To become a certified ski patroller, Casey Human Resources Director Marie Keeton spent a year learning first aid, advanced skiing, tobogganing, sled handling, and even avalanche training.

injuries for snowboarders, or knee, leg and head injuries for skiers. Some injuries make her anxious, such as when someone lands on their head doing an "invert" on a snowboard. "One of the major concerns is hypothermia. If we don't get an injured person off the mountain in 15 minutes, they can go into shock. Later, we get thank you notes all the time—the people are grateful for the help." Just in case, Marie is covered by the slope's insurance policy and Good Samaritan legislation.

To become a certified ski patroller involves training similar to that for emergency medical technicians. Marie spent a year learning first aid, advanced skiing, tobogganing, sled handling and avalanche training. On each of her shifts with two or three other ski

patrollers, she is required to spend 30 minutes at the bottom of the mountain and another half hour at the summit shack. In between, she can ski as she chooses and carries a radio to respond to calls. While on the slopes, she checks for safety compliance—people skiing too fast, too close, or not using a code of respect.

When not on duty as one of the 102 ski patrollers at Connecticut's Sundown, Marie likes to ski at other New England slopes, especially Maine's Sunday River. She also has skied in Utah and Colorado, where the National Ski Patrol is headquartered. For her volunteer efforts at Sundown, she gets a season's pass for herself and her family.

Marie does not spend all of her free time on the slopes. It does sound like she spends much of it outdoors though, as she also enjoys snowmobiling, hiking, ice skating, camping, fishing, bicycling, kayaking, horseback riding and sailing. "This year I'm going to take up Rollerblading, and I want to learn how to ride a skateboard." "Oh," she adds as if she had forgotten something critical, "I want to fly in a hot air balloon, too."

Asked if there are lighter moments in the realm of ski rescue, Marie offers, "Yes, we eat, eat, eat." At the summit shack, there is a gas grill and the ski patrol is into lots of cooking and card playing.

Indeed, Marie Keeton likes to see snow and lots of it. Nevertheless, she says smiling, "By the end of the season, we're pretty tired with it, too. It's time to move on to something else." Sailing, anyone?



“The moment I met them, I thought, ‘this could be the family.’”

A Happy Ending for New Hampshire Sisters

Mike and Donna Coraluzzo know more about the need for good foster parents than most people. In their professions – he’s a state trooper and she is director of the Dover Children’s Home in New Hampshire – they meet children living in desperate situations every week. So when the couple, already parents of a 7-year-old boy, Anthony, decided to expand their family, they registered to become foster parents with Casey Family Services in Concord.

Their state social worker, Barbara Slayton, says the couple arrived just in time. “I had been assigned to find a family for two sisters, Kayla and Savanna, living at St. Charles Children’s Home.”

Casey was contacted and asked to find foster parents willing to take both girls. The agency has provided consultation in foster parent recruitment to New Hampshire’s state child welfare system for the past several years.

Because they were older (Kayla is 12 and Savanna is 7) and could not be separated,

Barbara had a difficult time finding the right placement for them, in spite of extensive publicity about the girls.

“Last March, New England Cable Network (NECN) produced a documentary about the sisters of St. Charles Children’s Home, which included an interview with Kayla and Savanna,” Barbara explains. “Shortly after that story aired, St. Charles contacted Casey and asked for our help in finding them a foster home.”

“By December, I was almost ready to give up and let another agency try to locate foster parents for them. I wanted them placed in a home as soon as possible. That was when Mike and Donna came to our office and signed up for our training session. The moment I met them, I thought, ‘this could be the family.’”

As the Coraluzzos completed their training, they began having regular visits with Kayla and Savanna at the St. Charles School.

“Mike and Kayla both love running and

began going for jogs together,” Donna says. In February, over the winter school break, Kayla and Savanna moved into the Coraluzzo home.

“There were a lot of changes in our home that first week,” says Donna. “We went from being parents of one to parents of three overnight. Anthony and Savanna are only a week apart in age, so suddenly he had a big sister and a twin.”

Although the move means both girls have had to change schools, they are only seven miles away from their friends at St. Charles.

Only 10 days after Kayla and Savanna moved in with the Coraluzzo family, the NECN producer arranged a follow-up interview with the girls. “They wanted to do a ‘where are they now?’ story, to revisit the girls a year later and see if they had found a loving foster home,” Barbara says. “Thanks to Mike and Donna, we think this story will have a very happy ending.”

Staff Updates

Casey Family Services operates divisions throughout the Northeast and in Baltimore, Maryland, offering support services and programs for vulnerable children and families.

NEW HIRES

Casey Family Services welcomes the following new staff members:

Kenneth Goode, Family Support Specialist, Providence, RI; Kerri Honiberg, Social Worker, Hartford, CT; Joseph Huertas, Life Skills Specialist, Hartford, CT; Asmahan Ibrahim, Social Worker, Hartford, CT; Carol Mandigo, Team Leader, Concord, NH; Steven Polesel, Deputy Division Director, Hartford, CT; Karen-Ann Spence, Team Leader, Hartford, CT.

TRANSFERS

Casey Family Services congratulates the following individuals on their new positions:

Juliette le Cornec has transferred into the position of Intranet Information Coordinator in New Haven, CT.

Patricia Lugo has transferred into the position of Information Specialist with the Casey Center for Effective Child Welfare Practice in New Haven, CT.

Child Development Center

Helps Parents Achieve an Education

What started a few years back as a “drop-in” child care center at Casey Family Services’ Baltimore Division has evolved into a comprehensive child development center that is enabling struggling young parents from the neighborhood to complete their high school education.

The center, which initially served only children up to 6 years old, has seen such a



Certified child development consultants work with children of all ages to help improve social, motor and language skills, while their parents attend evening classes or other Casey activities.

strong demand for its services that children up to age 10 are now being accepted, according to Terry Baisden, team leader for Casey’s family support program. And in order to properly address each child’s developmental skill needs, children now participate in small, age-specific groups that follow a curriculum of activities developed by Casey’s early childhood teacher, Marilyn Carlisle.

“The structure is very important,” says Baisden, “because the kids are not with us



for very long. We may, at best, have a child for three hours in the evening while their parents are taking a class or a workshop. So this is our only opportunity to help them in developing skills, whether it’s language, motor, cognitive or social skills.”

“Some parents have alternate options for care but choose to bring their children to the child development center for the social interaction and educational toys,” adds Carlisle.

In addition to offering computer classes, a book club and parenting classes, the center, in partnership with the Baltimore City Community College, offers GED classes, explains Baisden.

“And according to the college, the division’s retention rate is very high. We believe this is because the development center allows the

parents to continue taking classes and not dropping out.”

The center will often serve between 25 and 30 children on a regular basis. Each child takes a standardized development test to assess their skills, and then certified child development consultants work with each group. Consultants will teach the same age group, points out Baisden, so if a child only attends intermittently, the consultant will already be aware of that child’s needs and challenges.

Families Stay Connected

through Family Resource Center

PROVIDENCE

Many of the immigrant families living in the Washington Park neighborhood of Providence, Rhode Island, will soon be able to “connect” more easily with families back home with the opening of Casey Family Services’ Family Resource Center.

The facility, which opened this month, is located on Eddy Street in a low- to moderate-income neighborhood and is desperately needed, according to Odessie Preston, team leader for Casey’s Family Support Program, who will also oversee the center’s operations. The only other community center in the area has a limited number of services and primarily offers day care.

The facility will eventually offer a range of programs and services specific to the needs of the community, which is populated by many ethnic groups, including Portuguese, Puerto Ricans, Dominicans, Haitians and Liberians. For many of them, the facility’s free Internet access is the only way to immediately communicate and stay in touch with relatives overseas. And oftentimes, they need the Internet to gather the proper paperwork from their country of origin, says Preston.

Over the past year, Casey has been holding “neighborhood chats” to determine the needs of the community. And there are quite a few, says Preston. For instance, many residents say they need a local facility to offer English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL), GED and pre-GED prep classes. They also need a safe, supervised after-school recreational center. Residents expressed concerns about neighborhood pollution and safety, but have had nowhere to hold meetings to address such issues.



The newly opened family resource center will offer a range of services specific to the needs of the community, such as GED courses, financial literacy training and free legal assistance.



“This could be a central place as well to bring people together to talk about and seek solutions to their mutual concerns,” says Preston.

Initially, in addition to offering the computer service, the center is providing family support and financial literacy training, along with free legal assistance. And a “clothing closet” is stocked with donated clothing items.

While it’s intended to serve the needs of Washington Park residents, the family resource center will be open to families from surrounding communities as well.

“It will take time to get the programs up and running and to get ongoing participation from the residents. But it helps already having Casey Family Services in the neighborhood for the past year and a half,” Preston adds.

The facility is staffed by a bilingual receptionist, but the agency hopes to eventually hire more individuals. In the meantime, staff primarily from Casey’s family support and school-to-career programs are working in the center. And efforts to establish a resident advisory committee continue. The group will be the driving force behind the development of the family resource center’s services, says Preston, “and hopefully the programming will grow not only in-house but also through collaborations with other neighborhood organizations.”

Permanency for Teens: New York City's Emerging Policy

PERSPECTIVES

by *Sania Metzger, Esq., Director of Policy*

The concentration of older youth in the child welfare system is a national issue, as evidenced by the 18,500 to 24,000¹ youth who annually “age out” of foster care. Too often, independent living has meant a youth leaves state custody disconnected from a source of unconditional love and support, and disconnected from socio-economic supports that would increase an 18- to 21-year-old’s chances to become a productive, self-sustaining young adult.

This article will summarize a promising new administrative policy initiated by New York City’s Administration for Children’s Services² aimed at facilitating permanency options for older youth who have been forced to grow up in foster care and who then exit to “independent living.”

In 1993 a staggering 47,509 children and youth were in placement in New York City’s foster care system.³ Ten years later, according to the Administration for Children’s Services (ACS), the municipal agency charged with the implementation of child welfare policies and services, that census count had been reduced by more than half – down to 23,149 children in foster care. How ACS dramatically reduced its foster care population; increased its capacity to serve more children through preventive services than through foster care services (the numbers are 33,046 and 23,249 respectively⁴); and how ACS is able to annually discharge more children from care than it takes in is a complex and ongoing tale. It is a story of commitment to systemic improvements shared by consumers, advocates, ACS leadership, key stakeholders, and decision makers from each branch and each level of state and local government, including the

court-appointed child welfare system reform experts who constituted the Marisol Panel. (Note: The Annie E. Casey Foundation played a key role in the work of the Marisol Panel.)

There is undoubtedly still much unfinished work on the ACS agenda, including the elimination of racial disparities in its child welfare system (also a national problem) where according to ACS 88 percent of the children admitted into foster care in 2002 were African American and Latino and 5 percent were Caucasian.⁵

To date, however, there is at least one group of youth in foster care that have yet to benefit from the ACS reforms of the past several years. The group is youth with a permanency goal of independent living. In fact, the data on adolescents in care who are 12 and older show a disturbing trend: Between 1999 and 2003, the percentage of adolescents in foster care recorded a significant increase, rising from 36.4 percent of the youth in care to 51.3 percent as of September 2003.⁶ Moreover, youth placed in New York City’s congregate care settings number 4,128, a census count that has remained virtually unchanged since 1993.⁷ Demographically, older youth in care are predominately African American. In 1999, for example, more than 35 percent of youth aging out of foster care nationally were African American, although African-American children represented only 15 percent of children under 18. While Caucasian children under 18 were underrepresented, accounting for 45 percent of youth aging out though constituting 64 percent of all youth under 18.⁸

Can state child welfare policy reforms address the urgent needs of youth aging out of foster care?

Facilitating Permanent Family Relationships

“Permanent, nurturing family connections are the foundation of all child welfare services and are as critical for adolescents in foster care as they are for younger children.”

This important observation by William Bell, commissioner of ACS, is at the heart of a promising administrative policy change under way in New York City. The policy, entitled Family-Based Concurrent Planning with Goals of Independent Living, initiated last July, seeks to connect every youth on an independent living track with a caring adult willing to serve in a parental capacity.

Youth who would otherwise age out or exit foster care are the intended beneficiaries of ACS’ family-based policy objective. Direct services staff members are being trained to use new case practice methods designed to meticulously explore and reconstruct significant past relationships an adolescent once enjoyed with caring adults. The desired outcome of the new policy is an increase in the number of youth who exit foster care with a lifelong relationship

- that is as legally secure as possible;
- to a caring adult; and
- to an adult committed to functioning in a parental capacity, in most instances.

This agencywide cultural shift represents the important organizational value ACS now attaches to facilitating a permanent

It is envisioned that the Family Team Conferences will connect youth with a parent, relative, adoptive parent or with a significant adult willing and capable to make a lifelong, legally binding commitment to a youth about to be discharged from care.

family relationship for older youth in foster care, and if successfully implemented, the family-based policy should simultaneously decrease ACS' over-reliance on congregate placements for this population.

Limit the use of Independent Living as a Permanency Placement

In an effort to limit the use of the Adoption and Safe Families Act (ASFA) least preferred permanency goal – independent living – ACS' policy requires the prior written approval of supervisory staff before a youth may be assigned the permanency goal of independent living. Even court-ordered independent living goals are to be reviewed by ACS supervisory staff and, where appropriate, ACS legal staff will seek a rehearing or an appeal of the court's permanency decision. Independent living is increasingly viewed as a set of invaluable, age-appropriate life skills developed to assist a young person transition out of foster care rather than a placement goal, in and of itself.

ACS caseworkers and supervisors involved with the placement process are being trained on how to assist youth in identifying permanency resources. These resources might include a parent, family members, current and former foster parents, parents of close friends, agency staff, teachers, coaches, mentors and "other adults the young person trusts or may have felt safe with."¹⁰ Congregate care staff are also expected to assist in the identification of permanency resources for youth they supervise. Once identified, it is hoped that the youth's potential permanency resources will be involved in Family Team Conferences. A

primary objective of these conferences is to develop a youth-centered plan that ensures the continuing presence of at least one caring adult in the life of each teen after discharge from foster care. It is envisioned that the Family Team Conferences will connect youth with a parent, relative, adoptive parent or with a significant adult willing and capable to make a lifelong, legally binding commitment to a youth about to be discharged from care.

PERMANENT, NURTURING FAMILY CONNECTIONS ARE THE FOUNDATION OF ALL CHILD WELFARE SERVICES AND ARE AS CRITICAL FOR ADOLESCENTS IN FOSTER CARE AS THEY ARE FOR YOUNGER CHILDREN.

When reunification with a parent is the concurrent permanency plan, the caseworker is required to take steps to engage the parents and family members in decision making, treatment services, visitation and discharge planning. And when adoption is the permanency goal, caseworkers are encouraged to help youth individually assess a prospective adoptive family. (This differs from the previous ACS practice of accepting blanket adoption waivers from youth over the age of 14.)

These and other practice changes mandated by ACS' family-based concurrent planning administrative policy offer the field a promising, values-driven approach for facilitating permanency for those youth forgot-

ten in the system. Wisely, ACS anticipates the need to offer an array of post-permanency services to youth reunited with or adopted by a family as well as needed supports for kinship families. Prioritizing family-based permanency options for older youth in foster care is an idea whose time has finally come.

¹ The Youth Transition Funders Group, Foster Care Work Group with the Finance Project. Connected by 25: A Plan for Investing in Successful Futures for Foster Youth. March 2003.

² Commissioner William Bell. Administration for Children's Services, New York City. Memorandum, June 12, 2003. Implementation of ASFA Part V: Family-Based Concurrent Planning for Youth with Goals of Independent Living.

³ Mayor Michael Bloomberg, New York City's Child Welfare System: Management Review, January 2004.

⁴ Ibid. p.13.

⁵ Practical Methods for Addressing the Disproportionate Representation of Children of Color in the Child Welfare System, NAPCWA Forum, March 9, 2003, New York City Administration for Children's Services: A presentation by Commissioner William Bell.

⁶ Mayor Michael Bloomberg.

⁷ Ibid. p.7.

⁸ Wertheimer, Richard, Ph.D., Youth Who "Age Out" of Foster Care: Troubled Lives, Troubling Prospects, Child Trends Research Brief, #2002-59 at www.childtrends.org.

⁹ Commissioner William Bell.

¹⁰ Ibid.

The Power of Foster Youth and Former Foster Youth Involvement

View from Washington



by Robin Nixon, Director
National Foster Care Coalition

I have recently had the privilege of attending two meetings unique in the world of American child welfare. The first, an advocacy planning meeting of the National Foster Youth Advisory Council at the Child Welfare League of America (CWLA), focused on the development of a position statement on improving educational supports for young people in care. The second, an initial planning meeting of the national alumni network, brought together a diverse group of young and not-so-young adults (from ages 18 to mid-40s or so) who had, at some time in their lives, been in out-of-home care.

The National Foster Youth Advisory Council (NFYAC) is a group of foster care youth and alumni who have partnered with the CWLA to create a national youth presence and voice on foster care issues in Washington. The Council has developed and published a Foster Youth Involvement Toolkit, conducted training on youth leadership and advocacy at local and national conferences, and advised the CWLA on its youth development programs. One member of the NFYAC sits on the CWLA Board of Directors, and others are members of both state and national advisory boards related to child welfare and youth issues. These active and passionate young people are committed to empowering youth in foster care to advocate for themselves. This year, they will focus on improving educational outcomes

for foster youth as a priority issue, and will be a powerful influence on the many legislative proposals currently being discussed in Congress and the White House. The NFYAC is sponsored by the Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative.

THESE TWO YOUTH-LED ORGANIZATIONS REPRESENT A SEA CHANGE IN THE ABILITY OF THE CHILD WELFARE SYSTEM TO BRING ITS ULTIMATE CONSUMERS TO THE TABLE.

The national alumni network grew out of a Casey Family Programs' project, The Foster Youth Alumni Studies. Currently being launched as an independent national organization, the network brings together foster care alumni of all ages for mutual support, communication and advocacy. It represents the first effort in our country to bring foster care alumni together as a powerful grassroots network that will collectively represent thousands of people who have known the system from the inside, and who will be able to advocate from a uniquely legitimate perspective.

These two youth-led organizations represent a sea change in the ability of the child welfare system to bring its ultimate consumers to the table. No discussion of national foster care leadership would be complete, however, without the California Youth Connection (CYC). This advocacy group

of, by, and for foster youth in California has been the Lewis and Clark of foster care and alumni leadership. I can say without question that the CYC has been one of the most effective advocacy groups of any kind in the United States, responsible for numerous pieces of legislation designed to improve foster care and increase the well-being of foster youth. Their influence goes well beyond California's borders. In 1998, it was then-First Lady Hillary Clinton's meeting with representatives of the CYC that sparked the interest of the Clinton administration in the needs of transitioning foster youth, and helped create the momentum for the Foster Care Independence Act of 1999. Legislation developed by the CYC in California has found its way to the Capitol as proposals for new or improved federal programs. Like Lewis and Clark, the CYC has mapped a wilderness for the rest of us to follow!

I am grateful to have been asked as a guest to attend meetings of all three of these outstanding groups. It was an amazing and gratifying experience. As foster care and youth development professionals, we are finding the path toward true youth participation and youth-led advocacy a long and challenging one. I am happy to report that we are well on our way to the Pacific.

TRANSITIONING YOUTH: BLENDING THE WORLDS OF PERMANENCY AND INDEPENDENT LIVING

PERSPECTIVES

by Lauren Frey, Project Manager
The Casey Center for Effective
Child Welfare Practice

“I grew up in a very loving and caring foster home ... with a family that was special in ways that no one will ever know ... but no matter how happy I was, I always had in the back of my mind that my foster parents were only taking care of me ... turning 18 meant that my foster parents didn’t have to be there for me if they didn’t want to, and it meant that I didn’t have a family anymore ... but being adopted (at age 19) changed my life ... it made it possible for me to move on with my life ... I was always part of a family, but now that family is my family ... a family that no one can ever take from me!”

– Sarah Coryell, former foster youth

The work of Casey Family Services has long been dedicated to making sure that youth in our child welfare system have safe and secure families—regardless of their age, challenging needs or complex circumstances. As the agency listens to youth in care like Sarah, it continues to push the boundaries of its own work in increasingly more comprehensive and creative ways—making sure youth who are reaching the age of “transition” have all the life skills, supports and services they need *and* the most secure, enduring and legally permanent family relationship possible.

In almost all states, child welfare systems too often compartmentalize their work with children and youth by giving them service plan goals that offer either “legal family membership” (reunification, adoption, guardianship) *or* “long-term support”



Adoption is important to youth at any age. Sarah, adopted at age 19 by her longtime Casey foster family, says she finally has a sense of true security.

(another permanent planned living arrangement, independent living). The Casey Center is committed to promising practices that blend the best of both worlds for youth—assuring them a permanent parenting relationship, permanent extended family connections and comprehensive life skills, supports and services. Although these two distinct service arms of the child welfare system—permanency and independent living—have each achieved progressive policy leaps and promising practice advances of late, from “the eyes of a youth” the compartmentalization is still there. The blending of these two worlds is imperative if our youth are ever to be adequately prepared for life, love and work in adulthood. Training and technical assistance provided by the Center related to transitioning youth are guided by the blending of these dual needs for lifelong relationships as well as life skills, supports and services.

The Center’s model of technical assistance is based on engaging Casey practitioners in peer-to-peer learning with states, counties and public agency staff that request assistance in making program, practice and policy enhancements in their respective systems.

Using this peer-to-peer learning style, the Casey Center is engaged in a yearlong technical assistance project with the Connecticut Department of Children and Families (DCF). DCF requested additional technical assistance in expanding recruitment efforts for adolescents through its Life Long Family Ties initiative, following the Connecticut Adoption Review Study completed by the Center last year.

The Casey Center is currently involved in facilitating training, mentoring and peer consultation groups with staff from private contract agencies and DCF in order to: (1) identify significant adults from within a youth’s circle of existing relationships, (2) involve the youth and the significant adults in his/her life in a team-planning and decision-making process, (3) explore and support the highest level of commitment that each adult can make as a permanent parent or extended family member, and (4) develop and implement a comprehensive case plan that addresses safety, permanency and well-being outcomes for the youth. This effort is enhanced by the collaboration between the Casey Center and Massachusetts Families for Kids (MFFK) at Children’s Services of Roxbury, Inc., with training provided by MFFK staff in their Adolescent Permanency-Family Consultation Team® model. Fifty practitioners are currently being trained in two groups, with follow-up peer consultation groups planned on a monthly basis for the next year.

The Casey Center also has provided technical assistance in its priority area of transitioning youth in at least three additional states over the past year.

TRANSITIONING YOUTH: BLENDING THE WORLDS OF PERMANENCY AND INDEPENDENT LIVING



Casey has provided training to the Wyoming State Council on Adoption, focusing on identifying, preparing and supporting permanent family connections for the oldest youth in foster care. A group of 40 practitioners were trained in strategies and tools to recruit potential permanent families from a youth's natural networks, to engage both youth and all caring adults in a family team decision-making process and employ a "what would it take?" philosophy to support the adults in being able to make a permanent commitment.

In Texas, at last year's "It's My Life" Conference—an event designed to showcase promising practices in life skills, transitions and independent living—Casey's Lauren Frey presented a workshop entitled "A Family for Life: Achieving Permanent Families for Youth in Foster Care" in order to increase the knowledge, attitudes and skills of participants related to promising practices in permanency for this population of youth. Sarah Coryell, a young adult from Casey's Maine Division, co-presented with Frey, sharing her compelling perspective on how the resolution of the family permanency issue in her life affected her ability to more fully work on life skills and transition goals. Adopted at age 19 by a long-term Casey family with whom she had lived since age 10, Sarah says, "... I spent a lot of time trying to figure out who my family was and by being adopted I was able to turn my focus on other things..."

In California, the Casey Center is collaborating with the California Permanency for Youth Project (CPYP), a public-private effort funded by the Stuart Foundation on behalf of transitioning youth in a four-county area (Alameda, Monterey, San

Mateo, and Stanislaus). The Center has provided training and technical assistance at several key points in the project and at various project sites over the past year, offering strategies and tools aimed at increasing recruitment options for older youth through identifying safe and caring adults in a youth's natural network; and promoting a youth-centered family team-planning and decision-making process that results in integrated life planning for youth, combining lifelong relationships and life skills, supports and services.

THE BLENDING OF THE WORLDS OF PERMANENCY AND INDEPENDENT LIVING IS IMPERATIVE IF OUR YOUTH ARE EVER TO BE ADEQUATELY PREPARED FOR LIFE, LOVE AND WORK IN ADULTHOOD.

In an effort to promote a holistic model for the youth of our child welfare system, the Casey Center bases its technical assistance on best and promising practices according to an evolving framework of guiding principles. When addressing systemic change related to transitioning youth the following needs are emphasized:

The need to be guided by a sound definition of permanency. According to the publications of well-known pioneers in the field (Maluccio, Fein and Olmstead in *Permanency planning for children; concepts and methods* and Emler, Lahti, G. Downs,

"I spent a lot of time trying to figure out who my family was. By being adopted I was able to turn my focus onto other things," says Sarah.

McKay and S. Downs in *Overcoming barriers to planning for children in foster care*), the core elements of permanency include intent, commitment/continuity, sense of belonging, and legal and social status. It is imperative that the beginning of all policy, practice and program change on behalf of transitioning youth begin with clarifying the definition of permanency—with permanency being not merely a process, plan or placement, but a family relationship. It seeks family relationship that is intended to last indefinitely; that provides continuity of relationships and assumes a common future; that entitles the youth to the same rights and expects from the youth the same responsibilities equal to all other members; and offers all the benefits and rewards of social status and legal family membership (reunification, adoption or guardianship).

The need to customize permanency outcomes. Because family permanency (according to the above definition) was not pursued earlier for some youth in care due to age, special needs, perceived lack of cooperation by the youth or family, or traditional values related to systems of caregiving—the permanency picture for youth may look different now than it might have looked for them at an earlier age. And depending on the existing threads of family in their lives, their complex maze of relationships and their individual strengths and needs, the permanency picture may indeed look different for each youth. Consequently an individualized approach is needed. In the area of transitioning youth, the most promising practices define a family permanency out-

In an effort to promote a holistic model for the youth of our child welfare system, the Casey Center bases its technical assistance on best and promising practices according to an evolving framework of guiding principles.

PERSPECTIVES

come for each older youth based on reaching “the highest degree of physical safety, emotional security and legal permanency that can be reached within the context of a family relationship.” And that “highest degree” might be achieved through reunification with their family of origin, or through adoption or guardianship by a family known to them, or adoption or guardianship by another family not yet known to them. When the most secure degree of physical, emotional and legal family permanency seemingly cannot be reached at a given point in time, the next question should always be “Then what would it take?” And then if the most secure level can still not be reached, the youth and family are encouraged to “keep the door open” and allow their level of commitment to evolve over time.

The need to be committed to comprehensive, continuous and customized services.

The recent systemic gains at both state and federal levels in independent living and transitioning services for youth are laudable, but nonetheless still less than adequate in certain areas. In order for youth to be prepared for and supported through adulthood, they will need not only a host of ancillary supports and services that offer “real world” skills, but also a strong permanent family network. By partnering with Casey practitioners who are utilizing a range of solid life skills-related strategies, tools and services with older youth in each Casey division, the Center is well positioned to provide valuable technical assistance in this area.

The need to engage youth in Integrated Life Planning. A missing piece of the equation for older youth is the presence of a

“TURNING 18 MEANT THAT MY FOSTER PARENTS DIDN’T HAVE TO BE THERE FOR ME ANYMORE IF THEY DIDN’T WANT TO, AND IT MEANT THAT I DIDN’T HAVE A FAMILY ANYMORE.”

seamless process of case planning and decision making that addresses both the youth’s permanency needs and their independent living supports. Convinced that youth need a holistic approach to lifelong family relationships and life skills, supports and services, the Casey Center promotes the values, policies and practice models that address this systemic challenge.

The need to be youth-centered. All too often, the case planning process does not include the youth. Without the youth steering and guiding the process, follow-through on tasks and success in outcomes is likely to suffer. The most promising practices in transitioning youth put the youth “in the driver’s seat,” hold planning meetings only with the youth present, and assist youth in shaping their hopes, dreams, goals and strengths into viable transition plans.

The need to be family-focused, using an expanded definition of “family.” Optimal integrated life planning with youth is best accomplished with those safe, caring and committed adults who can be there for the youth over the long haul. Unless case planning addresses both the cutoffs and the con-

nections in a youth’s family relationships, and meaningfully engages the significant adults in a youth’s life, it will miss the mark. Promising practices in transitioning youth involve birth family members in planning and decision making and honor their role in a youth’s life, even when they are not able to parent full time. Promising practices with this population also actively seek to identify all adults in a youth’s natural network of relationships with adults (teachers, coaches, employers, former foster parents, mentors and others) interested in participating in joint planning and able to assist the youth in achieving his/her future goals – while, at the same time, exploring with each adult what it would take for them to make a commitment as this youth’s permanent parent or permanent extended family member.

The need to employ a collaborative process of family team planning and decision making.

A family team meeting model that is youth-centered and family-focused, as described above, offers the perfect opportunity for an outcome-oriented approach that leads to both lifelong family relationships as well as life skills, services and supports. Building on select components of internally developed models such as the Casey Adolescent Transition Team (CATT) from the Maine Division and the McGill Action Planning System (MAPS) developed in the Vermont Division, as well as externally tested models developed by programs such as Massachusetts Families for Kids, Families for Teens (Northeast Ohio), Permanency for Teens (Iowa) and Catholic Community Services of Western Washington, the Casey Center assists its technical assistance consumers in exploring team-planning tools that best serve youth in transition.

WEST HAVEN PROBATE COURT PROJECT A COLLABORATIVE ENDEAVOR

DIALOGUE

Sharing Perspectives on Research, Practice and Policy

by Amy Stephens, Research Associate

In December 1999, Judge F. Paul Kurmay, the State of Connecticut Probate Court Administrator, received approval from the judicial branch for a two-year pilot program in the West Haven court that privatizes the required social services investigation in removal of guardianship matters. In June 2000, the Bridgeport Division of Casey Family Services launched the West Haven Probate Court Project. The program began as a two-year demonstration project, the goal of which was to provide a service model to better meet the needs of the Probate Court and ultimately Connecticut's families and children. With the agreement of the Department of Children and Families (DCF), Casey Family Services' social workers working out of Bridgeport conduct the investigations and provide case studies and follow-up reports for the court.

When the project began the following seven goals were identified:

1. To meet the needs of the West Haven Probate Court for the submission of timely, thorough case studies for removal of guardianship and termination of parental rights petitions submitted to the court.
2. To establish a stable, consistent, good working relationship between Casey Family Services and the West Haven Probate Court.
3. To provide MSW-level social workers to the court who are experienced and knowledgeable in child welfare assessments and who are sensitive to the needs and concerns of the court and the clients they serve.

4. To provide consistency to the court in the assignment of social workers.
5. To provide social workers to the court who possess sound clinical judgment on child welfare/child safety issues.
6. To provide meaningful recommendations to the court based on a sound permanency plan that best serves the needs of the child.
7. To provide follow-up assessments to the court in more complicated child custody matters.

Since the program's inception, the services provided by Casey Family Services have received high marks from West Haven Probate Court Judge E. Michael Heffernan.

When assigned to a removal matter, social workers from Casey Family Services adhere to guidelines developed in cooperation with DCF. Within the 90-day period before the hearing, the social workers 1) meet with the parents or current guardians, 2) meet with the prospective guardians, 3) meet with the children, 4) collect social, medical, educational and employment histories for each party, and 5) file a report of their findings with the court. Collateral contacts such as substance abuse assessments, the child's pediatrician, the petitioner's physician, the petitioner's therapist if there are mental health issues, personal references for the petitioner, DCF checks, and local as well as state police checks require an additional amount of follow-up time. The agency's assessment includes a recommendation about the child's best interests.

To date, the two social workers assigned to this project (Joanna Korsh, LCSW, and Patricia Lugo, MSW, JD) have handled all the referrals, submitted reports, and attended every court hearing pertaining to the cases referred. Due to their excellent organizational skills, solid clinical judgment and a sense of dedication to this project, they have established an excellent working relationship with the court. Families have benefited from their combined knowledge of community resources and the legal process. Since the program's inception, the services provided by Casey Family Services have received high marks from West Haven Probate Court Judge E. Michael Heffernan. The judge states that their "prompt" and "professional" reports "have been a great help to the court in meeting its responsibilities in these sensitive cases." The cases include custody petitions, termination of parental rights matters, and petitions for reinstatement and co-guardianship.

The work conducted in the West Haven Probate Court far exceeds the legislative mandate that requires social workers to conduct a full home study and provide information to the court for decision-making purposes. The program evaluation conducted in July 2003 revealed that many families require services – including safety monitoring, family preservation and conflict resolution – which are provided by the Casey social workers. Additionally, it was learned that many families require services from other community providers, including crisis stabilization, counseling and supervised visitation. Social workers' overall involvement with a case is correlated to the following: families' need for counseling, crisis stabilization and supervised visitation; cases that are

The work conducted in the West Haven Probate Court far exceeds the legislative mandate that requires social workers to conduct a full home study and provide information to the court for decision-making purposes.

contested; and petitioners with prior DCF involvement.

The project's third and final year is dedicated to refining a standardized assessment tool for use by social workers in probate court settings. The Research Department and social workers have been working closely on this task and have decided to tackle another project jointly—a description of the Casey Family Services' home study process. As this pilot project is completed and social work responsibilities are redistributed, the court

may find it helpful to have documentation of the Casey home study process.

Additionally, the collaboration between the Research Department and the social workers led to a recent evaluation presentation at a national conference and prompted a state-wide study of the probate court system. This study, outlined in the Winter 2004 edition of *Voice*, has encouraged the Connecticut Probate Court Administrator's office to consider avenues toward improving the state's probate court system.

Consequently, the Probate Court Administrator has decided to proceed with a pilot probate court project in New Haven this year.

**Note: In recent weeks Patricia Lugo has resigned as a social worker in the West Haven Probate Court. She now works in the administrative office of Casey Family Services as an Information Specialist for the Casey Center for Effective Child Welfare Practice.*

What is ... Results Orientation?

*by Ben Kerman, Director of Research,
Eliot Brenner, Director of Clinical Services,
Joy Duva, Deputy Executive Director of
Planning and Policy*

A *Results Orientation* is a healthy organizational practice of looking at data to see if agency, program and case goals are achieved, in order to maximize results and to learn and apply the most we possibly can from our collective experience.

Using data to guide decision making is often easier said than done. Along the way, even the most well-intentioned program team can be tripped up by obstacles such as the confusing language of results, the practitioners' understandable reservations regarding aggregate reporting, selection of ill-fit measures, and the challenges inherent in any systematic accountability system. Over the coming months, we will be engaging in discussions at all levels of the organization on how best to achieve a results orientation at Casey Family Services.

APPROACHES TO RESULTS:

Across disciplines, management and program improvement texts are littered with approaches to create and sustain the use of data. Unfortunately, the proliferation of similar terms may undermine clear communication and successful collaboration (Friedman, 2003). Among the approaches, Results-based Management (RBM) trumpets making decisions regarding programs based on recently measured results and consideration of obstacles and facilitators facing current operations. Another example, Managing for Results (MFR), emphasizes building a results focus into every aspect of management practice and routine. With Casey's Continuous Quality Improvement (CQI) effort, as with the Annie E. Casey Foundation's concept of Results Accountability, we recognize that all who can contribute to finding solutions and making improvements must be involved, not only "managers."

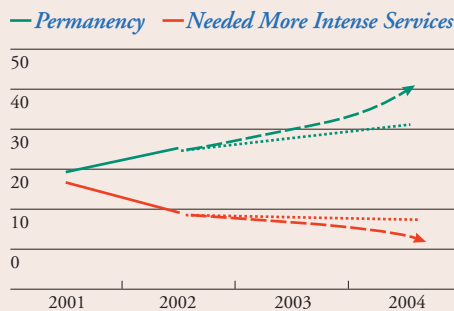
The main benefit from all these approaches comes not from having a lot of statistical reports—but from the process of using them in combination with everything else we know to achieve our goals. Mark Friedman, a proponent of a simple and straightforward approach to data use, recently presented workshops to Casey Family Services' leadership which highlighted "Turning the Curve" on key results indicators. Friedman notes the value of charting a known indicator, projecting where it will go if nothing different is done, considering the internal and external conditions needed to improve the situation (evidenced by a "turn" in the indicator's line when graphed), and then implementing an action plan.

Taking two indicators of status at exit from foster care spotlights the way this could be used at Casey. Figure 1 provides the annual reports for two indicators: The solid green line shows the percentage of foster children discharged to legally permanent families

What is ... Results Orientation?

achieved through reunification or adoption, and the solid red line shows the percentage of children discharged to more intensive services, such as residential treatment or correctional services. The actual data is presented through 2002, with small dotted lines projecting the expected results should no changes be made. Overall, these indicators are heading in the desired direction. However, *turning the curve* can also mean brainstorming within the program team, looking for ways to accelerate improvements (thick dashed arrows).

Figure 1. Illustration of Turning the Curves with Annualized and Projected Results



THE ESSENCE OF BUILDING ON OUR RESULTS ORIENTATION:

To facilitate goal achievement and practice improvement, the core ingredients of a results orientation include:

- Accountability for success on clearly stated and measurable goals;
- Goals that describe both ultimate outcomes and system performance;
- Regular availability of *results information* concerning these core goals;
- Routine reference to results information to guide decisions concerning program development and improvement; and
- A tolerance for and sensitivity to the tricky balance when we simplify complex contextualized processes with a limited set of indicators.

Accountability and goal focus: The prerequisite is “Results Accountability” – the acceptance of accountability for the impact of our work on mutually agreed upon goals for children and families. The Results Orientation helps clarify the expectations for the organization’s stakeholders, which may include boards, executive management, and funders, as well as service consumers and the workforce itself.

Outcomes and systems performance: Rather than looking solely at outcomes and relegating everything else to a “program black-box,” the Results Orientation also considers both system performance and other features of the environment in order to find solutions. To keep the effort manageable, a limited set of measures is chosen for monitoring purposes. Measures need to be created that are clear and precise in order to provide useful feedback. In child welfare, there is a growing convention of examining Safety, Permanency and Well-being.

Regular availability of results information: Data concerning the results indicators highlighted for inclusion needs to be readily available to those who need it. Widely and easily accessible information demonstrates the commitment to empowering leadership and all staff with the information that they need, as well as the confident openness to new ideas for continuing program improvement. In contrast, the results orientation is undermined by slow and dirty data. Momentum is lost when the indicators are irrelevant or misleading due to delays in getting feedback or “dirty data” (too much missing or inaccurate information).

Routine reference to results indicators at decision-making points: Feedback must not only be available to staff and managers, but it should be used freely when discussing program status and program development. In order to “turn curves,” the shape of the line must be known. Though statistics must not be the only consideration, they provide a powerful tool to help maintain agency

direction and the team’s unity of action toward good outcomes. *What gets measured gets done* (Patton, 1999). Given the rigorous and distracting daily hustle, routine reference to ongoing results indicator feedback needs to be embedded into agency procedures through workgroup missions, meeting agendas, and supervision of staff.

Sensitively placing indicators in context: Data users must be sensitive to the limitations of aggregated data concerning individual results indicators. Overly simplified interpretation of key indicators can undermine good practice. Similarly, there is an intrinsic risk of oversimplification when we use a subset of measures to describe complex, multifaceted and evolving situations. Protection against these risks comes from proactive discussion regarding how results information is to be used, consistent consideration of participant, program and broader community context, and rigorous adherence to professional and ethical standards.

In sum, the results-oriented team carefully thinks through the program model of what is supposed to happen, selects indicators that reflect key system performance and outcome goals, looks at today’s results, and asks what other conditions need to be in place in order to do even better tomorrow. In the coming months, Casey will provide a variety of opportunities for stakeholders to get more involved in building on our Results Orientation.

Useful References

- Family Resource Coalition of America (1999). *Outcome-based Accountability and Evaluation Frameworks*.
- Friedman, M. (2003). www.resultsaccountability.com.
- Schorr, L.B. (1994). *The Case for Shifting to Results-based Accountability*. Improved Outcome for Childrens Project.

Resource Corner

Reviews

The Human Costs of Foster Care: Voices from the Inside

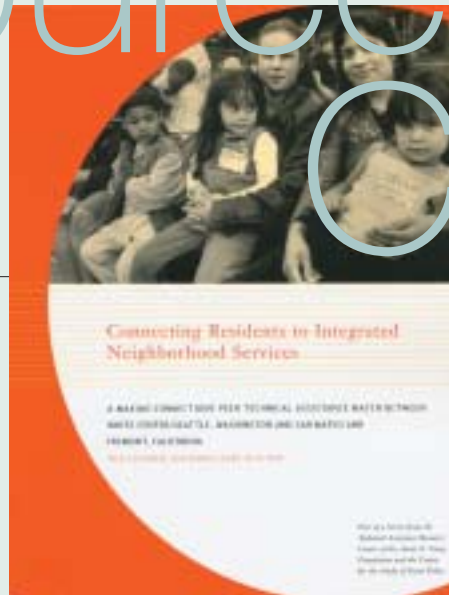
A new report released by the Pew Commission on Children in Foster Care examines the experiences of foster children, as well as their birth and foster or adoptive parents, through a series of focus group discussions. Information shared illustrates serious shortcomings in the nation's child welfare system, of which foster care is the largest component, as well as aspects of the system that are successfully helping children live safely in permanent families.

To view the report, please visit www.pewfostercare.org.

Children, Families and Foster Care: Issues and Ideas

The latest issue of *The Future of Children*, published by The David and Lucile Packard Foundation, examines the plight of children in foster care. Although foster care is a necessary lifeline for children who cannot safely remain with their families, too often the system lets these children down. They can be alienated from their birth families; “bumped around” from home to home; receive inconsistent medical care and “one-size-fits-all” service plans. Recent reforms in the child welfare system are a step in the right direction, but much more could and should be done. This guide highlights three key areas that can improve how children and families experience foster care and can enhance accountability within the child welfare system.

To view the document online, please visit www.futureofchildren.org.



Child Welfare: Improved Federal Oversight Could Assist States in Overcoming Key Challenges

This report, published by the United States General Accounting Office, found that child welfare agencies face a variety of challenges related to staffing and data management systems that impair their ability to protect children from abuse and neglect. The Department of Health and Human Services plays a role in helping states overcome some of the challenges they face in operating their child welfare programs, but the report points out, additional oversight or technical assistance could further assist states in meeting the needs of children served by child welfare agencies.

To view a copy of the report, please visit www.gao.gov and enter report # GAO-04-418T.

Children in Foster Homes: How Are They Faring?

The Child Trends report, based on findings from two national surveys, reveals that children in foster care may be faring better than news media reports indicate. Of the foster youth surveyed, ages 11 to 14, 97 percent reported that their caregivers “do a lot to help them.” Areas of concern for caregivers involve obtaining access to early childhood health services, increasing social interaction at school and improving cognitive development.

To view a copy of the report, please visit www.childtrends.org.

Connecting Residents to Integrated Neighborhood Services

This report, developed jointly by the Annie E. Casey Foundation and the Center for the Study of Social Policy, features lessons gained from the White Center/Seattle, Washington's *Making Connections* team, who traveled to California's Bay area to learn from organizations that have implemented comprehensive service integration initiatives. The White Center participants wanted to assess their options for promoting the development of a resident-friendly, integrated neighborhood services model back in their own community.

To view the complete report, please visit www.aecf.org/tarc.

What the Media Say

Media

Regional probate court for children considered

Probate judges turned out to the State Capital on February 25 largely in support of legislations that would create a new regional probate court for children's matters in the New Haven area. ... Probate judges from 10 area towns would join the pilot program for handling the "increasing number and complexity" of cases involving children in probate courts across the state.

The idea was pitched after a report concluded that state probate courts are failing in their mission to protect children. There is so much backlog that judges cannot move quickly enough to move children from danger, according to the report by Casey Family Services.

Connecticut Law Tribune, Fairfield, CT, 3/1/2004

Community Foundation names board members

Administrator Susan Whetstone and Realtor Barbara L. Pearce were named Friday as the highest board members of the Community Foundation for Greater New Haven. ... Last year, the foundation's board distributed more than \$10 million from about 500 endowments.

The keynote speaker during the Friday lunch was Patrick T. McCarthy, a vice president for the Annie E. Casey Foundation, whose direct services office is now located in downtown New Haven. ... He noted most of Connecticut's kids at risk can be



found in two dozen neighborhoods in New Haven, Bridgeport and Hartford.

New Haven Register, New Haven, CT, 2/28/2004

Health Watch

These are happy times for 16-year-old Madison Burke. She has parents and a lot of support through Casey Family Services. Not the case when she was 4 and living in a group home. ... this nonprofit organization not only trains foster parents but offers continued support. ... Casey also offers support to the foster children.

WJAR-TV, Providence, RI, 3/12/2004

Face of adoption is changing

Decades ago, "Susie had appendicitis," or that's the story her family would tell when she went away to have a baby, says adoption agency director Dawn Smith-Pliner.

"It was a deep, dark secret," says Sharon Goedkoop, of Casey Family Services in White River Junction and Waterbury. Casey provides post-adoption services to families. Today, ... adoptions are open, celebrated even ... and increasingly, says Goedkoop, Vermonters are adopting older children.

Rutland Herald, Rutland, VT, 2/15/2004

Earned income tax credit a boom for Maine's poor

The program, funded through a \$25,000 grant from the Annie E. Casey Foundation, is in its first year in Portland and Lewiston and its second in York County and Farmington. ... The earned income tax credit is "one of the largest anti-poverty programs in the country," said Mark Millar, division director of Casey Family Services in Maine, the foundation's program arm. ... The free tax-preparation service is expected to serve between 500 and 700 families this year. The program also will begin to provide people with an economic education.

Morning Sentinel, Portland, ME, 2/15/2004

Young fathers urged to become positive role models

Speaking before a group of more than 300 parents – all fathers – social workers and family advocates, Devon Lane said he had never known his own father, but was determined to play a meaningful role in his son's childhood.

Sponsored by the Annie E. Casey Foundation, including Casey Family Services ... the conference featured workshops and presentations aimed at helping young fathers become stronger, more positive role models for their children."

The Baltimore Afro-American, Baltimore, MD, 1/31/2004

2004: Important Dates

May

May 3-5

2004 Finding Better Ways Conference
Child Welfare League of America
Atlanta, Georgia
www.cwla.org

May 10-15

34th National Conference
“Lifting Spirits – Touching Lives”
National Foster Parent Association
Orlando, Florida
www.nfpainc.org

May 12-15

10th Biennial National Conference
Family Support America
Chicago, Illinois
www.familysupportamerica.org

June

June 2-4

13th Annual Child Welfare Conference
“Getting the Job Done: Building Skills to
Serve Children and Families”
Colorado Department of Human Services
Vail, Colorado
www.cwconf.com

June 3-5

National Foster Care Conference
“Footsteps to the Future”
Daniel Memorial Institute
Atlantic Beach, Florida
www.conferences.danielkids.org

June 5-8

National CASA Annual Conference
National CASA Association
Washington, D.C.
www.nationalcasa.org/htm/events.htm

June 6-9

Conference on Family Group
Decision Making
“From Margin to Mainstream”
American Humane Association
Harrisburg, Pennsylvania
www.americanhumane.org

June 7-11

Mid-West Regional Training Conference &
National Juvenile Justice Summit
“Let’s All Get in the Victory Lane: Making
Children a National Priority”
Child Welfare League of America
Indianapolis, Indiana
www.cwla.org

June 23-27

Children’s Mental Health and Early
Intervention Training Institute
“Developing Local Systems of Care for
Children and Adolescents
with Emotional Disturbances and their
Families: Early Intervention”
Georgetown University Center for Child
and Human Development
San Francisco, California
www.georgetown.edu

July

July 15-16

AdoptUSKids National Adoption and
Foster Care Recruitment Summit
“Answering the Call – Partnering with
Communities of Faith”
Washington, D.C.
www.cwla.org

July 18-21

18th Annual Conference on
Treatment Foster Care
Foster Family-Based Treatment Association
Nashville, Tennessee
www.ffa.org

August

August 4-7

12th Annual Colloquium
American Professional Society on
the Abuse of Children
Oklahoma City, Oklahoma
www.apsac.org



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Voice

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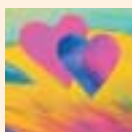


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National alumni network formed



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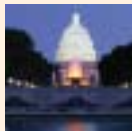


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Voice is published quarterly by Casey Family Services for child welfare professionals, advocates, and the children and families they serve. The opinions expressed within this publication do not necessarily reflect the views of Casey Family Services or the Annie E. Casey Foundation. Casey Family Services is the direct service arm of the Annie E. Casey Foundation, a private charitable organization established in 1948 by United Parcel Service Founder Jim Casey and his siblings in honor of their mother.

The Foundation is dedicated to helping build better futures for disadvantaged children in the United States. Started in 1976, Casey Family Services offers quality long-term and treatment foster care, post-adoption services, family reunification, family preservation, family advocacy and support, family resource centers, and assistance to young families and families affected by HIV/AIDS, and technical assistance through the Casey Center for Effective Child Welfare Practice. The mission of Casey Family Services is to improve the lives of at-risk children and strengthen families and communities by providing high-quality, cost-effective services that advance both positive practice and sound public policy.

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