

A publication sharing ideas and insights



THE DIRECT SERVICE AGENCY OF
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Voice

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Sharing Perspectives: Youth Voices for Change



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From the Executive Director's Desk

When I listen to young people speak about their experiences in foster care and offer ideas on how to make this time easier for others, I am struck anew by their courage and eloquence.

These reminders – coming to us directly from young and old with unassailable veracity – are critical. Theirs is a voice that can lead us to lasting change, and it is one that is building in volume as youth from coast to coast exercise their right to speak out.

This spring, 10 foster youths from Casey Family Services' Bridgeport and Hartford divisions met with Connecticut state legislators and officials to voice concerns about their futures. These young advocates discussed the need for more stability in their placements and, therefore, their schools, and for adequate legal representation.

One youth, Dahanne, from Bridgeport, challenged lawmakers with the statement, "I wonder how my life would be different if I had known I could have an attorney representing me." He added that perhaps he might have been able to see his mother before she died, and it was too late for a relationship.

While the ultimate goal of youth advocacy work is systems change, the change on a personal level cannot be discounted. The youth spoke with clarity, conviction, and compassion for future generations who might follow their path into foster care.

Another youth, Nadege, speaking at a Congressional briefing on the release of the Annie E. Casey Foundation's 2007 KIDS COUNT Data Book, noted that had she known that her foster mother could adopt her, it might have become a reality before she turned age 21. Her adoption, however delayed, "saved her life," she said.

The value of engaging in a true dialogue with youth will only enrich their experiences in care, our own practice, and, ultimately, the system designed to protect them.

Raymond L. Torres

Del Escritorio del Director Ejecutivo



Cuando escucho a los jóvenes relatando sus experiencias en cuidado de crianza y a sus sugerencias sobre como mejorar este cuidado para los demás, me quedo nuevamente impresionado por su valor y su elocuencia.

Estos recordatorios – que nos llegan directamente tanto de jóvenes como de adultos con una veracidad irrefutable – son sumamente críticos. La voz de estos jóvenes nos lleva a cambios duraderos ya que ellos ejercen su derecho de hablar en voz cada día más fuerte de un lado del país al otro.

Esta primavera, diez jóvenes de las divisiones de Casey Family Services de Bridgeport y Hartford se reunieron con legisladores estatales para hablar de sus preocupaciones sobre el futuro. Estos jóvenes abogaron por la estabilidad en su colocación temporal y por consiguiente en las escuelas, y también por la necesidad de representación legal apropiada.

Un joven de Bridgeport, Dahanne, hizo un desafío a los legisladores, diciéndoles: “Me pregunto como hubiera sido diferente mi vida, si hubiera sabido de mi derecho de representación legal.” También, agregó el, hubiera podido tener contacto con mi madre antes de su muerte y quizás hubiera posiblemente llegar a conocerla.

La meta primordial de nuestro labor de abogacía con los jóvenes es el cambio del sistema, pero también no debemos ignorar la importancia del cambio a nivel personal. El joven habló con claridad, convicción y compasión, recordándonos de las generaciones futuras en cuidado de crianza.

Otra joven, Nadege, habló en una sesión de orientación para congresistas en la ocasión de la publicación de 2007 KIDS COUNT Data Book de la Fundación Annie.E. Casey (Libro de Datos sobre los Jóvenes – 2007). Ella les hizo saber que si se hubiera enterado de la posibilidad de adopción por parte de su madre de crianza, hubiera efectuado tal adopción antes de cumplir los 21 años. Sin embargo, aún con la demora, la adopción “me salvó la vida,” dijo ella.

El dialogo verdadero con los jóvenes enriquecerá tanto a su experiencia en cuidado de crianza como a nuestras propias prácticas, y también al mismo sistema dedicado a su protección.

Raymond L. Torres

YOUTH RAISE VOICES TO CREATE CHANGE

Yolanda



Cheniece



"If someone from the Connecticut Department of Children and Families had spoken to my foster family earlier, maybe I would have been adopted at age 15 instead of age 21." – Nadege M., speaking in July on Capitol Hill

"Just imagine how different my life might have been if I had known I had an attorney who could have advocated for my right to see my brothers and sisters. I might have been able to see them on a regular basis, instead of just at family funerals." – Dahanne G., challenging state legislators in Connecticut

"I don't like moving to a new school and starting new classes all the time. I have to leave friends and start all over again. I feel like I don't belong." Cheniece O., sharing her story with policymakers

In growing numbers, youth and alumni from the foster care system are speaking about their experiences and insights at the national, state, and local levels, inserting their own voices and perspectives into the discussions of policy and practice usually reserved for experts and professionals. Although results are anecdotal, the increasing presence of youth in advocacy activities suggests that their messages on birth family connections, permanence, and greater involvement in case planning are having an impact.

Kim Stevens, founder of the noted Massachusetts Speak-Out Team and the more recent Raising Children's Voices (see Close-Up on pages 8 and 9), agrees that youth involvement in systems reform and individual decision making is expanding. "Massachusetts Families for Kids (MFFK) began pushing for youth panels at conferences and trainings in 1997. Since then, I have observed that nearly



Kiara

all child welfare conferences include youth. More and more, you're seeing youth talking with professionals and policymakers directly, across the board," says Stevens, who is helping to coordinate events that bring together youth speakers and judges in four states.

According to interviews conducted by Casey Family Services, child welfare directors in nearly 40 states revealed that youth and family involvement in federal Child and Family Service Reviews (CFSRs) is critically important. "From our conversations with state leaders, more professionals are viewing youth and family as key resources in helping create effective change," says Raymond L. Torres, Casey Family Services executive director.

Voice highlights several successful youth advocacy efforts:

Youth Advocacy Day in Connecticut

At the heart of last spring's Youth Advocacy Day at the Connecticut Legislative Building were the personal stories of youth and alumni from foster care. Young people from Casey's Bridgeport and Hartford divisions moderated and participated in a panel discussion for lawmakers, state agency leadership, and the press. The 10 youths focused their messages

on the importance of sibling and birth family connections for those in care, the necessity of adequate legal representation, and the benefits of stable school placements.

Results were both immediate and tangible. Brian Mattiello, then acting commissioner of the Connecticut Department of Children and Families (DCF), invited the youth to join him, newly appointed DCF Commissioner Susan Hamilton, and agency staff in exploring sensible solutions to the issues raised. State Representative Toni Walker challenged the youth to participate in a select committee to inform house members on new legislation – to be presented in the next session – that would address their concerns.

The first Youth Advocacy Day in 2005, also sponsored by Casey, had similar results: DCF allocated funds for a sibling visitation program for youth in foster care.

Fighting Cuts in Rhode Island

The initial release of Governor Donald Carcieri's 2008 proposed state budget called for an end to services at age 18 for youth in foster care. Youth Collaborative (the youth board of the Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative in Rhode Island) and OSSUM (a youth-driven policy and advocacy group) worked together to maintain these critical services.

Young people provided testimony at critical budget hearings, participated in a policy roundtable held at the State House, and, in the final days of the budget process, staged two marches, one of which ended with a sleep-in at the state capitol. The youth organized and spoke at press conferences over



Dahanne and James



David and Dominique



“I WANT TO MAKE IT BETTER FOR THE HUNDREDS OF THOUSANDS OF YOUTH WHO ARE STRUGGLING JUST LIKE ME. I KEEP GOING, NOT JUST TO ADVOCATE FOR MYSELF, BUT FOR MY PEERS AS WELL.”

several months, garnering media attention and building public will. They also participated in direct lobbying of their state representatives and senators.

“The interest from the media was cultivated and sustained by providing ‘meet and greets’ for groups of media and youth,” explains Kat Keenan, policy analyst for Rhode Island KIDS COUNT, a leader in the advocacy effort. “This sparked the human interest side of the story, leading to a photo essay of youth

in the *Providence Journal*. The youth provided a meaningful context for discussing the budget cuts.”

The continued and persistent advocacy of these youth led to the maintenance of categorical age eligibility to age 21 and a partial restoration of funding to provide services when the budget passed.

Informing Massachusetts Reform

Proposed legislation in the Bay State calls for a new cabinet secretary focused solely on child welfare, establishes new educational requirements for social workers and their supervisors, and toughens criminal penalties for mandatory reporters who fail to report abuse and neglect. According to Stevens, youth input into these reforms was crucial in developing the policies.

“Ten years ago, just after the Adoption and Safe Families Act passed, MFFK took 35 youths to testify before a state legislative committee that was created to bring our state statutes up to speed with the new national standards. The kids had a private, day-long hearing and testified one by one about the importance of family connections. When the legislation came out, it was totally focused on family connections, and State Representative John Rogers said the youths’ testimony had the biggest influence on the committee.

“This year, when Representative Rogers chaired a special committee on abuse and neglect to determine how Massachusetts could improve its child welfare system, he invited youth advocates to be ex-officio members of the committee and they greatly informed this new legislation,” Stevens says.

Leading National Foster Care Month

A variety of events during National Foster Care Month last May focused on the urgent needs of children and teens in foster care and included youth voices in activities throughout the country.

Meeting with their Congressional legislators, the FosterClub All-Stars and the National Foster Care Coalition’s Emerging Young Leaders (EYL) shared their experiences and spoke out on behalf of kids in foster care. EYL members also provided advocacy training for more than 200 foster youth who attended the National Foster Parent Association’s national conference in Washington, D.C.

In addition, several of the youngsters took part in a Congressional briefing on the release of the Pew Charitable Trusts’ “Kids are Waiting Report: Time for Reform – Aging Out and On Their Own,” which addresses the growing number of teens leaving foster care without permanent families.

The young people’s motivation for speaking out is both simple and strong: helping tomorrow’s youth lead better lives. “I want to make it better for the hundreds of thousands of youth who are struggling just like me,” said former foster youth Theresa in Washington. “I keep going, not just to advocate for myself, but for my peers as well.”

From legislative hearings to letter-writing campaigns to demonstrations, children and young adults who have experienced foster care speak with earnest and authentic voices that make their appeal for change all the more convincing, according to Torres. He asks: “What could be more fitting than having these experts lead the way to change?”

Creative Transformations: From Refugee to Designer

"Where I come from in Uganda, the children could not even imagine the opportunities I was being offered," says Kahinda, reflecting on her first few months in America.

It had been a long road to those opportunities for Kahinda, however, after a childhood of unimaginable hardship. With thousands of armed rebels roaming the countryside and little or no protection for civilians, life in villages such as Kabukyolwa, where Kahinda was born, was not about opportunity – it was about survival.

Sadly, her parents did not survive the turmoil – both were murdered in a tribal conflict when Kahinda was just 6 years old. She was taken in by an aunt who abused her. After five years and, with the threat of genital mutilation, Kahinda escaped on a food truck to Kampala, Uganda's capital, a six hour drive from her village.

On the streets and alone at 11 years old, she befriended two women who cared for her. Eventually, Kahinda was able to attend school, graduating from high school in three years. When she learned that her aunt was looking for her, she feared for her life, and with the help of friends who were aware of her plight, she finally migrated to the United

States. However, because she was alone and a minor, the Massachusetts Department of Social Services (DSS) took custody of her, placing her, initially, in a DSS foster home. After a time, Kahinda came into the care of Casey Family Services and a Casey foster family.

"SINCE COMING TO AMERICA, THEY HAVE HELPED ME SUCCEED BY USING MY STRENGTHS OF RESILIENCY, DETERMINATION, AND NATURAL TALENT FOR FASHION AND DESIGN."

"Although it was challenging to adapt to life in America, I was determined to make the most of my situation. I wanted to take all the suggestions from my foster mother and my DSS worker so that I could make something of my life," she reflects. With the gift of a sewing machine from her foster

mother, Kahinda created her own clothing, taking the first steps toward making her dreams of fashion design a reality. She also began to paint, indulging another of her passions.

Through the mentoring and advocacy of her Casey social worker, Anita Marshall, Kahinda overcame the cultural, language, and economic barriers refugee children face. She completed a high school diploma, enrolled at Middlesex Community College, and later entered the University of Massachusetts at Amherst. To pursue her passion for art and fashion design, she eventually transferred to the Massachusetts College of Art.

This spring, the art school hosted a fashion show featuring the work of its students, including Kahinda. She was recognized for having achieved the highest honors for design and academic accomplishments, including the Alfred Fiandaca Award for outstanding achievement as a sophomore.

"I was able to share my joy and special moment with my therapist, my DSS worker, and my Casey social worker. Since coming to America, they have helped me succeed by using my strengths of resiliency, determination, and natural talent for fashion and design." While paying homage to her own ability to overcome personal tragedies, Kahinda is mindful of the critical help she received on her journey from refugee to award-winning artist.

A dean's list student, Kahinda, whose designs are featured at the top of this page, will enter her junior year in college this fall. She lives in her own apartment, while maintaining a close connection with her Casey foster family.

UNFULFILLED DREAMS: TOO FEW FOSTER YOUTH PURSUE POST-SECONDARY EDUCATION



Jessica, left, celebrates her graduation with Jennifer McAllister, a social worker at Casey Family Services.

A former foster youth, Jessica is the only one in her family to receive a college degree. The young graduate from New Hampshire beams as she recalls the exhilaration she felt walking across the stage during Boston University's graduation ceremony earlier this year.

"I had a positive learning environment growing up," says Jessica, a former youth in care with Casey Family Services. "People always told me I was smart. They believed in me and pushed me to do my best. College was always a part of my plan."

But, compared to many of her peers growing up in foster care, Jessica is an exception. A white paper, "Educating Children in Foster Care: The McKinney-Vento and No Child Left Behind Acts," by Casey Family Programs, a national operating foundation based in Seattle, Washington, notes that foster youth aspire to attend college on par with their peers who are not in care. Yet, only 37 percent of the youth in foster care who graduate from high school actually go on to attend college; this is in stark contrast to the approximately 60 percent of all high school graduates who attend college, according to the paper.

The Casey paper points out that youth in care traditionally receive little or no help or encouragement along the path to postsecondary education. National data estimate that 74 percent of foster youth complete high school (compared with 86 percent of the general population) and these graduates are five times more likely to do so by earning a GED.

The frequency of moves for youth in foster care makes them particularly vulnerable to academic failures. In contrast to this typical experience of foster youth, children who

have stable family placements and are able to attend school regularly show improved academic performance. According to a 2004 study of Chicago Public School students, youth in foster care experience an approximate loss of three months of academic progress with every change of school. Conversely, in a national study of 1,087 youth who had been in foster care, a single reduction in placement change per year improved graduation rates by 100 percent.

"A CONTINUOUS EDUCATION PLACEMENT – WITH THE SOCIALIZATION AND RELATION- SHIPS IT AFFORDS – IS VITAL TO THE FUTURE SUCCESS OF TODAY'S FOSTER YOUTH."

Lack of educational stability has been high on the list of concerns for youth advocates around the country. In various youth presentations on Capitol Hill during National Foster Care Month and during a May Youth Advocacy Day forum at the Connecticut Legislative Office Building, young presenters shared their frustrations. One young person explained that she had attended three schools during her ninth grade because of disrupted placements. "I made friends and lost them. I felt that I didn't belong anywhere," she told policymakers.

Casey Family Services Clinical Director Diane Kindler corroborates the importance of stability to academic achievement. "The opportunity to remain part of the same family and school is critical for all children, but this stability is particularly vital for

youth in foster care," according to Kindler. "Education is hope and a lifeline for children coming from unsafe or neglectful environments," she says.

At a national level, the U.S. Congress has begun to address this issue with the passage of the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act, which addresses school stability, though primarily for homeless youth. "McKinney-Vento has proven effective in addressing the needs of homeless children and youth," says Sania Metzger, policy director at Casey Family Services. "However, it covers only a fraction of the children in foster care." Education and child advocates contend that school-age children in out-of-home care should be included within the scope of the act. U.S. Senators Norm Coleman (R-MN), Mary Landrieu (D-LA), and Joe Lieberman (I-CT) are also working at the federal level to expand the coverage of McKinney-Vento to include all foster children.

In addition to reauthorizing McKinney-Vento, leading child advocacy organizations are looking to state policies to support foster children in obtaining an adequate education, according to a recent Casey Family Services policy brief prepared for the May Youth Advocacy Day forum in Connecticut. Priorities include expanding the category of children able to access federal McKinney-Vento supports and cost-covered transportation services that would allow foster children placed in a new home to still attend the same school.

In the face of formidable odds, Jessica emphasizes the importance of family and other adult support. "Foster youth who want to go to college need to believe they can do it. We have to know that the option is there for us, and we need family and financial supports to achieve our dreams."

CASEY FOUNDATION SHOWS KIDS NEED FAMILIES TO COUNT ON



For decades, child welfare advocates have asserted that children in foster care need permanent family connections to count on throughout adulthood. Despite this, the concept of “permanence” has yet to become a paramount and defining goal of child welfare systems. The need for that goal to become real is critical and immediate, however, according to the Annie E. Casey Foundation and the findings from its recent *KIDS COUNT Data Book*.

Each year, the Foundation’s *Data Book* provides information and statistical trends on the needs and conditions of America’s most disadvantaged children and families. In addition to its review of traditional indicators, the 2007 report also examines in a landmark essay what can be done to build and strengthen the family relationships that the 726,000 children involved with foster care each year need.

The essay, “Lifelong Family Connections: Supporting Permanence for Children in Foster Care,” looks at how the United States can move toward ensuring lifelong families for all children in care. The essay looks at the increased risks of early parenthood, involvement with the criminal justice system, poverty, and homelessness that are associated with youths who “age out” of the system without solid ties to stable families. Furthermore, it calls on child welfare systems and federal legislators to make significant changes and to support policies that can bring family connections to all children and youth in foster care.

“Placement in foster care should be a means of moving towards a lasting family, with kids going into family settings and their own neighborhoods and living with their siblings

whenever possible,” says Patrick McCarthy, vice president for system and service reform at the Casey Foundation. “Stays should be brief and systems should move youth toward reunification, legal guardianship, or adoption.”

The report also urges child welfare systems to give families and children sufficient post-permanency supports. “A legal connection to a family for a lifetime is just part of the work involved in permanency planning,” says Raymond L. Torres, executive director of Casey Family Services. “Supports that keep families together, safe, and strong after a reunification or an adoption are essential.”

“THE CHALLENGE IS TO MAKE THE EXPECTATIONS THAT WE ALL HOLD FOR OUR OWN FAMILIES THE NORM FOR HOW CHILD WELFARE SYSTEMS OPERATE NATIONALLY.”

The essay, released in July on Capitol Hill, points out that African-American children and older youth in foster care are particularly vulnerable and have the most alarming life outcomes. On a single day in 2005, 33 percent of the children in foster care were African-American, though only 15 percent of all the children in the United States were African American.

Once in foster care, African-American children stay longer in the system – for children entering care in 2000, 23 percent of the African-American children stayed for three

years or more, compared to 13 percent of the white children. The Annie E. Casey Foundation believes that systems can reduce disparities by committing to better preparing case workers and broadening community partnerships with organizations in African-American neighborhoods.

In addition to African-American children, older children in foster care are not finding family permanence. Older youth are expected to remain in care until they “age out,” as more than 22,000 youth did in 2004. To make matters worse, the majority of states have set their discharge or “emancipation” age at 18, despite the reality that many of these teens are not prepared to become independent, thriving adults. The Foundation recommends that child welfare systems make a commitment to children of all ages in finding them family or guardian relationships.

The essay also calls on federally elected officials and policymakers to focus attention on child welfare financing reform, better data collection, and increased accountability to support greater permanence for children in foster care.

“The nation needs to do more than simply talk about the importance of lifelong family connections for children in foster care,” concludes Douglas W. Nelson, Casey Foundation president. “Today, more than ever, children need a loving, stable family they can turn to for a lifetime. The challenge is to make the expectations that we all hold for our own families the norm for how child welfare systems operate nationally.”

2007 KIDS COUNT DATA BOOK: SLIPPING ECONOMIC CONDITIONS FOR CHILDREN



Despite an upward trend in overall child well-being, the economic health of America's families showed significant slippage in the Annie E. Casey Foundation's annual report of state and national research indicators. At mid-decade, the nation's children improved just slightly from 2000, according to the 2007 *KIDS COUNT Data Book*.

The Casey Foundation announced its 18th annual report of child well-being at a Capitol Hill policy briefing hosted by U.S. Senators John Rockefeller (D-WV) and Olympia Snowe (R-ME) and U.S. Representatives Dave Camp (R-MI) and Danny Davis (D-IL) on July 25 in Washington, D.C.

"*KIDS COUNT* contains some good and bad news," says Laura Beavers, research associate at the Annie E. Casey Foundation. "Although well-being indicators have largely gotten better for teens, they've gotten worse for babies. We also see persistent disparities in outcomes for children of color, particularly African Americans."

Improving Conditions for Children

Of the 10 indicators used to compile the national ranking, four showed improvement. Overall, child deaths inched downward, thanks to a general decline in deaths from motor vehicle accidents, the largest cause of child fatalities in the country. Nationally, the rate of teen births continued to drop, resulting in similar reductions in teen pregnancies and abortions. The high school dropout rate was one of the few indicators that exceeded its rate of improvement from the 1990s, dropping nearly 11 percent from 2000 to 2005. In addition, the number of teens who are not working and not enrolled in school also fell by a percentage point.

The infant mortality and teen death rates also improved, though only slightly.

A Decline in Economic Well-Being

According to Douglas W. Nelson, president of the Annie E. Casey Foundation, the United States at mid-decade is lagging behind the steady rates of child well-being improvements that were recorded in the late 1990s.

"ALTHOUGH WELL-BEING INDICATORS HAVE LARGELY GOTTEN BETTER FOR TEENS, THEY'VE GOTTEN WORSE FOR BABIES. WE ALSO SEE PERSISTENT DISPARITIES IN OUTCOMES FOR CHILDREN OF COLOR, PARTICULARLY AFRICAN AMERICANS."

"In some key areas, we are losing ground," Nelson says. "Most alarming is the child poverty rate. In 2005, 19 percent of children (13.4 million) lived in poverty. That represents a 1.2 million increase since 2000." Highlighting the change from the 1990s, between 1994 and 2000, the child poverty rate fell 30 percent, the largest decrease since the 1960s, according to the *Data Book*.

In addition, the rate of children who live with parents who lack a secure year-round job continues to increase, rising from 32 percent in 2000 to 34 percent in 2005. The trend is most significantly felt within the African-American and Native-American

communities where one out of every two children is living in a home where neither parent has gainful employment.

In addition, there was a small increase in the percentage of children living in single-parent families, up a point in 2005 from 2000. Sixty-five percent of African-American children lived in households with one parent, compared to 36 percent of Latinos and 23 percent of non-Hispanic whites.

The indicators repeatedly speak to the vulnerable position of children of color in the United States. While the rate of low-weight births (less than 5.5 pounds) in 2004 reached its highest point since 1969 at 8.1 percent, black infants are twice as likely to have a low birth weight when compared to other racial or ethnic groups.

Data for Change

"Each year, the release of the *KIDS COUNT Data Book* is an important milestone within the child welfare community," says Raymond L. Torres, the executive director of Casey Family Services, the Casey Foundation's direct service agency. "*KIDS COUNT* is a trusted source for policymakers, practitioners, researchers, and advocates throughout the country. Nationwide, our partners are telling us that the unbiased presentation of indicators makes it an essential resource for the field."

In an independent research survey of state legislative leaders, 60 percent reported that *KIDS COUNT* had a direct impact on public policy.

To view the latest *KIDS COUNT Data Book*, visit www.aecf.org.



KIM STEVENS, PRESIDENT AND FOUNDER, RAISING CHILDREN'S VOICES

Close-up

Kim Stevens is the president and founder of Raising Children's Voices, a nonprofit organization empowering youth to engage in their own advocacy work. She developed and managed the Massachusetts Speak-Out Team, a noted group of young advocates that has been instrumental in changing child welfare policy in Massachusetts and training other youth around the country to self-advocate. In addition to two birth children, Stevens and her husband adopted four children from foster care. Today, she works with Community Champions Network, a grassroots development project of the North American Council on Adoptable Children funded through Jockey International to develop and implement post-adoption services.

VOICE: *How did the Speak-Out Team start?*

STEVENS: Massachusetts Families for Kids (MFFK) wanted to start both an adult and a youth advocacy group, and the adult effort never got off the ground. The youth initiative did and, eventually, became the Speak-Out Team. I invited the seven kids I knew to our first "party," and we decided to "put it out there." We created a youth team, with members ranging in age from preteens to early 20s, that would be available to talk about being in foster care with parents, professionals, and other kids.

VOICE: *What issues did youth identify?*

STEVENS: The impact of race and culture on adopted kids, the importance of sibling relationships, the chance to have a say in what was happening in their lives, and the need for family connections to be maintained. We had seven different perspectives since each young person had confronted at least one of these issues living in the system.

VOICE: *How did you get Speak-Out Team bookings?*

STEVENS: Through folks that MFFK worked with in its four locations. We launched the team at a legislative event on post-adoption services. Four youth spoke

from their own experiences about the need for post-adoption support. Each time we were invited to speak, we'd get new kids who were interested in the topics. We went from seven to 130 kids in a seven-year period.

VOICE: *Was there a process for accepting youth on the Speak-Out Team?*

STEVENS: We had no applications. Anyone who worked with us was automatically a team member. The Speak-Out Team was not about any particular category of kids. Kids in foster care, kinship care, kids who were adopted out of foster care or from other countries – all were welcome. We also helped other groups with their advocacy efforts. For example, we connected with a program in which all of the kids identified as gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, or questioning, and we often joined forces with them in advocacy work.

VOICE: *Do all youth have the ability to share their individual voices?*

STEVENS: Yes, absolutely. Not every young person can speak to an audience. Not everyone can write a story. But any youth can contribute. For example, my daughter Tanya did a lot of art work – collages and photography – that we used at our events. A group of kids made masks for Boston's First Night parade, and some team members trained others in computer skills.

One young woman, Lindsay, never came to our events but came to our weekend retreats and summertime parties. The kids on the team got to know her and, when they would do a presentation, they'd share concerns on her behalf. So, everyone had a voice.

VOICE: *How did you prepare the youth?*

STEVENS: My bias is not to over prepare the kids. They are the experts on their own lives. It's my job to know enough about them to help them see the relevant parts to share. I used to ask kids to write up their stories but many would have trouble reading or following what they wrote at the podium. If public speaking is the goal, I've learned that my writing down the story while they speak is the way to go. With the Speak-Out Team, I sat down with each presenter and asked the youth to share whatever he or she wanted while I typed on my notebook. If someone got stuck, I'd ask open-ended questions to help refocus. When a youth finished, I would read it back to him or her and, if needed, correct. The story was completely in the individual's own voice, and that made it comfortable to share.

ONE BY ONE, THEY SPOKE ABOUT THE IMPORTANCE OF FAMILIES AND THAT EVERY KID HAS A RIGHT TO A FAMILY.



VOICE: *How do you ensure that youth presenters don't share too much and feel over-exposed or uncomfortable?*

STEVENS: In terms of sharing too much, the message doesn't necessarily have to be personalized if their past experience is too painful or uncomfortable. I help them identify areas where they might be self-defeating. They can always say, "I know someone who..." or "I've met kids who..." and speak in more general terms.

The most risk comes during questions and answers with an audience. When young people are addressed directly, they usually feel that they have to answer, and that's when they run the risk of revealing too much. I always moderate questions from the audience. As soon as someone asks a question, I repeat it out loud so everyone can hear. Then, I will direct the question to the appropriate youth participant. In some cases, when the question is too direct or too sensitive – such as a question on a sexual abuse scenario – I'll rephrase it in a way that deals with the issue and doesn't make the youth reveal too much and feel hurt later. The adult facilitator's role always is to protect the dignity of the youth.

VOICE: *What are a few of the memorable advocacy efforts of the Speak-Out Team?*

STEVENS: When the federal Adoption and Safe Families Act (ASFA) first passed, Massachusetts created a committee to look at what it needed to be in compliance. The committee held a day-long, private hearing, at which 35 advocates spoke. They ranged in age from 13 to 32, and had a wide vari-

ety of experiences with the system. Before the hearing, we wrote up the testimony from each youth and put it into a book for legislators.

THE YOUTH HAVE ALL BEEN THROUGH SIMILAR EXPERIENCES – THEY START OUT WITH A SORT OF "ONE-NESS" – A SENSE THAT THEY ALL UNDERSTAND SOMETHING ABOUT THEMSELVES THAT OTHERS DO NOT.

The legislators had been thinking about setting up orphanages or group homes to take care of foster kids who didn't have homes. One by one, the kids stated that group homes were not the answer. One by one, they spoke about the importance of families and that every kid has a right to a family. When the legislation came out in 1998, it was totally focused on family connections. The legislators also committed to doing criminal record check waivers to make it easier for relatives to find kids who had been separated from family while in state care. There also was a significant emphasis on permanent families in the legislation and nothing on group homes. Chairman John Rogers said that the young people who testified had the biggest influence on the committee.

Nearly 10 years after ASFA, another special committee on abuse and neglect was formed to find out how they could improve

the system. Once again, Rogers invited the Speak-Out Team to provide testimony at a three-day hearing on how to make the system better for kids. Before he adjourned the hearing, he invited the kids to be ex-officio members of the committee to help inform the legislation.

VOICE: *Describe the relationships among the team members.*

STEVENS: The Speak-Out Team taught me so much about generosity. I discovered that misery does not love company. Sharing their past with other adopted kids or kids in foster care did not make these kids feel worse. None of them ever tried to bring each other down. Each experience they had, they used to reach out to other kids on the team to help them achieve more and to do the right things.

VOICE: *Was that a result of what you did?*

STEVENS: I think it was a natural thing. We didn't really do anything specific. The youth have all been through similar experiences – they start out with a sort of "oneness" – a sense that they all understand something about themselves that others do not. We would go to other states to help start youth speak-out teams and all these kids who had never met bonded immediately. It was amazing. I believe adults need to trust that organic process instead of trying to orchestrate and control everything.

The Chafee ETV Program: A Six-State Review

View from Washington



*by Robin Nixon, Executive
Director, National Foster
Care Coalition*

Each year, 20,000 to 25,000 young people “age out” of the foster care system without a lifelong connection to a stable family. According to recent studies, these former foster youth are more likely to suffer from mental health problems, become involved in crime or be victims of crime, and are more frequently homeless than their peers. In addition, they are likely to be unemployed and, when employed, earn, on average, too little to escape poverty.

Federally funded educational and training vouchers available through the federal Chafee Educational and Training Voucher Program (Chafee ETV Program) can help improve these statistics by assisting youth in beginning, continuing, or completing post-secondary education or vocational training. The Chafee ETV Program makes up to \$5,000 per year available to meet the post-secondary education and training needs of youth “aging out” of foster care or those adopted from foster care and enrolled in a qualified program. Reaching their educational goals leads to more successful transitions to adulthood and increases their chances for personal fulfillment and economic self-sufficiency. In order to promote effective implementation of this important program and to support states in program improvement efforts, the National Foster Care Coalition (NFCC) recently published a report on ETV implementation in six states.

NFCC Report on ETV Implementation in Six States

NFCC’s recent publication examines the effectiveness of educational and training vouchers (ETVs) and other state-based supports for young adults transitioning from foster care and enrolling in post-secondary education and training programs. NFCC has worked closely with six states to examine the implementation of the Chafee ETV Program since its inception four years ago.

The states featured in the publication include: California, Maine, Montana, New York, North Carolina, and Wyoming. States were selected based on NFCC’s desire to create a broad picture of diverse state systems and populations of young people in care. The states profiled in the report include both state-administered and county-administered child welfare systems, rural and urban populations, and both very large and very small populations of eligible foster youth.

Several of the profiled states administer the ETV program directly through the child welfare system, and several utilize either other state agencies (such as the California Student Aid Commission) or a third-party independent organization (New York and North Carolina work with the Orphan Foundation of America). Information also is provided about young people’s experiences with the program, as are recommendations from constituents and other stakeholders on how to improve this unique and important post-secondary education and training program.

In addition to a Chafee ETV Program overview and recommendations for its improvement, there are six state sections, each of which feature:

- a state profile,
- an overview of the state Chafee Foster Care Independence Program (CFCIP),
- an overview of the state Chafee ETV Program,
- challenges encountered,
- noteworthy practices, and
- positive outcomes.

While all of the states experienced significant challenges in getting the ETV programs up and running, all have made tremendous progress and are serving increasing numbers of youth each year. Areas that remain challenging include outreach to all eligible youth (especially adopted youth, who are eligible for ETV if they were adopted from foster care at age 16 or older), as well as funding and implementing additional support services to increase student retention and graduation rates. Exciting innovations include web-based application and outreach systems; effective collaboration among child welfare staff, post-secondary institution and financial aid personnel, and community service providers; and comprehensive student support programs that help to ensure student success.

We are hopeful that this publication will be a resource for states engaged in strengthening implementation of their ETV programs.

*You can download the NFCC report at
www.nationalfostercare.org.*

Resource Corner

Connections Count: Resources Connecting Foster Teens with Families for Life

Produced by the Annie E. Casey Foundation/Casey Family Services, *Connections Count* is an electronic newsletter focusing on best practices information, tools, research, and data emerging on youth permanency in child welfare at local, state, and national levels. *Connections Count* highlights successful youth permanency work achieved by states following their participation in the 2006 National Convening on Youth Permanence, strategies for overcoming barriers to permanence, and peer-to-peer exchanges about successes and challenges reported by on-the-ground staff, administrators, youth, and their families.

To view, or subscribe to future issues, visit www.caseyfamilyservices.org.

2007 KIDS COUNT Data Book and Essay

Each year, the Annie E. Casey Foundation's *KIDS COUNT Data Book* provides information and statistical trends on the needs and conditions of America's most disadvantaged children and families. The essay accompanying this year's release, "Lifelong Family Connections: Supporting Permanence for Children in Foster Care," looks at how the United States can move towards having all children who are in foster care become part of a lifelong family. The Foundation calls on child welfare systems and federal legislators to make significant changes and support policies that bring family connections to foster care.

To receive a copy of the 2007 Data Book and essay, visit www.kidscount.org.



"African-American Children in Foster Care: Additional HHS Assistance Needed to Help States Reduce the Proportion in Care"

A significantly greater proportion of African-American children are in foster care than children of other races and ethnicities, according to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and other research. A recent report from the U.S. Government Accountability Office found that a higher rate of poverty is among several factors contributing to the greater proportion of African-American children entering and remaining in foster care. African-American children also stay in foster care longer because of difficulties in recruiting adoptive parents and the unwillingness of relative caregivers to terminate parental rights and adopt.

To view the full report, visit www.gao.gov/docsearch/abstract.php?rptno=GAO-07-816.

"School Engagement and Youth Who Run Away from Care: The Need for Cross-System Collaboration"

To better understand factors that impact the educational experiences and choices of youth in care, the Chapin Hall Center for Children presents the voices of youth who ran away from their foster placements and the perspectives of adults who care for or

work with these youth. Qualitative data from two earlier studies were re-analyzed in an effort to better understand the complex factors or systems that influence school engagement for youth in care, particularly youth who run away from their placements. Findings reveal missed opportunities for helping to support the educational aspirations of a vulnerable group of youth.

For more information, visit www.chapinhall.org.

Beyond the Foster Care System: The Future for Teens

Betsy Krebs and Paul Pitcoff, who cofounded the Youth Advocacy Center in New York City, recently released *Beyond the Foster Care System: The Future for Teens*. The book follows the authors' journeys as professionals and highlights the stories of others, demonstrating unique approaches to providing foster care services.

Implementing Differential Response in California

This report from Casey Family Programs details how California counties used the Breakthrough Series Collaborative (BSC) model to implement differential response strategies involving families referred to child welfare systems. The report outlines the overall training and technical assistance effort; explains the BSC methodology; describes key strategies and practices that resulted from county testing, and offers success stories; highlights lessons learned about the importance of organizational culture change; and suggests next steps for implementing, spreading, and institutionalizing differential response practice.

To view the report, visit www.casey.org.

What the Media Say

Strong Family Relationships Key for Foster Children

The [KIDS COUNT] report found over 22,000 children aged out of foster care without finding a permanent family. ... A loving family is exactly what Sonya Merrill wanted to provide. "Seeing the fruit of these kids just blossom after being given a chance and having a family, and seeing them go from anger to love, from stressed out to calm; that's so rewarding. They now feel they belong to someone and can say: 'I'm a human being that matters,'" says Merrill, [who works with Casey Family Services].

CBS KMEG 14
Sioux City, Iowa
July 17, 2007

Say Hello to the Intentional Dads

One of the distinct challenges for adoptive dads, as well as adoptive moms, is dealing with the inevitable questions their children ask about their backgrounds.

"Children want to know their own story," says Sarah Greenblatt, director of the Casey Center for Effective Child Welfare Practice at Casey Family Services in New Haven. "Their story is more complex, perhaps, and the most successful dads are able to talk honestly and openly with their children when the time is right. It really takes men who understand how much these children need parents."

The New Haven Register
New Haven, Connecticut
June 7, 2007

Baby Boomers and Foster Parenting

Michelle Violette couldn't say enough about the support Casey Family Services provided for her family, a sentiment echoed by other Casey clients. The organization provides classes, support groups, and people who can be reached around the clock. "Sometimes people have jobs," said Michelle. "These people care about kids."

Mark Millar, Maine division director for Casey Family Services, said baby boomers, such as Michelle, make ideal caregivers. "Boomers often have the additional time, resources, and the life experience to make them a valuable resource," Millar said. "Empty nesters who have raised children have the skill set."

The Current
Scarborough, Maine
June 28, 2007

Poverty, low-weight births take toll on youngest

Fewer teenagers in the USA are giving birth each year, and the high school dropout rate is steadily declining. But the percentage of babies born with a low birth weight is greater than

ever, and more children are living in poverty and single-parent families.

These findings from a study from July suggest that indicators of well-being have improved for the nation's teenagers but worsened for babies, says Laura Beavers of the Baltimore-based Annie E. Casey Foundation.

USA Today
August 6, 2007

Program to Serve as State Model

A pilot program that was tried out in Waterbury, Connecticut, for two years will be used by state officials to address the disproportionately high number of black and Hispanic kids in foster care. The Department of Children and Families (DCF) has figures showing that minority children make up the majority of children in the foster care system.

During the Waterbury program, officials met with children, parents, and community leaders to discuss how and why black and Hispanics end up in foster care. They worked out strategies to reverse the trend.

Officials chose Waterbury as the site because it was a large urban center with demographics similar to those found statewide, said

Siobhan Trotman, a DCF program director who oversaw the program in conjunction with the Annie E. Casey Foundation.

The Associated Press
August 14, 2007



For additional important dates, visit www.caseyfamilyservices.org.

2007

2007: Important Dates

Voice is published quarterly by Casey Family Services, the direct service agency of the Annie E. Casey Foundation, 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 the Annie E. Casey Foundation, including Casey Family Services.

The Annie E. Casey Foundation is a private charitable organization established in 1948 by UPS 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 permanence-focused foster care, post-adoption services, family reunification, family preservation, family advocacy and support, family resource centers, assistance to young families, and nationwide 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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Extending the Conversation

With a vision of sharing ideas and insights, the Voice editorial staff welcomes feedback from its readers. Please feel free to contact us with your story ideas, requests for additional information on topics covered, and updated subscription information. The editor can be reached by sending an email to voice@caseyfamilyservices.org or calling 203.401.6940.

September 19-22

“Growing Pains 2007”
National Independent Living Conference
Daniel Memorial Institute
Adam’s Mark Hotel
Denver, Colorado
www.danielkids.org/sites/web/content.cfm?id=276

September 24-26

“Crisis in Child Welfare: Strengthening Public Practice and Policy”
Mid-Atlantic Region Training Conference
Child Welfare League of America
Sheraton City Baltimore Hotel
Baltimore, Maryland
www.cwla.org/conferences/2007midatlanticcrfp.htm

September 30-October 2

“It’s My Life” Conference
Casey Family Programs
Atlanta, Georgia
www.casey.org/Resources/Projects/ItsMyLife

September 30-October 3

“Training Shines in the Lone Star State”
Professional Development Institute
National Staff Development and Training Association
Crown Plaza
Addison, Texas
nsdta.aphsa.org/pro_dev_inst.htm

October 17-19

Alliance for Children and Families National Conference
Alliance for Children and Families
Anaheim Marriot Hotel
Anaheim, California
www.alliance1.org

October 15-19

Advanced Analytics for Child Welfare Administration Course
Chapin Hall Center for Children and the Center for State Foster Care and Adoption Data
The University of Chicago Gleacher Center
Chicago, Illinois
www.about.chapinhall.org/conferences/analytics2007/conference.html

October 26-27

“Juvenile Justice Reform: 40 Years after Gault” Symposium
Boalt School of Law, University of California Berkeley, California
www.law.berkeley.edu/centers/bccj/conferences

November

National Adoption Month

November 14-16

2007 Conference on Differential Response in Child Welfare
American Humane
Long Beach, California
www.americanhumane.org

November 17

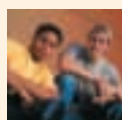
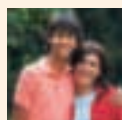
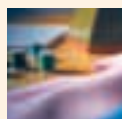
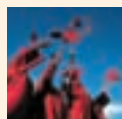
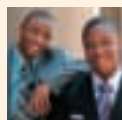
National Adoption Day



THE ANNIE E. CASEY FOUNDATION

Voice

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