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Fostering Connections Act Promises New Opportunities for Child Welfare Reform

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From the Desk of Raymond L. Torres

Unlike any other time in my career, vulnerable families and the field of child welfare stand together facing unquestionable challenges. The nation's economy and the very financial institutions that once fueled our progress have faltered in a manner not witnessed in generations, and the damage is engulfing millions of American families and nearly all the public systems created to protect them.

Nonetheless, this moment also offers a unique opportunity to better the lives of America's children and families. As I speak with child welfare commissioners, social workers, and advocates across the country, I am inspired by a heightened resolve to support children and families through this economic downturn. I believe practitioners have new hope for the people they serve, thanks to new federal legislation that focuses on family connections, permanence, and well-being.

Last October, Congress passed the most significant child welfare reform legislation in 30 years. The Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act further establishes the priority of relationships between children and relative caregivers and expands the rights of those in state care. It also empowers Native American tribes to administer their own foster care and adoption assistance programs.

Congress also strengthened the safety net for working families earlier this year when it reauthorized and expanded the State Children's Health Insurance Program – providing health care to 4.1 million low-income children who otherwise would have been uninsured.

This May, National Foster Care Month holds special significance for me because it commemorates a new era in foster care. While social workers, policymakers, and resource families will work alongside families in their communities as they always have, I do hope they stop to celebrate what they have accomplished with this new legislation, and look forward to all that they can achieve in the future.

Raymond L. Torres
Vice President, The Annie E. Casey Foundation &
Executive Director, Casey Family Services

CHILD WELFARE REFORM: FULFILLING THE POTENTIAL FOR CHANGE

OVER THE PAST YEAR, CASEY HAS INTENSIFIED ITS EFFORTS TO SPUR POLICY REFORMS THAT IMPROVE OUTCOMES FOR VULNERABLE CHILDREN AND FAMILIES.



All children need and deserve a loving, lasting family that offers unconditional support. Yet more than 800,000 American children spend time in foster care each year, often separated not only from parents, but from siblings, extended family, and their schools and communities. Many stay in the system for years without being safely reunited with family, adopted, or placed into permanent guardianship. Tragically, some are removed from parents who could have cared for them had they received basic services and supports. All too often, teenagers leave the system without a family to support their critical transition to adulthood.

Today's economic crisis threatens to disrupt even more struggling families, further taxing overburdened child welfare systems and making it imperative that every dollar is invested wisely. Over the past year, Casey has intensified its efforts to spur policy reforms that improve outcomes for vulnerable children and families.

"With dollars stretched tight, it's critical that policies and programs aimed at children and youth reflect our knowledge about

what works," says Douglas W. Nelson, president of the Annie E. Casey Foundation.

The Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act, passed in 2008, is the most significant child welfare legislation enacted since 1980 and an important vehicle to advance the goal of a permanent, loving family for every child. It reflects many principles Casey champions, including involvement of extended family in making decisions and providing permanence for children, extended support for youth transitioning out of care to age 21, increased adoption incentives and assistance, and greater accountability for child welfare agencies. Casey and its grantees and partners played a key role in demonstrating the need for reform and supporting advocacy efforts that led to the law's enactment.

While the law provides critical new resources and protections, its impact will depend largely on state implementation. Several key provisions are optional or will require new state investment, raising concerns that states won't fully implement the reforms Fostering Connections authorizes. The Casey

Foundation – through its direct services and grant-making work – is committed to helping states navigate and implement the law.

"Making sure states have the knowledge, resources, and tools to implement the legislation effectively is our number one priority," says Robert Geen, a senior fellow specializing in child welfare issues at the Foundation.

"Our primary goal as a Foundation is to promote principles such as prevention, permanence, and equity," says Sania Metzger, director of policy for Casey Family Services.

Support for implementation

Fostering Connections offers opportunities for states to use federal funds to extend subsidized guardianship benefits; extend foster care and support adoption and guardianship benefits past age 18; provide enhanced incentives for adoption, including those for special needs children; increase resources to train child welfare professionals; and extend resources for Native American tribes to care for their children.

Del Escritorio de Raymond L. Torres



En forma que no hes visto previamente en mi carrera presentemente muchas familias vulnerables y las instituciones de bienestar del niño están enfrentando desafíos enormes. La economía de la nación y las instituciones financieras que anteriormente apoyaron nuestro progreso han fallado en una manera que no se ha experimentado a lo largo de generaciones y el daño está alcanzando a millones de familias Americanas y a casi todas las estructuras públicas creadas para protegerlos.

Sin embargo, este momento actual también ofrece una oportunidad única para mejorar la vida de los niños y familias de nuestra América. Al hablar con los directores de bienestar del niño, con trabajadores sociales y abogados a lo largo del país, me quedo alentado por la resolución para apoyar a familias y niños durante este periodo mientras la economía va cuesta abajo. Creo que los profesionales dedicados tengan esperanza para la gente con quienes trabajan, gracias a legislación federal nueva con enfoque especial en lazos familiares, la permanencia y el bienestar.

El Octubre pasado, el Congreso de los Estados Unidos aprobó la reforma legislativa más importante en cuanto al bienestar del niño en los últimos 30 años. Esta legislación sobre la Promoción de Lazos para el Éxito y el Aumento de Adopciones (en inglés, The Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act) establece la prioridad de la relación entre niños y parientes cuidadores y amplifica los derechos de las personas en cuidado del Estado. También Nativos Americanos tendrán más control sobre la administración de sus propios programas de cuidado de crianza y adopción.

También, más temprano este año, el Congreso fortaleció la red de seguridad para familias obreras al volver a autorizar y ampliar el Programa Estatal de Seguro de Salud para Niños (State Children's Health Insurance Program) proporcionando el seguro de salud a 4.1 millones de niños en familias de bajos ingresos, quienes habrían quedado sin seguro.

Este mes de Mayo, El Mes Nacional de Cuidado de Crianza tiene significancia especial para mí porque conmemora una época nueva en el sistema de cuidado de crianza. Mientras trabajadores sociales, representantes políticos y familias ayudantes seguirán trabajando al lado de las familias en sus comunidades como siempre lo han hecho, espero que tomen el tiempo para celebrar todo lo que han logrado con esta legislación nueva, y consideren todo lo que podrán lograr en el futuro próximo.

Raymond L. Torres

Vice Presidente, La Fundación Annie E. Casey &

Director Ejecutivo, Casey Family Services

It also establishes new requirements to:

- Notify relatives about opportunities to step in when children are removed from their parents and placed in foster care.
- Expand efforts to place siblings together or otherwise ensure they have significant interaction.
- Mandate the development of transition plans for young people emancipating from the system; and
- Ensure educational stability and health care coordination to meet children's needs.



Casey is working to help states take advantage of the law's provisions and recognize that the long-term benefits far outweigh the costs. The Foundation and its partners also are supporting evidence-based practices to ensure that new protections offered by the law are implemented effectively.

One way the law advances the goal of permanence, Metzger explains, is by allocating new federal dollars for subsidized guardianship, which until now has been funded mainly by states and which provides financial assistance to relatives who become legal guardians for children whose parents cannot care for them. Subsidized guardianship provides a permanent family connection and allows children who would otherwise be in foster care greater contact with birth parents, siblings, and their communities. Unlike adoption, subsidized guardianship doesn't require termination of parental rights, leaving the door open should birth parents' circumstances improve to allow for safe reunification.

To date, 37 states and the District of Columbia operate subsidized guardianship programs, and the hope is that more states will now use federal funds available for that purpose. However, the law's guardianship provisions are narrowly written, allowing relatives caring for children to qualify only if they are, or are willing to become, licensed foster parents.

Casey's networks can play an advocacy role to extend the law to more relative caregivers and "get the word out" about how the law's training funds can be used to educate prospective guardians, child welfare professionals, and court personnel, Metzger adds.

SUBSIDIZED GUARDIANSHIP PROVIDES A PERMANENT FAMILY CONNECTION AND ALLOWS CHILDREN WHO WOULD OTHERWISE BE IN FOSTER CARE GREATER CONTACT WITH BIRTH PARENTS, SIBLINGS, AND THEIR COMMUNITIES.

States also should tap training dollars to reduce the disproportionately high numbers of children of color in the system and collect data to gauge progress in disparities in services, treatment, and outcomes.

Ensuring effective implementation of provisions to notify relatives and keep siblings together also is important. "One role for us is to raise awareness of what these provisions allow and what they really mean," says Metzger. "Research shows that if children are involved with relatives early on, there is a greater chance of reducing the number of placements or shortening the stays of racial and ethnic minority children in care."

Opportunities for influence

While Fostering Connections focuses almost entirely on children in foster care, the majority of children that come to the attention of child welfare agencies do not need and are not immediately placed in protective custody. Yet, the existing federal financing infrastructure is weighted heavily toward supporting foster care rather than encouraging states to prevent placement.

To improve long-term outcomes, the system must be revamped to focus more heavily on prevention. The Foundation and its partners support reforms that would provide more funding and flexibility for innovative

practices – such as "differential response" – that help families address problems that put children at risk of placement.

Many other legislative and policy proposals can help ease stresses that may lead to a child's removal, from home visitation and training for vulnerable parents to expanding family economic success strategies such as the Earned Income Tax Credit and special savings programs. The Foundation is working with the Center for the Study of Social Policy (CSSP) to help states integrate their child welfare and family economic success strategies.

In addition, the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, State Children's Health Insurance Program, Homeowner Affordability and Stability Plan, and Promise Neighborhoods Initiative offer resources designed to stabilize and support fragile families. But time is of the essence, and the Foundation is mobilizing technical assistance to ensure that resources reach the people and places most in need.

With Casey support, CSSP has launched a new website, www.PolicyforResults.org, which provides guidance to state decision-makers on how to best use resources from the recovery package and avoid short-sighted cuts to long-term intervention strategies.

SOCIAL INVESTMENT STRATEGY OFFERS STABILITY TO CHILDREN AND FAMILIES



When Gail Lyman, age 46, was looking to leave a difficult relationship and buy a new home for herself and her 10-year-old son, she sought assistance from the Franklin Asset Building Coalition. The coalition, led by the New Hampshire Division of Casey Family Services, operates Volunteer Income Tax Assistance (VITA) sites that provide free tax preparation services to help low- to moderate-income residents keep more of their money and assist people who qualify for the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC). The coalition also offers a special savings program that helps families put away money for a home, pay for college, or build financial assets.

To pay for the closing costs on her new home, Lyman used money she saved via a “Smart CD” developed by coalition partner Franklin Savings Bank. Banks initially developed products such as the Smart CD to fulfill Community Reinvestment Act requirements to help struggling families who may feel they can’t afford to save and don’t feel comfortable at banks.

“I was able to put money into it little by little,” says Lyman, also the director of a community action program that is among several coalition partners. “I needed every penny I had to buy my home.”

A person can open a Smart CD by investing \$100 and then add deposits of as little as \$5. If the CD remains open six months, Casey Family Services provides a \$100 match. The bank provides another \$100 match for CDs open a year. The CD also earns an annual interest rate significantly higher than

a standard savings account (currently 3.25 percent a year.)

“If people are willing to take that chance and put \$100 away, the bank feels it is important to invest with them,” says Melissa Mansfield, the Franklin Savings Bank’s Community Reinvestment Act officer. “We’re hoping it shows that if people work hard and save, they can achieve their goals of furthering their education or homeownership.”

In recognition of the relationship between the coalition and Casey Family Services, the Annie E. Casey Foundation recently deposited a \$100,000 social investment in Franklin Savings Bank. Social investing uses the Foundation’s endowment dollars to generate a financial return and support its investments, such as community-based implementation of innovative, cost-effective programs to improve outcomes for vulnerable children and families.

“Social investments are an additional philanthropic tool to complement our grant-making strategy,” says Christa Velasquez, director of social investments at the Foundation. “It is a way Casey is able to utilize more of our assets – specifically our endowment – toward our mission.”

By the end of 2009, the Foundation will have increased its social investments from \$6 million in 2002 to almost \$66 million. The bulk of these investments are either Mission-Related Deposits – typically structured as market rate insured certificates of deposit or share certificates – made to

financial institutions or Program-Related Investments – generally below-market rate loans, loan guarantees, or equity investments that support charitable purposes aligned with the Foundation’s mission.

In Franklin, an economically struggling former mill city of about 8,000 residents, the Foundation’s Mission-Related Deposit “is putting our money where our mouth is” because the Franklin Asset Building Coalition is “trying to effect change” says Cary Gladstone, community liaison for Casey’s New Hampshire Division.

“Casey’s research has found that stable housing and economic opportunities reduce the risk of family blowups and children living in neglectful or abusive situations,” says Gladstone. “How do we achieve stability? One of the most effective tools for getting the working poor out of poverty is the Earned Income Tax Credit.”

“The Franklin Asset Building Coalition VITA program initially focused on the EITC because of the significant return it can provide to families,” explains Gladstone. The next step involved using volunteer “money coaches” at VITA sites to link people to asset-building resources. “You’ve got to provide the counseling, specifics on how the dollars add up, and encouragement.”

VITA sites have helped many families in Franklin, which was struggling with shuttered factories and rising unemployment long before the current recession. “I can’t see people spending \$250 to have a company prepare their tax return when our VITA

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—CHRISTA VELASQUEZ

sites can do it for free,” says Lyman. “It’s the best thing that’s happened.”

In 2009, the coalition prepared more than 270 federal tax returns for low- and moderate-income people, more than 40 percent of whom were eligible for the EITC. Since the coalition’s VITA sites opened seven years ago, federal refunds of over \$1.7 million, including more than \$700,000 in EITC, have been returned to the community.

In addition to the investment in Franklin, the Foundation has made three Mission-Related Deposits in other communities served by Casey Family Services, including:

- Jeanne D’Arc Credit Union in Lowell, Massachusetts, a partner on financial literacy, an EITC campaign, and outreach to Cambodian and Hispanic immigrant communities.
- Key Bank in Portland, Maine, an EITC campaign partner.
- Opportunities Credit Union in Burlington, Vermont, which offers EITC-related financial products.

In 2007, the Casey Foundation also made a Program-Related Investment, a \$2 million low-interest loan, to Coastal Enterprises, Inc. (CEI) of Maine. CEI is a private, nonprofit community development financial institution whose work in Maine’s northern counties, which are affected by high unemployment and poverty rates, aligns with the Foundation’s Rural Family Economic Success initiative. CEI’s work in rural areas includes developing small businesses, natural



“ONE OF THE MOST EFFECTIVE TOOLS FOR GETTING THE WORKING POOR OUT OF POVERTY IS THE EARNED INCOME TAX CREDIT.” — CARY GLADSTONE

resources industries, community facilities, and affordable housing to create jobs.

The Foundation’s Program-Related Investment also helped CEI attract an additional \$1.2 million because it signaled to other investors that CEI met rigorous financial and programmatic requirements, says Tracy Kartye, a social investment analyst at the Foundation. CEI has now raised \$9.2 million toward its \$10 million goal for 2009 to fund its work in northern Maine.

Mark Millar, director of Casey Family Services’ Maine Division, says that the Program-Related Investment is a good example of “cross-program collaboration,” because it draws on the Foundation’s Rural Family Economic Success initiative, social investment work, direct services, and CEI’s efforts.

The Foundation and Casey Family Services have partnered with CEI for several years on other rural family economic success efforts, including free tax assistance and financial literacy, designed to improve the lives of disadvantaged children and families.

“A good Program-Related Investment is used in conjunction with a number of different initiatives,” says Millar. “It’s one more tool to use in helping low-income families in rural areas achieve enhanced financial stability.”

For Gail Lyman, the Franklin Savings Bank program that helped her save for a home has reaped very concrete returns. “It helped me to become a stronger person and, for my son, it brought stability and a much happier childhood.”

UNIQUE CHALLENGES FOR IMMIGRANT FAMILIES IN THE CHILD WELFARE SYSTEM

IN MANY JURISDICTIONS, CHILD WELFARE PROFESSIONALS ARE NOT PREPARED TO MEET THE SPECIAL NEEDS OF IMMIGRANT FAMILIES WHO DO NOT SPEAK ENGLISH... AND HAVE LITTLE KNOWLEDGE OF THEIR RIGHTS AND RESPONSIBILITIES AS PARENTS IN AMERICA.

SCENARIO: After police were called to intervene in a domestic dispute, a mother from Guatemala says, "In my country when a government employee knocks on your door, a family member disappears. I came to this country to give my children a better life, but all they see is someone who doesn't speak English, who doesn't know anything. They think we don't care about our families. They took my daughter and did nothing to help me."

SCENARIO: A caseworker who did not speak Chinese came to the house, explains an immigrant mother. "I sent my daughter to talk to her; I thought she was a missionary. All my daughter said was that she would call me back. I later found out the school had reported me for abuse because I punished my daughter for misbehaving. No one ever explained what was going on to me, only to my daughter."

These scenarios reflect the experiences of many immigrant families who come to the attention of child welfare service providers. These families often have little understanding and considerable fear of the formal social service system. Furthermore, service providers who work with immigrants face

unique challenges, such as cultural differences in parenting styles and expectations, and language barriers.

Immigration increases nationwide

Immigration has been a defining feature of the United States throughout its history, and children currently represent one of the fastest-growing immigrant subgroups. In fact, they are expected to constitute 30 percent of the nation's school population by 2015.

Approximately 80 percent of children in immigrant families – and 93 percent of those under age 5 – were born in the United States and are entitled to support as citizens. And although immigrant children enter the child welfare system for the same reasons as native children – poverty, domestic violence, substance abuse, health and mental health problems – challenges such as linguistic and social isolation, limited economic resources, and low educational attainment may place these children at greater risk of growing up without opportunities to succeed. Consider these facts:

- Poverty rates generally are higher among children of immigrants than among native

children. According to an Urban Institute report in 2005, 27 percent of all young children in immigrant families are poor, compared with 19 percent in native families. Even in two-parent families, one in five young children of immigrants lives below the federal poverty line – triple the rate for children with United States-born parents.

- Young children of immigrants are less likely to receive public benefits and are more likely to be uninsured, reported in fair or poor health, and lacking access to preventive health care.

Systemic challenges

In many jurisdictions, child welfare professionals are not prepared to meet the special needs of immigrant families who do not speak English, have few family members or friends they can turn to for help, fear deportation, and have little knowledge of their rights and responsibilities as parents in America. Furthermore, immigrants who left countries plagued by harsh authoritarian regimes and corruption often have little trust in government agencies and may not seek help or services.



In addition, social workers may require training to work with different cultures and communities. For example, a worker may have serious concerns about six people living in one room, when such conditions may represent an improvement for the family. The situations, characteristics, and behaviors of immigrant families, therefore, may trigger caseworkers to remove children hastily and decrease the likelihood of placement with relatives.

“We have to be aware of our assumptions when working with families,” says Casey Family Services social worker Greeta Soderholm. “Some parents get written off quickly as being incapable, because their parenting style and belief systems do not fit with our values or those of the foster care system. Our interpretations of events can become facts in the record,” she adds. “A person who has experienced war may have a vastly different view of what constitutes a safe home environment than what is recognized by the foster care system.”

Many challenges immigrant families experience are exacerbated by:

- A shortage of interpretation/translation services and multilingual and multicultural staff within the child welfare system.
- Limited culturally and linguistically relevant services, such as parenting classes, domestic violence services, and drug treatment programs.
- Differences in cultural norms and child-rearing practices, for example, corporal punishment. Corporal punishment is accepted in many countries, and Western parenting styles appear permissive.
- Perceived restrictions about access to federal income and employment supports. Many immigrants believe that receiving public benefits could prevent them from becoming legal permanent residents or citizens.
- Difficulties licensing relative caregivers because they can't fulfill minimum space-per-occupant requirements and income qualifications required by foster care systems.

“MANY IMMIGRANT FAMILIES COME HERE WITH INTACT, MULTIGENERATIONAL FAMILIES AND A STRONG DESIRE TO SEIZE ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITIES.”

— YALI LINCROFT

Meanwhile, child welfare practitioners may not consider the positive factors in immigrant family life, says Yali Lincroft, a consultant to the Annie E. Casey Foundation's Family to Family program and an expert on immigration/child welfare issues. “Many immigrant families come here with intact, multigenerational families and a strong desire to seize economic opportunities,” she explains. “They want to take care of their own and have a strong sense of community. In many cases, they need help for only a short time to overcome hurdles.”

Inadequate federal and state support

“There is very little guidance at the federal level, and it's hit or miss in the states,” says Lincroft, noting that federal funds often

cannot be used to care for undocumented children, forcing jurisdictions to use scarce local funds.

“These issues will come up more as immigrant populations grow across the country,” adds Sonia Velazquez, vice president of the Children's Division of the American Humane Association.

Working toward solutions

Research on how and why immigrant families, children, and youth come to the attention of child welfare has been limited to date, and more needs to be done.

“The patchwork of approaches used to deal with immigrant populations may result in unnecessary removals, longer stays in out-of-home placement, or the outright denial of services for which families and children may be eligible,” Velazquez explains.

Child welfare agencies need to conduct training on how immigration affects family functioning, adopt written protocols that address immigration status, and connect undocumented families to community-based networks.

In addition, language access must be considered a right for families engaged in child welfare services, and bilingual staff or translators must be available. Under no circumstances should minor children, neighbors, or family friends be used as interpreters.

To address these issues, Casey has joined the American Humane Association, Casey Family Programs, and other child welfare agencies to form the Migration and Child Welfare National Network, a coalition that provides training, research, and practice materials on the intersection of immigration and child welfare.



THE HONORABLE JIM McDERMOTT, U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Close-up

Last September, the U.S. Senate Finance Committee joined the House Ways and Means Subcommittee on Income Security and Family Support to introduce the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act, the most significant adoption legislation since 1980.

U.S. Representative Jim McDermott (D-Washington), chair of the House subcommittee, and Jerry Weller (R-Illinois), the ranking member at the time, sponsored the bipartisan and bicameral bill that increases incentives to move children from foster care to adoptive families, allows more children to be cared for by relatives in their own communities, and creates opportunities for older children aging out of the foster care system.

A child and adolescent psychologist who has practiced in multiple settings, including hospitals and correctional systems, McDermott has extensive experience in medical, political, and humanitarian arenas. In 1987, after 15 years in the Washington State Senate, he served as a Foreign Service medical officer based in Zaire, providing psychiatric services to the Foreign Service, Agency for International Development, and Peace Corps personnel in sub-Saharan Africa. A year later, he returned to run for Congress, where he is serving his 11th term. He recently spoke with Voice about the Fostering Connections Act.

VOICE: *How did foster care become such an important issue for you?*

McDERMOTT: As a psychologist, I've spent my life working with kids in a variety of settings, whether in my own clinics or in the criminal justice system. I have seen the impact of foster care, both good and bad. When I joined the Income Security and Family Support Subcommittee and later became the chairman, it felt like I was coming back to what I'd been doing for the last 40 years. It is a great experience for me to fix some of the things I couldn't do anything about when I was in practice.

VOICE: *What piece of the legislation do you see having the most impact?*

McDERMOTT: Fostering Connections attempts to ease the aging out process for youth in foster care. I see this having the longest-ranging impact, because a huge amount of a young person's potential is lost during these transitional steps, particularly when they take them alone. Young people fall into drugs, prostitution, and all kinds of things, because there is no one there to say:

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"Hey, you can go to college. Let's figure out how we can get you into a community college. Let's apply for a Pell Grant. Let's find you a place to stay."

Some kids can make it alone, and there are those who do, but we lose a lot of kids. If you walk down the main street of any U.S. city at night, you see the kids that were in foster care, and were one day just put out on the street. Changing their lives and their transition into adulthood is probably going to have the greatest impact.

VOICE: *The law reflects a changing attitude toward birth families. In the past, if a mother neglected her child, the mother's sister also was viewed negatively and often kept apart from the child. Now, families of origin are a resource for youth in care. To what do you attribute that change?*

McDERMOTT: On a practical level, there aren't enough good foster parents out there, so we need to expand where we look for families. Also, with a family member, there's blood; you want to help your own.



"IT IS A GREAT EXPERIENCE FOR ME TO FIX SOME OF THE THINGS I COULDN'T DO ANYTHING ABOUT WHEN I WAS IN PRACTICE."

Of course, as a society, we have always said that families need to suck it up financially and take relative children into their home. That's not possible in many cases. If you have a grandmother who is living on social security, and she gets a 15-year-old dropped on her – boys at that age can eat you out of house and home; their changing bodies need new clothes; and more – she can't afford it. Under the new law, the system can help the grandmother financially, and the child's life will be much more stable.

Barack Obama is the perfect example of the success of relative caregivers. That kind of potential outcome is there for hundreds of kids if we are able to transition them from foster care to a family member who is responsible and capable.

VOICE: Do you see implementation happening as a result of lawsuits brought against states by consumers and advocates eager for the provisions to be enacted?

McDERMOTT: I hope we don't get to that. Sometimes lawsuits have been very useful. But I think it would be much better if states would see what the needs are and begin to take action. I think in the long run, it's better if you have done it willingly, rather than being forced by a legal mechanism. The courts may be required, in some instances, to get some states to move forward, but I'm more positive than that. I think this thing is going to move forward because it's the right thing for kids and families, and I am eager to see the results.

VOICE: How do you think the economy will affect states who must now implement the law's new provisions?

McDERMOTT: First, nothing in the law forces states to implement unfunded provisions. We passed a major piece of legislation just as the economy was collapsing. Right now, many states don't have the capacity to enact or fully embrace all the changes. But, the laws are in place and, as the economy rebounds, states will move forward.

VOICE: Looking beyond this law, what do you see as the next legislative priority to support vulnerable kids and families?

McDERMOTT: Prevention always is on my mind. If you have a young woman in her teens with a baby, she probably doesn't know anything about raising an infant. Her own mother isn't there to help and her father isn't around, so this young woman and the baby are stuck. Ultimately, the baby will end up in foster care, but it could have been prevented

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So much comes down to getting money into the system so that there is a sufficient number of people to look at what's happening with kids. For example, we put a provision in the bill for health-care evaluation for foster youth. We've got kids right now who are receiving Medicaid and they are on medication; all of a sudden they leave care, and their access to medication is gone. Some of those transitions are abrupt and so inhuman.

But, it's about resources. There are a lot of accusations about how much medication is used on foster kids, and if we had more resources for oversight, it could very well be that we would change the quality of their care. The mechanisms are there so that, if we can implement what we've started with Fostering Connections, kids will be better in the long run.

with some early supports, such as teaching young people how to parent. In 10 or 20 years, it is my hope we would have developed a system that moves to support families before it's necessary to remove a kid from the home.

Every kid we can keep with their parents in a functioning home is better – for the kid and society. My goal is to reduce the number of kids in foster care. I think that in many ways, we know what to do to make that happen. It's a question of having enough money and people to implement it.

PERMANENCY TEAMS MAKE THE DIFFERENCE: UNIQUE APPROACHES TO A SECURE FUTURE FOR YOUNG PEOPLE IN FOSTER CARE



“There is no doubt that all children – especially children who have been in care – need at least one permanent connection throughout their lives,” says Raymond Torres, vice president of the Annie E. Casey Foundation and executive director of Casey Family Services. “It is equally clear that there is no ‘one-size-fits-all’ approach to permanence.”

To fulfill each child’s unique need for lifelong connections, Casey Family Services promotes the Permanency Teaming Process, which brings together a team of family members and people from a child’s existing network of adults. Teams – which include the child, whether directly or indirectly – work together as planners and decision makers to meet a child’s needs and connect him or her with a lasting, primary parenting relationship. Also on the team’s agenda: Making sure the child has the strongest possible connections to important people, extended family, for example, and other individuals who love the child or youth.

Permanency teams are as diverse and individual in their make-up and outcomes as the children, youth, and families they are designed to serve. Permanency teaming works because it involves people for what they can offer a child rather than excluding them for what they cannot.

“Permanency teams enable a mother who cannot parent her child to be included in the child’s life in a safe and lasting way,” says Lauren Frey, Casey’s project director for

permanency services. “A foster parent who cannot adopt a child can become a lifelong friend and mentor. An estranged sister can reconnect with a sibling lost in the system and pave the way for relationships among disconnected siblings.”

Casey has found that most children have a wealth of people in their network – grandparents, aunts and uncles, other relatives, teachers, pastors, or family friends – who want to contribute to the youth’s life. While the traditional foster care system has not recognized that people who have been cut off from a child may have something to offer, that recognition is central to the Permanency Teaming Process.

Permanency teaming also establishes supports for a child’s family. It can allow foster parents to mentor birth parents; birth parents to be involved in their children’s lives in meaningful ways; aunts, uncles, and other relatives who may have lost touch with a child to play a supportive role – whatever is needed in a family’s particular circumstance. The teaming process builds relationships among adults so they can work together to benefit the child and the family.

This article offers examples of how permanency teaming works. Personal information has been changed to protect privacy.

Bringing together three families

Amy, age 9, was adopted in infancy after her birth mother’s chronic substance abuse led to termination of her parental rights. At age 5, Amy’s adoptive mother died; Amy experienced three failed adoptive placements before settling into a foster home.

Once Amy was placed in foster care, Casey began to build her permanency team. Three disparate family groups came together to focus on Amy’s future: seven members of Amy’s birth family; three members of her original adoptive family; and four members of her foster family. All have participated in individual and joint meetings and are playing key roles in Amy’s support network.

Presently, Amy’s team is working to finalize legal permanence through an open adoption. This will enable Amy’s birth mom and family members to remain in Amy’s life. Working together, the adoptive and birth families have alleviated their fears and misconceptions about one another and focused on Amy’s needs.

Creating a stable network

Andrew is an articulate, self-aware 13-year-old who effectively advocates for himself. His team, which he helped define, includes his birth parents, foster parents, uncle, therapist, social worker, attorney, family support specialist, state social worker, his mother’s attorney, and a Casey Family Services social worker.

“PERMANENCY TEAMS ENABLE A MOTHER WHO CANNOT PARENT HER CHILD TO BE INCLUDED IN THE CHILD’S LIFE IN A SAFE AND LASTING WAY. A FOSTER PARENT WHO CANNOT ADOPT A CHILD CAN BECOME A LIFELONG FRIEND AND MENTOR.” – LAUREN FREY

Andrew’s team is working to maintain his birth family connections and support his current placement while searching for the right permanency option for him.

Andrew has been in the state’s care since 2006. Although it is unlikely he will reunite with his mother, who struggles with mental illness, his mother is very involved in his life and visits with him regularly. Andrew’s foster parents may be willing to adopt him, but his birth mother has rejected that option. Andrew’s team is exploring how to connect him with a “forever family” while maintaining his relationships with his foster and biological families.

Getting started

In and out of foster care as a child, Martha has a difficult relationship with her mother, who has a history of depression and alcohol addiction. In 2007, Martha was reunified with her father, but returned to foster care after a few months. Even though Martha now lives with a foster parent who intends to remain involved in her life, as she approaches her 18th birthday, Martha feels insecure – like many older youth in foster care.

Martha’s team is just now forming; Martha and her Casey social worker are working to identify team members. The challenge for Martha’s team will be to find a way for Martha’s parents to support her desire for a more permanent situation with her foster mother. The team will likely encourage Martha’s parents to work with her foster mother to reconnect Martha with people she misses, such as her siblings and those who served as caregivers earlier in her life.



Seeking the best options

Lisa came into care about four years ago at age 10. Lisa had five foster care placements before moving in with foster mother Nancy. When Nancy lost her housing, Lisa was moved to another placement.

When Casey began working with Lisa to build her permanency team, Nancy was able to take Lisa back into her home – a great boon to Lisa, who has a strong and loving relationship with her foster mother.

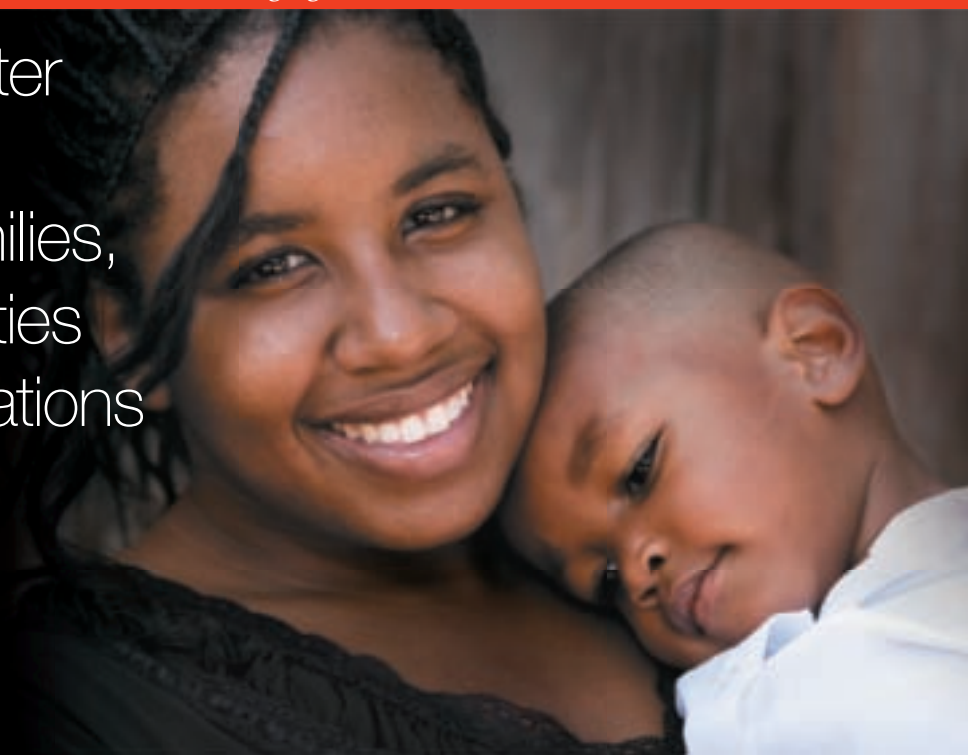
As Lisa’s team began to meet, finding a way to involve her father and illustrate his love and support for Lisa became important. Although he was not involved in Lisa’s life for many years, a Casey social worker initiated meetings with him at Lisa’s request. Now close to 60 years old and in very poor health, Lisa’s father plans to return to Latin America. But before he leaves, he is giving Lisa a Quincianera, a celebration for Latina girls turning age 15. Lisa is adapting the Quincianera tradition to honor 14 of the meaningful relationships in her life.

Lisa’s team includes her foster mother, attorney, therapist, three Casey staff, and Lisa’s father, when he is able. The team’s current goal is to establish guardianship with Nancy. Although Lisa knows she will never live with her mother, she doesn’t want to create a bigger “hurt” for her mother by forcing termination of her parental rights. The guardianship will celebrate Nancy and Lisa’s connection to one another and provide Lisa with the enduring, day-to-day parenting she needs.

Making family possible

All the teams – Amy’s, Andrew’s, Lisa’s, and Martha’s – are committed to the best interests of the young people whose needs they serve. “Like all of us, the needs of these young people will change throughout their lives,” says Torres. “But as they do, they will have the support of committed parents and family members, thanks to the diligent, clarifying work of their permanency teams.”

Parent-Child Foster Care Program Strengthens Families, Offers Opportunities for Future Generations



Being a new parent isn't easy. You have to figure out how to hold and feed a newborn, how to function on too little sleep, and what to do when the baby cries. Most young parents can call their own moms or dads when the going gets tough, but whom do you call if you are a teen parent in foster care?

In East Baltimore, teens and their babies in the Parent-Child Foster Care Program of the Baltimore Division of Casey Family Services are placed with foster families who provide support and parenting advice to help the young adults grow into their parenting responsibilities.

"Teen parents have so many different roles," says Damon Thomson, deputy division director in Baltimore. "You're still a child, you have a child, and you're going to school. It can be difficult to manage those distinct parts of your life, especially if you can't look to your own parents as role models."

Since the program's inception a year ago, Casey Family Services has connected 10 teen moms with foster and adoptive families. The youth are coached on how to nurture their children while also balancing school work, preparing for adulthood, and dealing with the trauma that brought them into foster care. Foster parents, recruited specifically to support the teens and their

MOST YOUNG PARENTS CAN CALL THEIR OWN MOMS OR DADS WHEN THE GOING GETS TOUGH, BUT WHOM DO YOU CALL IF YOU ARE A TEEN PARENT IN FOSTER CARE?

babies, receive specialized training in parenting adolescents with children.

And at a time when many programs are threatened by budget cutbacks, the Maryland Department of Child and Family Services recently recognized the program for its unique capacity to work with teen parents. As a result, the Baltimore Division is preparing to double the number of program participants in the next year.

Doreen Jordan, a former statewide director of foster care and adoption services for the Connecticut Department of Children and Families, recently joined Casey as director of the Baltimore Division to guide the growth of the program to help more youth find permanence with lifelong families. "We have the opportunity to provide a better future for two generations of local residents, and I'm excited to work closely with other agencies

and community leaders to develop a program that can become a model for cities and states nationwide," says Jordan.

Creating lasting bonds

Among the program's positive outcomes is the bond created between new parents and their foster families around the emotional experience of caring for a new baby.

"Several of the foster mothers were young mothers themselves, and want these teens to benefit from their experience, assistance, and the compassion of someone who has walked in their shoes," says Vickie Holley-Stokes, who recruits families to become foster and adoptive parents.

"I wanted to give a young mother the opportunity to accomplish goals she may not have thought were possible," adds Brenda Winston, foster mother to a teen, age 16, and her 18-month-old baby girl. "Knowing that I am making a difference for both mother and child brings me great joy."

Creative approaches

Casey staff members readily recognize the challenges associated with serving teen parents straddling the line between youth and adulthood, and regularly explore ways to enhance the services they offer. For example, foster parents initially were asked to help the teens manage the monthly stipends they

“YOU’RE STILL A CHILD, YOU HAVE A CHILD, AND YOU’RE GOING TO SCHOOL. IT CAN BE DIFFICULT TO MANAGE THOSE DISTINCT PARTS OF YOUR LIFE, ESPECIALLY IF YOU CAN’T LOOK TO YOUR OWN MOM OR DAD AS A ROLE MODEL.” – DAMON THOMSON

THE YOUTH ARE COACHED ON HOW TO NURTURE THEIR CHILDREN WHILE ALSO BALANCING SCHOOL WORK, PREPARING FOR ADULTHOOD, AND DEALING WITH THE TRAUMA THAT BROUGHT THEM INTO FOSTER CARE.



receive to cover living expenses, yet found it created tension that disrupted bonding between the teens and their foster families.

Because many of the teens had little experience managing money, they would take care of their baby’s immediate needs, then quickly spend any leftover funds, says Lynda Cymrot, team leader for the Parent-Child Foster Care Program. By the end of the month, the teens would have no money for last-minute emergencies such as medicine or extra diapers. The staff modified the program to include meetings at which foster families and teens present a monthly budget before they receive the stipend.

“When we started seeing money management become an obstacle between foster families and the young parents, we recognized we needed to find a new approach,” adds Cymrot. “Staff now model the parent-child budget conversations and anticipate that foster families will take on those responsibilities as their relationships with the young parents grow.”

Building on success

The Parent-Child Foster Care Program is an outgrowth of the Family Resource Center, which has served the East Baltimore community for more than 10 years. Recognizing that children need a stable home environment to develop into healthy, contributing

members of their communities, Casey established the center to provide programs and services to strengthen families and enable children who would otherwise be at risk of removal remain at home.

Often, a first inquiry may be a “quick fix” issue, such as obtaining a driver’s license or enrolling a child in school. Yet, staff often find that people have other needs, which could have an impact on keeping their families together.

Although foster families are central to providing stable home environments in which teen parents can raise their children, social workers regularly collaborate with center staff to reconnect teens with their biological parents, family members, and other people who are significant in their lives.

The center fulfills common community needs, including providing area residents access to English as a second language, pre-GED, and GED classes; a computer lab; tools to create resumé; help finding jobs; and group-oriented programs focused on anger management, parenting, and fatherhood. Participants enrolled in the center’s programs have access to a child development center. The resource center also provides case management to help residents access programs and services offered by community partners.

“We’re seeing that teens in our program have a strong desire to remain connected to their birth families,” says Cymrot. “Our ability to provide wraparound services to the whole family is central to reaching out to those individuals, guiding reunification efforts, and teaching young fathers how they can be involved in their children’s lives.”

In several cases, social workers have helped birth family members access services so that they can better participate in helping the teens establish connections to a caring family.

“The Parent-Child Foster Care Program further advances Casey’s partnership with the city of Baltimore,” says Raymond L. Torres, vice president of the Annie E. Casey Foundation and executive director of Casey Family Services. “By drawing on the existing services of the Family Resource Center and other investments the Foundation has made in East Baltimore, we hope to address the full scope of residents’ needs and increase the economic stability of the community.”

Jordan emphasizes that next steps include documenting outcomes that reflect the program’s effect on the community. “We’ve been presented with the unique challenge of coordinating the work of a variety of programs and services to improve outcomes in one area – creating an environment in which teen parents and their babies can grow and thrive.”



SANIA METZGER, ESQ., DIRECTOR OF POLICY

Sania Metzger, Esq., joined Casey Family Services in 2002 as the agency's first director of policy. A lifelong community activist, teacher, and lawyer, Metzger worked for 11 years in the New York State Legislature prior to her appointment at Casey. There, she served as chief of staff to Assemblyman Roger Green, and later worked as legislative counsel during Green's chairmanship of the influential Standing Committee on Children and Families.

Since joining Casey, she has worked to analyze, influence and track child- and family-related policies at the local, state, and federal levels, often collaborating with Casey's direct service divisions. She also serves on several strategy groups that address child welfare reform within the Annie E. Casey Foundation, of which Casey Family Services is a part.

VOICE: *In coming to Casey, you moved from one side of the legislative process to the other. How did the state assembly experience inform your work today?*

METZGER: In the legislative process, many stakeholders, including consumers, constituents, advocates, and public officials, exchange views and ideas about the issues important to them. You learn how to identify and establish policy goals that include the voices of many stakeholders. Today at Casey Family Services, this same sense of inclusion and collaboration guides our work.

VOICE: *What influenced your decision to join Casey and lead its policy department?*

METZGER: I wanted to take my calling for public service to a different venue, one that also had an influence on public policy to

improve outcomes for vulnerable children and their families. As Casey's first policy director, I have had a wonderful opportunity to collaborate with colleagues at the Annie E. Casey Foundation to develop the Foundation's policy agenda.

VOICE: *What value does Casey Family Services bring to policy reform?*

METZGER: As a direct service agency, Casey has the ability to connect our clients, especially our youth, with decision makers. Our youth and families are experts on how child welfare systems work, and offering them opportunities to share their stories adds tremendous benefit to our advocacy work.

Casey Family Services is grounded in communities throughout New England and in Baltimore, Maryland, which truly informs the agency's state-level policy work. We've developed strong local and state partnerships, and our division directors speak with authority about local issues, because they are working directly with consumers in their communities.

VOICE: *As an organization focused on serving children and youth in New England and Maryland, what role does Casey play in the national conversation?*

METZGER: Our federal work is done primarily through several national partnerships. This and similar working groups provide timely information on legislation and other policy efforts taking place within Congress and the administration. I also think Casey's partnerships with national entities – the Children's Defense Fund on issues involving relative caregivers, the Alliance for Racial Equity, and the Pew Commission on Children in Foster Care on

permanency outcomes, for example – and our state-level relationships create great opportunities for reform.

As part of a national foundation, I also think we are allowed to take risks, something government can't necessarily do. The Annie E. Casey Foundation/Casey Family Services is able to support innovative policy reforms, such as examining the connection between poverty and neglect, that add to the national discussion of what can work for children and families.

VOICE: *The child welfare community is in the process of implementing the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act. What provisions of the law interest you most?*

METZGER: Supports for subsidized guardianship at levels equal to those received by foster parents, along with provisions that support family connections – such as sibling placement, notice to relatives, and licensing waivers – are most compelling. We have long believed, and the data shows that expanded supports for relative caregivers are promising strategies to help more youngsters, particularly older youth and children of color, achieve permanence and exit foster care.

I also am excited by other provisions in Fostering Connections, including the Family Connections Grants, which provide \$15 million over five years to connect children with relatives, and Kinship Navigator funds. And, I'm pleased by the increased training dollars allocated to enhance the expertise of front-line public and private child welfare workers, relative caregivers, and court-related staff who are helping children achieve lifelong families.

YOUTH AND FAMILY PERSPECTIVES:

INSPIRED BY EXPERIENCE, MESSAGE OF CHANGE

by Saralyn

Editor's Note: Having entered foster care just shy of her 4th birthday, Saralyn is now 16 years old and living with a foster family in New Hampshire. A high achiever in academic and extracurricular activities, Saralyn was invited to attend the Presidential Youth Inaugural Conference earlier this year. She graciously agreed to share her inspiring experience with Voice readers.

My trip with the Presidential Youth Inaugural Conference started on a plane from Manchester, New Hampshire, to Washington, D.C., just days before the swearing in of our nation's current president. Upon our arrival, we quickly joined more than 16,000 fellow scholars attending the conference in the stands of Byrd Stadium at the University of Maryland. Once there, we listened to two amazing speakers. First, Doris Kearns Goodwin, author and Pulitzer Prize winner, amazed us with her never-ending knowledge of past presidents such as Lyndon B. Johnson and Abraham Lincoln and their promise of leadership. Lisa Ling, special correspondent for the National Geographic Channel and "The Oprah Winfrey Show," followed. Discussing her travels around the world, Ling revealed the problems that exist beyond our borders, and motivated us to become involved.

Our second day began with speeches from former Secretary of State General Colin Powell and Nobel Peace Prize winner Archbishop Desmond Tutu who both spoke about my generation's sense of urgency to act in righteous ways. Tutu urged the crowd of students to consider college as an opportunity to be exposed to the different experiences the world offers.

His advice moved me, and for the first time in many years, I see the value of the journey, as well as the ultimate destination or job title.

Despite the lasting impact of the previous speakers, Erik Weißenmayer – a world-class adventurer and author who has climbed the seven highest mountains in the world – offered words that will inspire me for a lifetime. "We are not who we are *despite* the obstacles we have faced," he said. "We are who we are *because* of the obstacles we have faced."

Weißenmayer is blind. He lost his sight at age 13 and, instead of dwelling on his sudden disability, started climbing. It made him more determined to succeed.

Sometimes, growing up in foster care feels like an obstacle, a mountain I struggle to summit each day. Having foster parents isn't the usual living situation for American teenagers. I spent years of my life hoping to reunify with my birth mother, only to lose her to cancer. I had to come to terms with what my birth father could and couldn't provide for me.

And, just like Erik, my obstacles never discouraged me. I knew I had to exceed the expectations society had for me, so I worked. I am not an accomplished young girl despite growing up in foster care, but I am who I am today because of it.

I am my class president and a National Honor Society member. I'm ranked second in my class. I am a camp counselor and play on several championship-volleyball teams. And soon, I'll be looking at colleges, something that too few foster youth get to experience.



Of course, the main event of the trip was the historic inauguration of our 44th president, Barack Obama. I was one of the millions who witnessed democracy firsthand as warm hearts welcomed President Obama and his message of hope. As I stood on the National Mall and looked around, I was overwhelmed with pride in my country and the promise of tomorrow. I also wondered how so many people could pack themselves in so tightly and still have smiles on their faces. We stood intently that cold January day and witnessed the world change. When Barack Obama took the oath of president, celebration broke out.

As the cheering took place all around me, I took a minute to cheer for myself, for overcoming my challenges and being invited to participate in such a historic event.

Of course, I didn't do this alone. There are many people to thank for making so much possible for me, including my foster parents, who always have encouraged me to reach for higher summits.



MAY IS NATIONAL FOSTER CARE MONTH

MAKE THEIR STORIES GOOD ONES

All children deserve a safe, happy life – including the nearly half-million American children and youth in foster care.

Many of these formerly abused or neglected children and teens will either safely reunite with their parents, be cared for by relatives, or be adopted by loving families.

But others are less fortunate. Every year, more than 26,000 older youth “age out” of foster care and are left alone to face life’s challenges. No matter their age, all young people in foster care need a meaningful connection to a caring adult who becomes a supportive and lasting presence in their lives.

May is National Foster Care Month... You Can Change a Lifetime!

No matter how much time you have to give, you can do something positive that will Change a Lifetime for a young person in foster care.

For more information on the many ways you can help, please call 888 799-KIDS today!



www.fostercaremonth.org

National Foster Care Month

View from Washington



by Kathi Crowe, Executive Director, National Foster Care Coalition

Each May, as most Americans enjoy the warming weather, bright flowers, and other symbols long associated with spring, child advocates focus the nation's attention to a more sobering reality – the nearly half-million children in foster care in the United States.

May was first designated as National Foster Care Month in 1988, when the National Foster Parent Association urged former Senator Strom Thurmond to introduce a resolution to recognize the valuable contributions of foster parents. More recent campaigns have highlighted the needs of children and youth in care, particularly of the 26,000 youth who age out of the system each year without a permanent, loving family.

Recruiting and retaining loving foster, kinship, and adoptive families has never been more urgent than during this time of economic downturn. Biological families who previously required services are facing even greater hardship, resulting in increased demand on an already stressed child welfare system. Job loss and foreclosure have touched foster and kinship families, making it difficult for them to care for foster children.

Perhaps nothing awakens people to the realities of foster care more than hearing directly from young people who share their firsthand experiences. The heart-wrenching stories of former foster youth put a face to the facts and figures, magnifying the issues and prompting policy leaders and the public to actively engage in foster care reform.

Hearing these personal stories engaged then First Lady Hillary Clinton to support the passage of the Foster Care Independence Act of 1999 and the John H. Chafee Foster Care Independence Program. Recently, young people's testimony at congressional hearings, briefings, and countless office visits, combined with compelling outcomes data and passionate advocacy by child welfare professionals, served as the drumbeat for reform that led to the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008.

To commemorate National Foster Care Month, members of the National Foster Care Coalition, in partnership with Casey Family Programs, the Annie E. Casey Foundation/Casey Family Services, and the Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative, joined together in Washington, D.C., the first week of May for a series of events to raise awareness of the needs of foster children and their families. The events also drew participation by young alumni of foster care, foster and adoptive parents, birth parents, relative caregivers, and CASA volunteers from across the country.

The first event, a journalist roundtable moderated by Marianne Bichsel of Casey Family Programs, and Ellis Cose, columnist and contributing editor for *Newsweek* magazine and producer of "Against the Odds," was held May 4 at the National Press Club. Panelists included Rob Geen, senior fellow at the Annie E. Casey Foundation; JooYeun Chang, policy director for Casey Family Programs; and foster care alumni Christopher Andrade, Josh Griggs, and Trista Miller. Grandmother Sue Avery and biological parent Mike Mohn also added their perspectives.

On May 5, the National Foster Care Coalition, assisted by some of its members, California Youth Connection, Casey Family Programs, FosterClub, Inc., National CASA, and the National Foster Parent Association, offered an intensive daylong advocacy training. Topics included the legislative process, strategic sharing, and discussion of key policy issues.

The training was followed by a Congressional briefing that included introductory remarks by Rep. Jim McDermott (D-Washington), chairman of the Ways and Means Subcommittee on Income Security and Family Support. The event also featured opening remarks by Joo Yeun Chang, public policy director for Casey Family Programs, and presentations by panelists Geen, and alumni Andrade, Griggs, Miller, Lupe Ortiz-Tovar, and Maggie Roberts. A reception honoring Senators Max Baucus (D-Montana) and Charles Grassley (R-Iowa), Rep. McDermott, and former Rep. Jerry Weller with 2009 Legislative Champion Awards for their leadership on comprehensive child welfare reform followed the briefing.

The events drew attention to the needs of the nation's most vulnerable children, their families, and the efforts currently underway to strengthen child welfare services. The National Foster Care Coalition is committed to partnering with policy leaders and engaging the public in improving the lives of children, youth, and families touched by the foster care system. American families are struggling and, more than ever, our most vulnerable children need our help.

ALUMNI PERSPECTIVE

MAKING TEEN ADOPTION A REALITY



by *Nathan Monell*,
Executive Director, *Foster
Care Alumni of America*

Nearly 40 percent of the 300 million adults in America have considered adopting a child, according to the National Adoption Attitudes Survey. If just one in 500 of those adults adopted, every one of the 129,000 children and youth in foster care whose primary wish is to find a forever family would realize that dream, according to the Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption.

A large percentage of children awaiting adoption are teenagers. “So many teens who would be a fabulous addition to your family are overlooked because they’re not babies or toddlers,” says alumna Samatra Doyle. “They could be wonderful sons, daughters, brothers, and sisters but they’re skipped over because of their age.”

Many adults shy away from adopting teenagers. They worry they are not equipped to deal with the consequences of life in foster care, the trauma of abuse and neglect, and a lifetime of significant loss. Teenagers are not unaware of these concerns, which often make them feel unadoptable.

“So many youth age out of foster care with no family or support,” explains alumna Mary Lee. “At age 16, I asked to be adopted even though I knew my chances were very slim. People didn’t understand why I wanted to be adopted, and they tried to prepare me for the rejection of not finding a family.”

Another alumna remembers, “I wasn’t considered ‘adoptable’ because I was too old

and my case record too extensive and scary. I still wonder why I wasn’t adopted and how my life might have been different.”

“It’s not easy to admit that you need a family. The older you get, the harder it is to talk about it,” writes Josh Connor.

So many alumni refused to take no for an answer and aggressively pursued adoption.

**“IT’S NOT EASY TO ADMIT
THAT YOU NEED A FAMILY.
THE OLDER YOU GET, THE
HARDER IT IS TO TALK
ABOUT IT.” – JOSH CONNOR**

Mary told her caseworkers, “I have to try because I want a family – a home during school breaks, a dad to walk me down the aisle, grandparents for my children, and the reassurance I will have unconditional love and support for the rest of my life.”

At 21, Josh had no family, no friends, and felt the only thing he had going for him was his foster youth board. There he spotted an adult who was assisting the board to obtain a grant. “We started having coffee every Saturday, and one day I showed up homeless. Lucky for me, he had a plan and the rest is history.” Josh’s dad and mother adopted him at age 22. Josh says, “My message is: Never be afraid to invite someone for coffee or dinner because you never know where you’ll find your forever family and your support system.”

Josh’s approach illustrates that adoption for older youth often looks more like dating than a typical adoption. Prospective parents and children bring their expectations to the table – what they are both willing to give and get – to determine whether there is a match. They discover mutual interests that serve as glue for the relationship. They realize that dependence and independence are inextricably bound together, and find a way that allows them to live out that dynamic.

Many people who would make great adoptive parents for a teenager are not even considering adoption. Life with an infant is not on their radar screen, but neither is the option of parenting a teenager whose chances for adoption are narrowing. For prospective parents who are older, first-time parents, or who have already raised their own children, teenage adoption might be a sensible option.

Sometimes adoption comes when the parent formalizes a relationship with a child already in their circle. When Samatra was adopted at age 19, her foster mom said, “This is just a formality, you’re my kid and you’ve been my kid since the first day, but legally we should do this.” Samatra’s reaction? “Emotionally I knew that she was officially my parent. It’s so great to see my mom with my children. She likes seeing my babies because she didn’t know me at this age, and my daughter looks like me.”

Recently a woman told me that she and her husband are going to adopt a teenager to send to college, then repeat the experience. It is the way they can make a difference for one of the 26,000 kids who age out of care every year having never found a forever family. It is a ray of hope we should all model.

Resource Corner

Permanency or Aging Out: Adolescents in the Child Welfare System

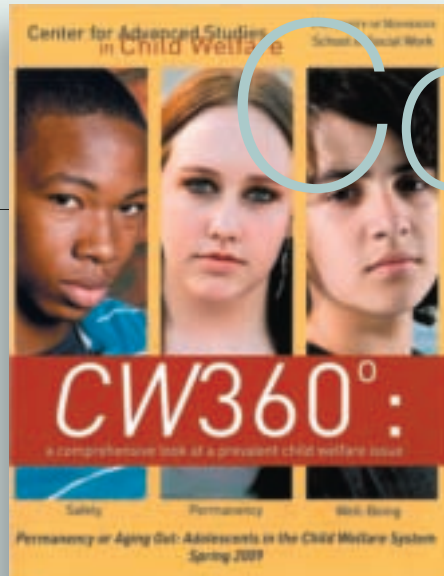
The latest issue of *Child Welfare 360°* (CW360°) focuses on permanence and adolescents who age out of the foster care system. Several members of Casey Family Services staff contributed articles to the journal, including Lauren Frey, “Permanence or Aging Out? A Matter of Choice”; Ben Kerman and Leah Glasheen, “The Central Role of Permanence in Improving Outcomes for Youth Aging Out of Foster Care”; and Sania Metzger, “Promoting Permanence for ‘Legal Orphans.’” CW360°, published by the Center for Advanced Studies in Child Welfare at the University of Minnesota School of Social Work, offers comprehensive information on the latest research, policies, and practices affecting child well-being today.

To download the latest issue, visit cehd.umn.edu.

From Inspiration to Action: A Summary of the 2008 National Convening on Youth Permanence

This summary of the 2008 National Convening on Youth Permanence, held May 1 and 2, in Washington, D.C., presents discussions from the gathering with the intention of readers applying lessons learned to make a difference in their own communities. The summary captures participants’ growing awareness that all youth in foster care need families, and that youth, parents, and family members can be vital players in both permanency planning efforts and in improving child welfare systems.

This publication offers examples of promising state, county, and tribal initiatives that advance youth permanency practice;



strengthen the courts’ role in supporting youth permanence; realign agency structures and increase collaboration; address racial disproportionality and disparate permanency outcomes for youth of color; and build public will and promote policy change.

To download the summary, visit www.youth-permanence.org.

Creative Interventions with Traumatized Children

Rich with case material and artwork, this volume demonstrates a range of creative approaches for facilitating children’s emotional healing and recovery from trauma. Contributors include experienced practitioners of play, art, music, movement, and drama for working with individual children, families, and groups. With a practical and user-friendly case-based format, the book addresses specific types of stressful experiences, including parental loss, child abuse, accidents, family violence, bullying, and mass trauma.

To order, visit www.amazon.com.

National Review of Policies and Programs Supporting Youth Transitioning Out of Foster Care

Conducted by researchers Amy Dworsky and Judy Havlicek from Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago, this comprehensive review of policies and programs covers state-by-state conditions under which foster youth can remain in care after age 18; provision of independent living and transition services; opportunities for youth to re-enter care; and use of state dollars to supplement federal funds from the Chafee Foster Care Independence Program.

To review the study, visit www.chapinhall.org.

New Help for Children Raised by Grandparents and Other Relatives: Questions and Answers About the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008

This resource aims to promote full and prompt implementation of regulations to help grandparents and other relatives raise children as outlined in the federal Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008. It was prepared by an informal coalition of 18 organizations, including the Annie E. Casey Foundation/ Casey Family Services and others that have worked individually and together for years to support children being raised by grandparents and other relatives. The guide answers a number of questions posed to the organizations by persons implementing the new act.

To download this guide, visit www.childrensdefense.org.

What the Media Say

Strengthening Families, Improving Communities

It's their "theory of change" – kids do better in strong families in strong communities.

This was the message Raymond L. Torres, vice president of the Annie E. Casey Foundation and executive director of Casey Family Services, drove home at the annual Empower New Haven luncheon.

The theory of change, as explained by Torres, is built on five main principles:

- Improving job access for parents.
- Helping parents figure out how to optimize their wages.
- Enhancing the savings of low-income families.
- Leveling the cost of living.
- Strengthening community organizations and services in the community.

These all embrace the "two generation approach," which increases the earning potential of parents while simultaneously dealing directly with issues faced by the children.

"This long term-agenda requires all of us working together," said Torres. "Children will do well when parents have stronger foundations to do well."

"Two-Generation' Approach Pitched"
The New Haven Independent
December 15, 2008



Free Tax Preparation Combats Predatory Lending

For families with annual incomes less than \$50,000, the city of Lewiston (Maine), working with IRS certified volunteers and the Annie E. Casey Foundation, is providing free tax preparation now through April 15. Volunteers are able to help many low- and middle-income workers get an Earned Income Tax Credit, a credit that can fetch as much as \$4,824.

Lewiston's tax preparation program is convenient, the volunteers are friendly, and it's free, said Tabor, who's used the service for three years. Her taxes are filed electronically. Her refund appears in her account within eight days. "I used to pay \$100 or more to get my taxes done. Everybody could always use more money, especially in this tough economy."

It's that tough economy that has Mark Millar of Casey Family Services concerned more people will turn to instant "refunds," or tax refund anticipation loans, what Millar said are often predatory lending.

"Beware of Fast Refunds"
Sun Journal
February 9, 2009

Helping Families Claim Tax Credits

About \$30 million of tax relief for New Hampshire working families goes unclaimed every year, said Carey Gladstone, the community liaison for Casey Family Services, a nonprofit child welfare agency with offices across the state. The key, Gladstone said, is applying for the Earned Income Tax Credit, which he called "the most effective tool for getting working people out of poverty."

"Tax Preparation Assistance Offered"
The Concord Monitor
January 24, 2009

Program Supports Youth in Foster Care Attending College

Only three percent of foster youth nationally complete higher education. While Connecticut is one of the most supportive states nationwide when it comes to foster youth and college, even paying tuition for students up to 23 years of age, the challenges students face on campus are significant.

It's difficult to track the number of foster youth enrolled in schools, as there is no formal mechanism to identify students who do not self-identify. But David Johnston of Casey Family Services, who has spearheaded the recent efforts to improve college life for foster youth, estimates there are 17 foster youth enrolled at Southern Connecticut State University.

"College Program Expands Support for Foster Youth"
The New Haven Register
December 25, 2008

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

2009: 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, providers, 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.

June 2-5

2009 Family Group Decision Making and Other Family Engagement Approaches Conference
American Humane Association
The Westin Convention Center
Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania
www.americanhumane.org

June 3-5

2009 National Pathways to Adulthood Independent Living/Transitional Living Conference
National Resource Center for Youth Services
The Westin Gaslamp Quarter San Diego
San Diego, California
www.nrcys.ou.edu

June 3-5

One Child, Many Hands: A Multidisciplinary Conference on Child Welfare
“A Time for Change”
The Field Center for Children’s Policy, Practice, and Research
University of Pennsylvania
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania
www.sp2.upenn.edu/onechild/

June 17-20

17th Annual APSAC Colloquium
American Professional Society on the Abuse of Children
Omni Hotel
Atlanta, Georgia
www.apsac.org

June 23-24

12th National Child Welfare Data and Technology Conference
“Making IT Work for Children: Improving Data for Agencies, Tribes, and Courts”
National Resource Center for Child Welfare Data and Technology
Hyatt Regency Bethesda
Bethesda, Maryland
www.nrcwdt.org

July 16-17

Second National Research Conference on Child and Family Programs and Policy
Bridgewater State College
Bridgewater, Massachusetts
webhost.bridgew.edu/edouglas/

July 27-31

Generations United 15th International Conference
“Because We’re Stronger Together”
Generations United
Hyatt Regency Washington on Capitol Hill
Washington, D.C.
www.gu.org

August 2-5

23rd Annual Conference on Treatment Foster Care
“Believing in the Magic of Families”
Foster Family-Based Treatment Association
Hyatt Regency Atlanta
Atlanta, Georgia
www.ffa.org

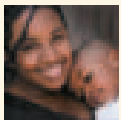
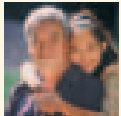


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Voice

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