

A publication sharing ideas and insights

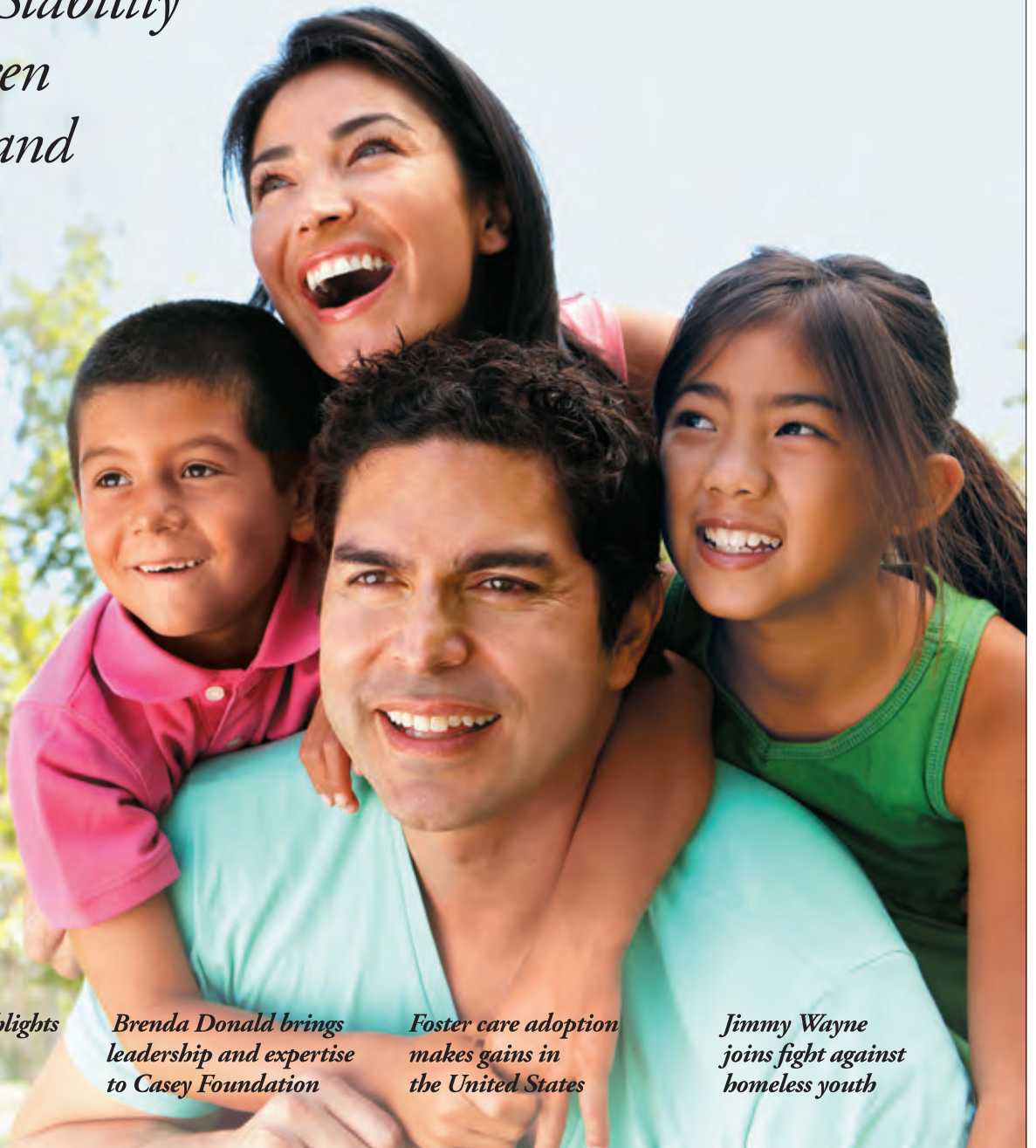


THE DIRECT SERVICE AGENCY OF
THE ANNIE E. CASEY FOUNDATION

Voice

Winter 2010-2011 Volume Eleven Issue Two

Ensuring Stability for Children at Home and in School



*Child welfare law highlights
vital importance of
educational stability*

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makes gains in
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joins fight against
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From the Desk of Raymond L. Torres

Last month in a Bridgeport, Connecticut, courtroom, a new family forged itself. Tim and Lenora Bauro – foster parents with Casey Family Services for more than 15 years – legally affirmed a lifelong commitment to Angel during a local National Adoption Day event. After living in multiple state-run foster homes, Angel joined what would become his forever family less than a year ago. With birth family, former foster parents, and new adoptive sisters at his side, Angel celebrated being part of a family, anchored in a sense of belonging and unconditional support.

As an executive director, I feel incredible pride in how our social workers bring their talents to bear to support birth parents, relatives, and foster parents in building safe and loving families for vulnerable children and youth. Connecting children to family, an outcome we call permanence, is the critical mandate of Casey Family Services. Family is a foundation on which children thrive. As a parent, I know Tim and Lenora are presenting Angel with a profound gift, and, even more, this young man will bring a new meaning to their lives.

In this issue of Voice, we explore adoption and the National Adoption Day Coalition's success in raising awareness about the needs of children like Angel.

For Angel, adoption means the end of the instability experienced by many children in foster care. In recent years, the field of child welfare has recognized how moving from home to home negatively affects children's academic performance. To help steady the education journey, the federal Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act pushes child welfare systems to meet all the basic needs of children in foster care, including education. In these pages, we explore the progress states have made in implementing the law's educational stability provisions.

We also introduce you in this issue to Annie E. Casey Foundation Vice President Brenda Donald, a longtime champion of children and families. A former child welfare administrator in the District of Columbia and Maryland, Donald led a number of reform efforts that have resulted in forever families for more kids.

As we enter a new year, I am filled with hope about what we can accomplish together for those in foster care – both at home and in school.

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

Raymond Torres, vice president of the Annie E. Casey Foundation and executive director of Casey Family Services, is joined by Bridgeport Mayor Bill Finch during an event to celebrate the opening of a new building for Casey staff in the Connecticut city.

Raymond Torres, vice presidente de la Annie E. Casey Foundation y director ejecutivo de Casey Family Services, se une al alcalde de Bridgeport Bill Finch en un evento celebrando la apertura de un edificio nuevo para el personal de Casey en la ciudad de Connecticut.



Desde el Escritorio de Raymond L. Torres

El mes pasado, en una corte de Bridgeport, Connecticut, una nueva familia se forjó de nuevo. Tim y Lenora Bauro — padres sustitutos que llevan mas de 15 años con Casey Family Services — afirmaron legalmente su compromiso de vida hacia Ángel durante un evento local del Día Nacional de la Adopción. Después de haber vivido en múltiples hogares sustitutos a través de todo el estado, Ángel se unió a la que sería su familia para siempre hace menos de un año. Ángel celebró el ser parte de una familia en un ambiente de sentido de pertenencia y apoyo incondicional junto a familiares biológicos, antiguos padres sustitutos y también junto a sus hermanas adoptivas.

Como director ejecutivo, siento un orgullo increíble viendo como nuestros trabajadores sociales traen sus talentos consistentemente apoyando a los padres biológicos, parientes y padres sustitutos para edificar de esta manera familias seguras y amorosas para niños y jóvenes vulnerables. Conectando niños con familias, este es un resultado que nosotros llamamos permanencia, es el mandato crítico de Casey Family Services. La Familia es una fundación en la que los niños crecen con fuerza. Como padre que soy, yo se que Tim y Lenora están presentando a Ángel como un regalo profundo, y aun mas, este joven traerá un nuevo significado a sus vidas.

En esta revista de Voice, nosotros exploramos la adopción y la Coalición del Día Nacional de la Adopción, esta levantando conciencia de las necesidades de niños como Ángel.

Para Ángel, la adopción significa el final de la inestabilidad experimentada por muchos niños en el cuidado sustituto. En años recientes, en el campo del bienestar infantil nos hemos dado cuenta cuan negativo es que los niños estén mudándose de hogar en hogar, pues les afecta mucho en su desempeño como estudiantes. Para ayudar a los niños en su jornada estudiantil, el Acta federal Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions empuja a los sistemas de bienestar infantil a suplir las necesidades de niños en cuidado sustituto, incluyendo la educación. En estas páginas, nosotros exploramos el progreso de los Estados implementando las leyes de provisiones de estabilidad educativa.

También introducimos en esta revista a Annie E. Casey Foundation, la vice-presidenta Brenda Donald, una campeona de niños y familias. Siendo antes administradora de Bienestar Infantil en el Distrito de Columbia y Maryland, Donald lideró un sinnúmero de esfuerzos de reformas que resultaron en familias de vida para más niños.

A medida que entramos a un nuevo año, yo me lleno de esperanza por lo que podemos lograr juntos para el beneficio de aquellos en cuidado sustituto — ambos escuelas y hogares.

Raymond L. Torres
Vice Presidente, The Annie E. Casey Foundation &
Director Ejecutivo, Casey Family Services

SCHOOL STABILITY IS CRITICAL TO SUCCESS OF YOUTH IN CARE



Ashley Jackson immersed herself in school to escape a challenging home life with a troubled mother. She worked hard in her classes and joined as many after-school activities as she could, from acting in plays and competing in a Science Olympiad to earning leadership positions in student council and Future Business Leaders of America. She participated in the Upward Bound college preparatory academy all through high school and made the National Honor Society her junior and senior years.

"I put all of my passion into school – it was my escape," reflects Jackson, now 22 years old and a senior at Missouri State University. "It helped me take on leadership roles and discover my talents."

These positive outlets could have ended abruptly when Jackson was removed from her mother's home and placed in foster care at age 16. But Jackson and her caseworker, juvenile officer, and guardian ad litem advocated effectively for a court order, which allowed her to stay at her high school when she was placed in kinship care with her aunt and uncle, who lived about 40 minutes away.

"School was the key factor in my transition from foster care to adulthood," says Jackson, who is majoring in public relations and pursuing a career in the nonprofit arena. Juggling so many activities in high school has made college "a breeze," adds Jackson, a youth leader and mentor to others in FosterClub, a national support network for young people in foster care.

RESEARCH SHOWS HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATION RATES ARE SUBSTANTIALLY LOWER FOR YOUNG PEOPLE AGING OUT OF FOSTER CARE THAN FOR THE GENERAL POPULATION, WITH SCHOOL CHANGES AND DISRUPTIONS PLAYING A MAJOR ROLE.

Jackson's story illustrates how vital a stable education is to help foster youth transition into productive adulthood. Unfortunately, many foster youth do not share her positive experience.

Research shows high school graduation rates are substantially lower for young people aging out of foster care than for the general population, with school changes

and disruptions playing a significant role. A major study, led by Mark Courtney and colleagues at the Chapin Hall research center at the University of Chicago, showed that more than a third of young adults who aged out of foster care experienced five or more school changes. Besides repeatedly leaving school connections behind and struggling to fit in, these young people often experience enrollment delays, lost records and academic credits, and difficulty accessing supportive services. Research shows that students lose approximately four to six months of educational progress each time they change schools. With the multiple moves many foster youth make, that lost progress can seriously jeopardize their learning and chances of graduating.

Such moves are especially traumatic for youth already experiencing separation from their parents, siblings, and communities, notes Kathleen McNaught, assistant director for child welfare at the American Bar Association Center on Children and the Law, as well as the project director for the Legal Center for Foster Care and Education. "As a result of these challenges, foster youth often fall behind their peers in school, lose hope, and ultimately drop out of school," she noted in testimony last year before the House Ways and Means Subcommittee on Income Security and Family Support.

“Children and youth in foster care must overcome myriad obstacles to enter adulthood as self-sufficient, contributing members of society. Educational stability and academic success should not be among these barriers,” says Michelle Lustig, coordinator of Foster Youth and Homeless Education Services for the San Diego County Office of Education. “Educational attainment is the path to success in life for all children, and we owe it to those who have been abused and neglected to take this responsibility seriously,” says Lustig, who has a master’s degree in social work and a doctorate in education and has worked in both fields.

New Hope from Fostering Connections

Education provisions in the federal Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008 are helping to change this landscape, but much remains to be done to ensure states fully implement the law.

The Fostering Connections Act mandates that child welfare agencies coordinate with local education agencies to ensure children remain in their same school, even if their living arrangements change, unless it is determined that leaving that school is in the child’s best interest. In that case, the child must be enrolled immediately in the new school and all of his or her records must be transferred. The law also clarifies that state child welfare agencies can use federal IV-E child welfare funds to cover reasonable travel costs to enable children eligible for IV-E reimbursement to stay in the same school.

The education provisions in Fostering Connections are making states take notice that this issue requires a lot more attention. “States are clamoring for assistance on educational stability, and they are reaching out for help,” notes Rob Geen, director of the policy, research, and communications group at the Annie E. Casey Foundation. “We see this as a real window of opportunity.”

VOICES FROM THE CLASSROOM SHUFFLE: CHENIECE



School stability provisions in the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act and in a law passed in her home state of Connecticut last May came too late for Cheniece O’Neal.

Switching schools was nothing new for O’Neal, who lived in 10 different foster-care settings between ages 11 and 18 and attended three different high schools in her freshman year. As she was finishing her sophomore year, O’Neal moved out of a residential facility and in with an aunt who became licensed as a foster parent, but she was determined to stay put at Hamden High School.

Not only had O’Neal made friends and bonded with teachers, but she felt she would get a better education at Hamden. “There was a nursing program that you had to be a junior to take, and I really wanted to enroll,” she said.

The problem: O’Neal’s aunt lived in New Haven, not far away but outside the boundaries of the Hamden school district. “I could have taken a public bus to school, but the school district wouldn’t allow it,” she says.

With support from her Casey Family Services social worker, O’Neal wrote “a whole bunch of letters to a lot of people, but I got no response.”

“We went to the boards of education in Hamden and New Haven, we wrote letters, and we explained the placement moves and the concerns she had. We even got her lawyer involved,” says Asmahan Liebowitz, a social worker for Casey Family Services. Several people in the state Department of Children and Families also were contacted, but nothing could be done.

As noted on page 7, a state statute delineating responsibility for transportation was needed to allow Connecticut children to continue attending their original school when they moved to foster-care placements across town borders.

O’Neal, a bright and motivated student, eventually adjusted to her new high school and graduated on time, despite some lost assessments and credits that she had to make up when she transferred. With support and guidance from Casey, she enrolled in a community college to study nursing, but ultimately did not succeed after two separate attempts. Too many school disruptions and a lack of adequate preparation took its toll. O’Neal is now expecting her first child, but hopes to resume her nursing studies.

That school transition was just one of many setbacks O’Neal faced, but it could have been avoided if current laws had been in effect. O’Neal served on a panel of young people involved in a Casey advocacy leadership academy that testified in favor of the educational stability bill passed in the Connecticut legislature. She also has shared her experiences at national conferences sponsored by Casey.

Today, when a child in state care is placed in a home outside the jurisdiction of the school of origin, “the presumption is that it is in their best interest to stay in the original school,” notes Liebowitz, and the state child welfare agency must ensure transportation.

Having that mandate “would have made a big difference,” says O’Neal.



The Casey Foundation, which has identified educational stability in foster care as one of its critical policy goals, is interested in this issue for its potential to improve the permanency outcomes and well-being of vulnerable children, Geen notes.

The American Bar Association's Legal Center for Foster Care and Education reports that advocates and practitioners from across the country have provided a wealth of anecdotal evidence that positive educational experiences – including fewer school moves – lead to better permanency outcomes for children in out-of-home care. Research from studies including the small Minnesota Permanency Demonstration Project to the well-known Midwest Study by Chapin Hall also suggest that children who attend school regularly and change schools less have fewer discipline problems and school suspensions, which can disrupt their living placements and impede permanence.

“Educational stability is something we know can lead to better outcomes – this is a no brainer,” says Sarah Greenblatt, senior associate director of the Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative, a national grant-making foundation focused on helping youth in foster care transition to adulthood. “While a young person is in the state foster care system, the state should take on

an advocacy role as if it were the ‘parent.’ The Fostering Connections law makes it easier for child welfare agencies to take that role with education systems.”

experts say. The Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative helps youth “to be their own best advocates,” notes Sandra Wilkie, a consultant with the Initiative. “Youth

“CHILDREN AND YOUTH IN FOSTER CARE MUST OVERCOME MYRIAD OBSTACLES TO ENTER ADULTHOOD AS SELF-SUFFICIENT, CONTRIBUTING MEMBERS OF SOCIETY. EDUCATIONAL STABILITY AND ACADEMIC SUCCESS SHOULD NOT BE AMONG THESE BARRIERS.”

– Michelle Lustig, coordinator of Foster Youth and Homeless Education Services for the San Diego County Office of Education

Youth in care get suspended from school more often than typical non-foster children, according to Diane Kindler, clinical director of Casey Family Services. “Part of it is that many have special educational needs and are not getting the support services they need because of frequent moves.”

The agency advocates for kids to stay in their same community and school whenever feasible, says Raymond L. Torres, vice president of the Annie E. Casey Foundation and executive director of Casey Family Services. “If they do have to leave their homes – we work very hard to make sure that issue is on the table and that their special educational needs are met.”

When it's necessary for young people to move, it's critical that they play an active role in decisions about their education,

need to participate in the education-planning meetings when questions about their best interest are discussed.”

Next Steps

Fostering Connections has helped mobilize states to forge interagency agreements and even adopt state laws and regulations to ensure educational stability. But some feel the collaboration requirements for child welfare agencies in Fostering Connections are not enough. Similar mandates should exist for school systems, which may feel their hands are tied by residence requirements and transportation barriers. “There are no similar mandates for local education agencies” to collaborate in overcoming these obstacles, notes McNaught.

The Fostering Success in Education Act, a bill introduced in Congress last year by U.S. Sen. Al Franken, D-Minn., would apply the same mandates for education agencies that Fostering Connections applies to child welfare systems. The measure, which some advocates want added as an amendment to the upcoming reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, would require states to:

- Designate a foster care coordinator within school systems to collaborate with the state child welfare agency in addressing educational stability;
- Create a process for resolving disputes about whether it is in a foster child's overall best interest to remain in a particular school after moving to a new school district; and
- Develop a system to ensure that foster children can transfer and recover credits when they change schools, and that foster children who have attended multiple high schools with different graduation requirements can graduate.

U.S. Rep. Michele Bachmann, R-Minn., also has introduced the School Choice for Foster Kids Act, which would allow foster parents to send any foster child to his or her original school through education vouchers from the Chafee Foster Care Independence Program.

Collaborative Efforts

Even without such measures, there are many steps child welfare agencies can and are taking to enforce Fostering Connections, working with school systems on a state-by-state and school-by-school basis.

With support from Casey Family Programs and the Annie E. Casey Foundation, the Legal Center for Foster Care and Education, which is comprised of the American Bar Association Legal Center on Children and the Law, the Juvenile Law Center, and the Education Law Center, has developed a national blueprint to guide the field in working toward better outcomes for children in out-of-home care.

The blueprint, which reflects input from organizations that are part of the National Working Group for Foster Care and

VOICES FROM THE CLASSROOM SHUFFLE: JOSH



Josh Grubb entered foster care when he was 12 years old and a sixth-grader in middle school. From the beginning of middle school to the end of high school, he attended nine schools – seven middle schools and two high schools.

"It was hard picking up where I left off at other schools, because different schools move at different paces," notes Grubb. For example, "Math is like building blocks, and if you miss a level you have to go back over it."

"The hardest thing was leaving friends behind," he says. "I considered my friends my family, especially when I was in homes that weren't the best place to be. It's always tough to start with the pressure of new classes, new teachers, and meeting new people."

Grubb has received support from and given support to other young people in his situation through the Youth 4 Youth Leadership Board in Tennessee, an organization that reaches out to foster youth and helps them network to educate the community to find resources and change policies and practices that affect youth. He has served as president of the organization's East Tennessee region and will be taking over as state president next year.

Through Youth 4 Youth, Grubb learned about the Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative and became an Opportunity Passport participant. This effort helps young people who have been in foster care between the ages of 14 and 24 to open an Individual Development Account (IDA) and save money that can be used to ease the

transition from foster care by covering costs for education, vehicles, housing, and health care. The IDAs draw a dollar for dollar match, up to \$1,000 per year, based on the participant's savings. In addition, the young people receive financial literacy training and open a personal bank account. Training also is offered to guide young people in buying and maintaining such assets.

In spite of the many challenges of moving around, Grubb beat the odds and graduated from high school second in his class. He is now a freshman at Vanderbilt University studying Latin American studies, Spanish and Portuguese, and political science.

Along the way, he has gotten vital help from his caseworkers and guardian ad litem and financial support for his studies through existing federal and state programs, but he's also worked hard and taken a lot of initiative to save money and navigate the various application processes for college and financial aid. He now works in his college admissions office part-time.

Grubb has shared his experiences and advice at convenings held by the Tennessee Department of Children's Services, which were modeled after the Annie E. Foundation/Casey Family Services' national convenings focused on finding permanent, loving families for all children in care. In addition to making more scholarship money available for foster youth, "There needs to be stronger emphasis and encouragement from social workers early on to encourage young people to pursue higher education," starting with community college, says Grubb. "We don't have the types of financial resources other kids get from their parents, and it can be very intimidating to think about going into debt."



Education, sets forth eight education goals and corresponding benchmarks, along with examples of state, local, and federal policies, practices, programs, and resources. Its educational stability goals include specific guidance and tools for stakeholders including caseworkers, judges, attorneys, and educators (*See article on page 8*).

The Education Law Center and Juvenile Law Center, two Philadelphia-based advocacy groups, also have received Casey Foundation support to foster interagency collaboration that promotes school stability for Pennsylvania children in the child welfare and juvenile justice systems.

The state's Department of Public Welfare recently released a bulletin and screening tool child welfare professionals and school district personnel will use to ensure school stability and minimize disruptions for children in out-of-home care, as well as those receiving services in their own homes. The bulletin lays out detailed requirements for various agency personnel and calls for an education liaison in each county child welfare agency. The "education screen" will be conducted for every school-aged child in the child welfare system. It provides detailed instruction to comprehensively address school status, records, and progress as part of the federal Child and Family Service Review process.

In addition, the Pennsylvania State Supreme Court is deciding whether to promulgate new rules that would require judges to inquire about the educational status of every child during case reviews, requiring specific education findings at every stage of a child's case and assigning an education decision-maker for each child if needed.

THE CASEY FOUNDATION HAS IDENTIFIED EDUCATIONAL STABILITY IN FOSTER CARE AS ONE OF ITS POLICY GOALS, BECAUSE OF ITS POTENTIAL TO IMPROVE THE WELL-BEING OF VULNERABLE CHILDREN.

Even in a tough fiscal climate, California continues to be a leader in providing support services and dedicated personnel to help keep foster youth on track in school.

"We have a collaborative framework. We became aware a long time ago that no one entity is going to do it alone and do it well," says Lustig of the San Diego County Office of Education. "There has been a huge shift from the time that I started as a social worker. We are indoctrinated now in

the notion that these systems need to work together and rely on each other."

Highlights of California's work include:

- A pilot program in three Northern California school districts in 1973 placed a special advocate in the school systems to monitor the school progress of foster children and help them overcome educational obstacles. This program today is funded in 57 of California's 58 counties and provides services from tutoring and mentoring foster youth in school to bringing them to visit college campuses and helping them to complete applications.
- A 2003 law applying provisions around school stability contained in the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act of 1987 to children in out-of-home care, including a mandated liaison for every school district to ensure that foster children's educational needs are met.
- Laws passed in September 2010 to improve outcomes for children in foster care, including a stronger measure allowing foster children to continue attending their school of origin — and secondary schools in the same attendance area — when placed with a family in a different neighborhood. The law also applies to children who are reunified with their



parents, “so you are not penalized for returning home,” notes Lustig. These measures require child welfare workers to consider proximity to the current school in foster care placement decisions and to collaborate with special school liaisons.

San Diego County’s work includes:

- An interagency agreement, currently being updated, that commits school districts, juvenile courts, case workers, child welfare authorities, probation authorities, and other stakeholders to work together in meeting school stability mandates;
- A foster youth student information system that houses the health and education records of children in foster care and on probation so that systems can share data;
- A program, funded by the Stuart Foundation and Child Welfare Services utilizing Title IV-E matching funds, to track the placements, educational outcomes, and services received by a specific cohort of foster youth to see how they fare and whether they graduate high school on time.

Thanks to all these efforts, data show that about 90 percent of San Diego foster youth who are eligible to graduate do so on time, and that their overall grade point average is higher than for foster youth nationally.

In Connecticut, an active coalition has been working to address school stability for youth in care for several years. “Youth in the child protection system had identified this problem as their number one priority, and folks in the child protection and education systems started working with child advocates to address it,” says Jamey Bell, executive director of Connecticut Voices for Children.

statewide system that would allow children to cross town borders.”

Casey Family Services has been a key partner in these efforts, Bell notes. The agency sponsored a 2008 forum at the Connecticut State Capitol after the federal legislation passed – with compelling testimony from foster youth and experts – which aided in the outreach and coalition-

FOSTERING CONNECTIONS HAS HELPED MOBILIZE STATES TO FORGE INTERAGENCY AGREEMENTS AND EVEN ADOPT STATE LAWS AND REGULATIONS TO ENSURE EDUCATIONAL STABILITY.

A proposed state law, which predated Fostering Connections, failed due to budget concerns, but a similar measure passed in May 2010. “The federal legislation gave us the extra push” to influence state lawmakers, says Bell. “It was fortunate that we had a preexisting coalition working together, because we were able to figure out what needed to change.”

“We needed legislative change on the state level so the State Department of Education and the Department of Children and Families could work out a system to transport kids,” Bell explains. “Our education system is very locally-based, so we needed a

building efforts that helped get the state law passed.

Nationally, such work will pave the way for more stories like Ashley Jackson’s.

“I am the first generation in my family to attend college, and I’m about to graduate from a four-year university,” she notes. “If I had been in different schools, if I was not involved in all these activities, if I was not with the same kids I had grown up with, I cannot even imagine what my life would have been like.”

GOALS AND RECOMMENDATIONS OF THE LEGAL CENTER FOR FOSTER CARE AND EDUCATION



The Legal Center for Foster Care and Education serves as a national technical assistance resource and information clearinghouse on legal and policy matters affecting the education of children in the foster care system. The Legal Center also provides expertise and advocacy to promote federal, state, and local laws and policies that address the educational needs of youth in care.

The Legal Center is a collaborative effort between the American Bar Association Center on Children and the Law, the Education Law Center, and the Juvenile Law Center. It is supported by a number of organizations, including the Annie E. Casey Foundation and Casey Family Programs.

Following passage of the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008, the Legal Center began receiving requests from policymakers, advocates, and others at the federal and state level about how to implement the education provisions of Fostering Connections most effectively.

“Because educational stability and continuity already were a focus of the Center’s work, we were able to provide both state and federal examples of best practices for states wishing to change law, policy, and practice,” notes Kathleen McNaught, assistant director for child welfare at the American Bar Association Center on Children and the Law and the project director for the Legal Center for Foster Care and Education.

One resource the Center recently updated to reflect the enactment of Fostering Connections is a blueprint to guide the field in working toward better outcomes for kids in out-of-home care.

“The Blueprint for Change: Education Success for Children in Foster Care,” developed with input from the National Working Group for Foster Care and Education, sets forth eight education goals and corresponding benchmarks, along with examples of state, local, and national policies, practices, programs, and resources. Its educational stability goals include specific guidance and tools for stakeholders including child welfare caseworkers, judges, attorneys, and educators.

The eight goals for systems working with foster youth include:

1. Youth are entitled to remain in their same school when feasible.
2. Youth are guaranteed seamless transitions between schools and school districts when school moves occur.
3. Young children enter school ready to learn.
4. Youth have the opportunity and support to fully participate in all aspects of the school experience.
5. Youth have supports to prevent school dropout, truancy, and disciplinary actions,
6. Youth are involved and engaged in all aspects of their education and educational planning and are empowered to be advocates for their educational needs and pursuits.

7. Youth have an adult who is invested in his or her education during and after his or her time in out-of-home care.

8. Youth have supports to enter into, and complete, postsecondary education.

Although Fostering Connections represents progress toward educational stability, in testimony delivered at a hearing before the U.S. House Ways and Means Subcommittee on Income Security and Family Support last year, McNaught offered a set of recommendations for amending and clarifying some of the Act’s education provisions:

- Make explicit the need for education agencies to coordinate with child welfare agencies to ensure educational stability and continuity for children in foster care.
- Clarify the mandate to transport children to their original schools.
- Promote interagency collaborations and identify clear responsibilities of each agency (child welfare or education agency, or the juvenile court) with responsibility for foster youth.
- Collect data to improve education outcomes for children in care.

“What we have learned from the first 10 months working with states on implementing Fostering Connections is that the full vision of the education stability and continuity provisions cannot be realized without addressing these outstanding issues,” McNaught says. “By advancing this work, there is an opportunity to leverage this exciting moment to improve the education, and the lives, of many children in our nation’s foster care systems.”

SOCIAL WORK PRACTICES TO SUPPORT SCHOOL STABILITY



The federal Fostering Connections and Increasing Adoptions Act and emerging state laws and policies promoting educational stability are a big step forward in ensuring that child welfare agencies work with school systems to make classroom success a high priority for foster youth. But the effectiveness of these mandates ultimately rests with the child welfare and education professionals working with children and youth in foster care.

One of the best practices to help ensure young people in foster care have educational stability, experts say, is one of the simplest: keep talking about it.

“The best practice is to know that educational stability needs to be addressed and it needs to be raised on a regular basis,” notes Sarah Greenblatt, senior associate director of the Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative, a national private foundation focused on helping youth from foster care transition successfully into adulthood. “If a young person’s need for a stable education isn’t raised, it won’t get addressed, and the more these needs are addressed, the more young people will get what they need from the education system.”

Team meetings aimed at finding a permanent, safe, and loving family connection for youth in foster care offer an appropriate setting to discuss these issues. Often called permanency teams, these meetings generally include the young person along with social workers, family members, teachers, mentors, family friends, and others identified as having a close connection and interest in helping the young person find a permanent family.

Permanency teams address three broad practice areas, Greenblatt notes: safety, permanence, and well-being. The latter category encompasses educational stability, health and mental health needs, and the concrete skills a young person will need to make a successful transition to adulthood.

“Educational stability is one of the goals that support a young person’s overall developmental well-being – and one the team should prioritize,” Greenblatt notes. The team should also ensure proper testing, class placement, and special accommodations the young person may need to make educational progress.

When discussing school issues, “the social worker might want to arrange a team meeting at the school or coordinate it with an Individualized Educational Program (IEP) meeting,” she says. “If the team meeting is held where education professionals are located, they can take a shorter break from school responsibilities and have educational information at hand to resolve any issues.”

Young people also need to be actively engaged in conversations about their education. The Initiative “promotes young people being involved in their own planning and decision making as equal partners while helping them learn to be their own advocates,” notes Greenblatt. “We are working to take the teaming process to a deeper level in states where there are Initiative sites so that child welfare workers can address these educational issues earlier on, with youth engaged in the planning process.”

When children don’t have birth family members who can advocate for them at school, it is important to educate and work

with foster parents to help them play an active role.

“We really encourage foster parents to act as parents and advocates in the school system with our assistance and back-up, but if that is not possible, the social worker will do it,” notes Diane Kindler, clinical director of Casey Family Services.

Ta’Nesa Blakely, a participant in the Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative who graduated from the University of Michigan-Flint in 2008 with a major in social work, only had one foster placement and one change of schools, but she says her foster parents’ involvement was instrumental in helping her find scholarships, programs, and resources for foster youth. A friend of theirs who was a social worker helped her connect with the Jim Casey initiative, which enabled her to earn extra money for books and other school costs through an Individual Development Account.

Blakely feels she would have had to struggle a lot more to complete her education without all of these connections and resources. “I had people to talk with, to look out for me, and to help me make tough decisions.”

Many experts say that educational stability will be best achieved through practices geared toward addressing the underlying issues that cause family disruption – and by working to find permanent, loving family connections for all children at risk of removal.

“In the long run, the best thing we can do is have less kids coming into care – to keep kids safe and with permanent families,” says Kindler.



BRENDA DONALD THE ANNIE E. CASEY FOUNDATION

Close-up

In August, Brenda Donald joined the Annie E. Casey Foundation as vice president of the Center for Effective Family Services and Systems. She leads the Center's work to promote improvements in public systems such as child welfare and juvenile justice, develop effective family strengthening practices, and bring evidence-based interventions to scale.

Donald previously served as secretary for the Maryland Department of Human Resources (DHR) overseeing critical services to children and families, and as deputy mayor in the District of Columbia. In addition, she served as assistant city manager of Little Rock, Arkansas. In 1995, she became one of the first fellows in the Casey Foundation's Children and Family Fellowship program.

VOICE: *While in Maryland, you designed Place Matters, a comprehensive child welfare reform agenda that, among other things, significantly increased permanency rates. What made this initiative work?*

BRENDA DONALD: Permanence was a critical focus of Place Matters, but it was a broader reform effort that also transformed front-line practice, how we engaged families, and accountability within the department. Together, these changes helped us reduce the number of children in care by 20 percent.

In terms of permanence, we embedded an expectation that permanency planning begins the day a child comes into foster care. At every critical decision point, you can influence how quickly or how slowly a child moves to permanence.

We wanted big results, so we first looked at Baltimore City, which had two-thirds of the state's foster care population. By looking at data, we quickly found that an extremely high percentage of children with a plan of adoption already were living with foster families or relatives that wanted to adopt them.

DHR didn't need to search for adoptive families – yet children were still in care. We had to remove the barriers, whether legal or structural, to allow families to

“IN TERMS OF PERMANENCE, WE EMBEDDED AN EXPECTATION THAT PERMANENCY PLANNING BEGINS THE DAY A CHILD COMES INTO FOSTER CARE. AT EVERY CRITICAL DECISION POINT, YOU CAN INFLUENCE HOW QUICKLY OR HOW SLOWLY A CHILD MOVES TO PERMANENCE.”

complete their adoptions. In one case, the home study wasn't approved because there was lead paint in the home. In another, a mother needed a generator to properly care for her medically fragile child before adopting. Rather than immediately addressing issues, the adoptions stalled over and over.

VOICE: *As the head of a large state agency, how did you ensure these barriers were overcome?*

BRENDA DONALD: Initially, I was very hands-on with case workers and leadership. We went through a series of detailed, child-

by-child plan reviews to find barriers to legalization. I met with staff every two weeks and worked through a list of 700 kids on an adoption track. What was the status of each kid? Was there a termination of parental rights? Were kids in pre-adoptive homes? Did I need to talk with someone to move an issue forward?

The process modeled to staff the importance of unpacking barriers and finding solutions. Most solutions were within our reach. By focusing on permanence and getting people to think critically, we moved a significant number of kids to adoptions. Later, we brought the same focus to reunification and working with families, as well as guardianships.

In addition to reviewing case practice, we looked at structural barriers. We learned that even when things on DHR's end went well, there were delays in court paperwork and hearings that left kids languishing in foster care. We went to the chief judge and asked: “What do you need?” The answer was an additional photocopier and a bit of clerical support to help process an enormous amount of paperwork. So, we figured out how to resource the court, and when they saw our support, they provided an extra judge to handle the backlog of families



“THE PROCESS MODELED TO STAFF THE IMPORTANCE OF UNPACKING BARRIERS AND FINDING SOLUTIONS. MOST SOLUTIONS WERE WITHIN OUR REACH. BY FOCUSING ON PERMANENCE AND GETTING PEOPLE TO THINK CRITICALLY, WE MOVED A SIGNIFICANT NUMBER OF KIDS TO ADOPTIONS.”

Photos by Tom Nappi

needing to finalize adoptions. We were able to build new relationships to make things happen for kids.

VOICE: *What can other states learn from Maryland?*

DONALD: Reform is complicated. While you can't do everything at once, you have to be clear about what pieces are interdependent. You have to focus on results and address barriers comprehensively.

For example, we wanted to reduce the number of youth in congregate care in Maryland. Initially, the focus was on placement policies. We said no child under age 12 could be placed in a group home without a high-level review and no kids under age 6 could be placed there, period. Those steps were important, but we also had to make sure there were more family-based placements. I spent a lot of time building supports for foster parents, which allowed us to place more children with families. In all, we reduced the number of kids in group homes by 50 percent.

VOICE: *Will we see less system reform in coming years as states grapple with fiscal crisis?*

DONALD: Everybody is challenged with budget reductions, and it's easy to become paralyzed in thinking, “We can't make changes without a whole lot of money.” That probably is true in some cases. However, look at the example of group-home reductions. It costs an average of \$75,000 to have a child in a group home, but only \$10,000 a year for a foster home. So, when potential foster parents said they would be

willing to care for a child if they had access to mobile crisis services, we did the math. We moved kids into more appropriate settings and still saved money.

VOICE: *As a state administrator when the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act passed, did you view the legislation as an opportunity or a challenge?*

“EVERYBODY IS CHALLENGED WITH BUDGET REDUCTIONS... WE MOVED KIDS INTO MORE APPROPRIATE SETTINGS AND STILL SAVED MONEY.”

DONALD: There remains a lot of excitement about the Act and its focus on kin and older youth; reform-minded commissioners were already working in these areas. But the devil's in the details. With the relative notification requirements, for example, how quickly do states need to move? How is the process documented? Everyone supports the idea of educational stability, but typically, state child-welfare systems don't have the authority to require locally administered schools to cooperate. Along with the excitement, commissioners fear getting into trouble if the law is not implemented in the right way.

VOICE: *What should be the role of philanthropy in supporting public systems reform?*

DONALD: Foundations can enhance and influence national- and state-level policy. Philanthropies such as Casey are able to

do the research, write the position papers, convene the discussions, and help overcome challenges inherent in public systems. In addition, Casey has helped states understand the importance of data. When an agency has to make budget cuts, it sacrifices policy and research expertise first, not social workers. Foundations can provide that missing resource with vital data analysis.

Foundations, including Casey, can play a significant role in helping to develop, test, and share best practices. Everybody wants something that works, but systems are trying out lots of different things and hoping something improves outcomes. Philanthropy can build that body of evidence to allow systems to pull something off the shelf and say, “This practice has been proven, we can apply it systematically and get the results we want for kids.” This can be vitally important.

VOICE: *Promoting evidence-based practice is a significant investment for the Foundation. In your mind, how will the field look if proven practices are adopted widely?*

DONALD: It's simple. Our kids will be getting better outcomes. For example, at Casey Family Services, we are building an evidence-based practice model focused on permanence for foster youth. If successful, kids would move to family quicker and with fewer post-permanency disruptions, and they would experience the same positive outcomes we want for all of our kids. Looking toward the future, when others follow the Casey model, they would see similar results.

NATIONAL ADOPTION DAY: BUILDING A MOVEMENT FOR KIDS AND FAMILIES



From left: Mary and her adopted son Darnell with Cynthia Billey from the Alliance for Children's Rights during a previous National Adoption Day event.

From Dover, Delaware, to Wenatchee, Washington, celebrations were held on and around Saturday, November 20, to celebrate a major milestone for 4,800 children – their adoption from foster care. The 11th annual National Adoption Day also highlighted the unmet needs of 114,000 children in foster care waiting for an adoptive home.

Since 2000, nearly 35,000 children have had their adoptions finalized during National Adoption Day. The event has grown to include more than 345 celebrations annually, thanks in large part to the work of a six-member coalition of foundations and nonprofit children's groups.

"It's very important that we have this coalition. As a group, we have strived to elevate foster care adoption," says Cynthia Billey, senior staff attorney at the Alliance for Children's Rights in Los Angeles.

"What makes this a national effort is that the cities where local events are held are so passionate. They just can't wait to create this celebration for these kids who have been waiting, and that excitement has spread across the country."

Traditionally held the Saturday before Thanksgiving, National Adoption Day was inspired by Los Angeles Juvenile Court Presiding Judge Michael Nash's idea to open court on a Saturday in order to push through thousands of backlogged cases finalizing foster care adoptions.

The Alliance then formed a coalition with the Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption and the Freddie Mac Foundation to spread "Adoption Saturday" to other cities with backlogs resulting from the 1997 Adoption

and Safe Families Act, which was designed to prevent children from lingering in foster care by connecting them more swiftly with permanent families.

By 2000, nine courts were on board; a year later, 34 – with help from volunteers in the courts, social services, and advocacy groups.

"That's when the strategy and vision got bigger," says Billey. Instead of being a day solely for large cities with backlogs to finalize adoptions, the day became a way for all cities "to celebrate these incredible adoptive families and raise awareness of the many children in foster care still needing permanent, loving homes."

Three new coalition partners – the Annie E. Casey Foundation/Casey Family Services, Children's Action Network, and the Congressional Coalition on Adoption Institute – also helped to launch a website, www.nationaladoptionday.org, and create a national campaign.

For communities sponsoring National Adoption Day events, the day represents more than finalized adoptions. "We wanted to recognize adoptive parents and kids and show the positive aspects of adopting kids out of foster care," says local organizer Geoffrey Allen, Family Court commissioner in Jackson County, Missouri.

These communities are not alone in highlighting foster care adoptions. In a presidential proclamation, Barack Obama praised the benefits of adopting from care, stating: "These children can thrive, reach their full potential, and spread their wings when given the loving and firm foundation of family."

The coalition also has pursued a two-tiered strategy – encouraging local celebrations and conducting a national campaign featuring celebrities and government officials, from actress and adoptive parent Nia Vardalos to U.S. Health and Human Services Secretary Kathleen Sebelius.

"We all come together under a single vision of getting these celebrations not only embedded at the community level, but providing a national overlay," says Rita Soronen, executive director of the Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption. "It really speaks to how to effectively elevate a cause through coalition building."

Coalition members also bring their individual orientation and strengths. For example, the Congressional Coalition on Adoption Institute helps involve policymakers so they can "experience the everyday impact" of foster care adoption, says Kathleen Strotman, the Institute's executive director.

The day "has a dual benefit for us," she says. "It raises awareness and policymakers' participation in the events. Seeing the adoptive families and a 4-year-old out of foster care who has now found a family helps motivate them to keep doing the work they need to do."

Eventually, the National Adoption Day Coalition hopes its efforts will be replaced by local planning coalitions.

"The vision is for National Adoption Day to become like any other holiday, with communities having total ownership of the celebration," says Soronen.

FOSTER CARE ADOPTION IN THE UNITED STATES



The good news: The number of children adopted from foster care has risen in the last few years, from 53,000 in 2007 to 57,000 in 2009. In addition, the number of children waiting to be adopted has declined by 20,000, down to 114,000 in 2009.

The bad news? More needs to be done to find permanent families swiftly for children in foster care who are waiting to be adopted.

To emphasize this need, child welfare experts point to a troubling statistic: 29,471 young adults exited foster care in 2009 without a permanent family.

“Have we really put the emphasis on assuring families for children? Twenty-nine thousand children aging out is an abject failure of the system,” says Rita Soronen, executive director of the Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption.

Many of these young people have spent years in foster care, switching placements and schools and becoming mistrustful and detached, she says.

“They also are more at risk of becoming early parents, engaging in substance abuse, being undereducated and underemployed, becoming homeless, and re-entering the public system – criminal justice or others,” Soronen adds. “It’s largely because they don’t have the support systems that other children with a family have.”

Soronen also notes the gap between the 70,000 children freed for adoption and the 57,000 children adopted in 2009. “We just haven’t done our job well enough,” she says.

Rob Geen of the Annie E. Casey Foundation shares Soronen’s concerns. “Is a child more likely to be adopted today than 10 years ago? I don’t think we have the answer,” adds Geen, Casey’s director of family services and systems policy, research, and communications.

THE NUMBER OF CHILDREN ADOPTED FROM FOSTER CARE HAS RISEN IN THE LAST FEW YEARS, FROM 53,000 IN 2007 TO 57,000 IN 2009.

Because foster care is not a federal system but is instead overseen by states and counties, Geen says, some agencies and localities are “doing a phenomenal job on adoption,” while others have “much room for improvement.”

“While I would love to celebrate the increase, it’s hard to say definitively we’re doing a much better job,” Geen says. “We’re probably getting a little better, but we have a lot more work to do – particularly with older youth adoptions.”

Experts add that prevention – not adoption – is the first goal. “How do we prevent the need for children to enter care?” says Soronen. “If we reach the courts, how do we reunify these families, providing the best possible supports so children are safe? If reunification fails, how do we quickly give these children what they deserve – a permanent family?”

Nor is adoption the only permanency option. Increasingly, children whose lives are disrupted by abuse, neglect, or other problems enter kinship care, usually living with a grandparent or other relative.

Most kinship arrangements are made by families without child welfare or court involvement. When the state arranges kinship care, some kin provide foster care and others assume legal guardianship of a child.

Guardianship got a boost from the 2008 Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act, which expands support for children in foster care and promotes family permanence. The law addresses a major issue: the child-rearing expenses that can cause financial hardship and discourage some kin from becoming guardians.

The law makes federal reimbursement available to states that offer subsidized guardianship, which provides financial assistance to guardians. “This has increased the chances for children to stay within their family,” says Soronen. “It’s not adoption, but it keeps them within their most familiar circle.”

“If it’s just a matter of resources, why wouldn’t we jump in and provide the same kind of supports to kinship families that we give to foster families?” says Soronen. “The law represents a major shift in attitude and resources.”

The provision has seen “an enormous pick-up,” says Geen. Most of the 37 states that had a subsidized guardianship program are taking steps to apply for federal support.

“THE MOST IMPORTANT THING THE FOSTERING CONNECTIONS ACT DID WAS TO EXPAND THE DEFINITION OF PERMANENCE TO INCLUDE GUARDIANSHIP. THERE WAS A MISPERCEPTION THAT GUARDIANSHIP WAS SOMEHOW LESS PERMANENT, BUT THE ONLY DIFFERENCE IN MOST STATES IS THAT PARENTAL RIGHTS AREN’T TERMINATED.”

— Kathleen Strottman, executive director of the Congressional Coalition on Adoption Institute

Many of the remaining 13 states are examining the option.

“The most important thing the Fostering Connections Act did was to expand the definition of permanence to include guardianship,” says Kathleen Strottman, executive director of the Congressional Coalition on Adoption Institute. “There was a misperception that guardianship was somehow less permanent, but the only difference in most states is that parental rights aren’t terminated.”

Some adoption groups also worried that “allowing two permanency options would disincentivize adoption, which has not proven true,” Strottman adds. Many relatives don’t adopt because it requires terminating parental rights, she notes, and the guardianship option “automatically increases the number of children who find permanence.”

Older Children Challenged in Finding Permanence

The median age of children adopted in 2009 was 5 years old, with 31 percent age 8 or older. For the children free for adoption, the median age was 7.5 years, with 47 percent age 8 or older.

“Children who are not in a larger sibling group, are under age 8, and don’t have significant medical concerns are much more likely to be adopted out of foster care. If you are in the other group, it is more difficult,” says Strottman. “We have to move forward in a way that recognizes the existence of these two groups.”

Not only is finding adoptive parents for older children harder, but children who enter care at an older age often are wary of family life and don’t consent to adoption. The 1997 Adoption and Safe Families Act clearly prioritized the importance of children achieving permanence. However,

NOT ONLY IS FINDING ADOPTIVE PARENTS FOR OLDER CHILDREN HARDER, BUT CHILDREN WHO ENTER CARE AT AN OLDER AGE OFTEN ARE WARY OF FAMILY LIFE AND DON’T CONSENT TO ADOPTION.

the law also included an escape clause of sorts, known as Another Planned Permanent Living Arrangement, which Strottman refers to as “a mistake.”

“Kids who have come out of years of abuse often are not looking to find another family,” and are sometimes supported in that decision by social workers who worry about “setting them up for heartbreak” by promising an adoptive family they fear they won’t find, says Strottman. This practice challenge is “a big hurdle we have to overcome.”

“We’ve isolated the problem, but changing the law is not enough to have a changed situation,” she says. Work must be done to change the attitudes prompting use of that clause, she adds.

Continued recruitment of foster families is also important “because they are the first line of potential adoptive parents,” says Soronen. In 2009, 54 percent of the parents who adopted a child were previously the child’s foster parent, 32 percent were related to the child, and only 14 percent were not related.

The Changing Face of Adoptive Families

Why the recent increase in foster care adoptions? Some say a recent drop in international adoptions may be a contributing factor. Some countries have restricted or ended international adoptions, and the economic downturn may make them less affordable.

Others note the foster care adoption community’s acceptance of non-traditional families. In 2009, 66 percent of parents who adopted children from foster care were married couples, 28 percent were single females, 3 percent were single males, and 2 percent were unmarried couples.

“There is a growing dynamic of single parents and older parents adopting,” says Soronen, as well as same-sex parents and parents who already have raised a family.

Geen also points to increased social acceptance of adoption. “We used to hide the fact that children were adopted. We wouldn’t talk about it,” he says. “Now as a society, we see adoption as something to be celebrated. That’s a major accomplishment.”

VOICES OF ADOPTION: ADOPTING 25-YEAR-OLD CHANGED ONE FAMILY FOREVER



As a young adult, Todd Kindler avoided holidays. “I’d turn my phone off on Thanksgiving. I didn’t want to be bothered,” he says. “Everyone else was doing their own thing with their family and I wasn’t.”

And when he met new people, he avoided exchanging information about his family. “I really had no ties. I’d hate answering questions because it was not a great topic. I was a kid in care,” says Kindler, who spent most of his childhood in foster care in Maine with Casey Family Services.

But that has changed now that Todd has a mother. Diane Kindler, director of clinical services for Casey Family Services, adopted him at age 25 in 2009.

“When Diane first started inviting me to Thanksgiving, I was hesitant to go,” he says. “Now, I look forward to it.”

Now, when someone asks about his family, “I just tell them about Diane,” says Todd. “It’s pretty cool.” He can also talk about his new brother David, age 23, who Diane adopted from India as an infant in 1987. David’s fiancée and their baby and Diane’s extended family also have become part of Todd’s new family.

“It’s just completely different. There is the family bond,” says Todd, who opted to take his mother’s last name.

It’s different too for Diane, who was caught off-guard when Todd, at age 24, asked her to adopt him. “It’s very unusual for an older youth to do. It was very brave,” says Diane. “I fluttered around and said, ‘Let’s continue to get to know each other.’”

But she also understood Todd’s request. “He wanted a family,” says Diane, a trained social worker. “He’d aged out of foster care and was one of those youths that the system had not served well, as hard as we tried. He realized what was missing in his life. He liked me. And I liked him. I planned for my other son David, but I never thought this would happen. But this is how older-kid adoptions happen. Most people don’t think it’s possible.”

The two first met during Todd’s childhood, when Diane was a Casey Family Services supervisor in Maine and he was a client. They continued to talk and see each other occasionally after Todd left foster care at age 18. “She’s always been in the background,” says Todd. “She was a mother figure to me.”

Diane’s biggest concern about adopting Todd was how it would affect David, who lives near Todd in Maine. “He and Todd have built a relationship and David has been nothing but gracious,” says Diane.

“Todd has been great as well,” she adds, learning to do “things a brother would do,” such as attending a shower for David’s baby and spending time with Diane’s extended family during get-togethers in Maine.

Inevitably, Diane’s parenting of Todd differs from her first experience. “I had David from infancy and we’ve gone through all of it together,” she says. “With Todd, it’s so different because you start at a different point and don’t have that shared history. We had a tiny bit, shared through Casey, but you have to start learning how to be a family.”

David says it was “a little strange” when his mother first mentioned adopting Todd, but in keeping with who his mother is. “She just helps people,” he says. And after Diane explained Todd’s situation, David adds, “I was all for it. The way my mom raised me made me understand. If I can help give somebody a family, I’m more than happy to do that.”

David also understands that while he is becoming more independent from his mother, Todd is learning how to depend on a mother for the first time. “I respect my mom enough that I feel it’s my responsibility to let them adapt to each other and create that bond of mother and son that I already have,” he says.

For Todd, it’s all good – even when his mother nudges him to go to college, which he does hope to do once he feels more financially secure. As he weathers the storms of early adulthood, he now has a home port.

Before, he says, “I basically was trying to survive on my own. I landed jobs wherever I had to. I couch-surfed for awhile, staying at friends’ houses,” he says. “It’s hard, especially when you feel like you have no support or anyone to go to.”

Now busy working several jobs and sharing an apartment with roommates, Todd has a permanent connection to someone who cares about him. “It’s great. If I’m having a crappy day I can call my mom and tell her what’s going on and she’ll offer advice,” he says. “For the first time in a long time, I’ve been happy.”

JIMMY WAYNE: WALKING THE WALK FOR AT-RISK TEENS



While many people make, and ultimately break, New Year's resolutions, one country singer kept his promise to raise awareness of foster youth left homeless after aging out of the system. That personal pledge to "give back" set Jimmy Wayne on a 1,700-mile trek from Nashville to Phoenix on foot, and toward the end of his seven-month journey, a broken ankle. His Meet Me Halfway awareness campaign focused media attention along his walk, and established him as a national advocate of teens in foster care.

Walking through six states paled in comparison to his journey through childhood in North Carolina. In and out of foster homes since age 8 as a result of his mother's alcoholism and time in prison, Wayne's life took a decidedly devastating turn at age 13. Brought along on his parents' crime spree, his stepfather woke Wayne from their car's backseat at midnight and told him to get out. "I did," he says. "They drove off and didn't come back. I became homeless for the first time, left at a bus station."

For the next three years, he lived on the streets frequently, running away from group homes and detention centers when police or social services intervened. "I was the smallest guy in those places," he says. "I didn't know what was going to happen. The older kids threatened to beat you. I always felt safer on the streets."

Having aged out of the North Carolina system at age 16, Wayne says he was "rescued" by Russell and Bea Costner, a couple in their mid-70s whom he initially met when he asked if he could mow their lawn for money. "They gave me a chance to go to school, to college, to chase my dream."

After years of instability, the teen welcomed the structure provided by family. "There were rules," Wayne says. "Mr. Costner told me to follow rules, cut my hair, and go to church. I knew he was strict, but I also knew he wasn't going to give up on me. They stood by me for six years and changed

"I REACHED A POINT IN MY CAREER WHERE I NEEDED A DIFFERENT STAGE, NOT THE STAGES I WAS PERFORMING ON ACROSS THE COUNTRY, BUT ONE WHERE I COULD DO MORE TO RAISE AWARENESS."

my life. They couldn't predict that I would eventually go to college or be on stage singing at Madison Square Garden or the Grand Old Opry. They just knew I needed a home and showed me a lot of love."

While in college, one of his classes visited a youth detention center. During the tour, a guard told the students that the inmates were "trash." For Wayne, the comment ignited a fire in him to speak out for those handed a difficult lot in life. "At the time, I was living with a middle class family and wearing nice clothes, so it surprised everyone when I raised my hand and said, 'Sir, you might not remember me, but I lived here, down the hall on the right. Some of these kids were abandoned by their families or made mistakes, but they're not trash. Don't ever say that again.'"

An aspiring songwriter and singer, Wayne began to share his stories in songs such as "Where You're Going." While in college, he won a Nashville songwriting contest and began touring, eventually landing a record deal and recording Billboard-topping hits.

Rather than focusing solely on commercial success and gain, Wayne has continued to share his experiences and highlight the struggles of homeless teens. "I reached a point in my career where I needed a different stage, not the stages I was performing on across the country, but one where I could do more to raise awareness."

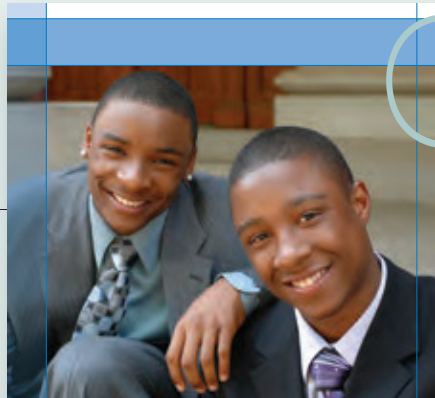
Wayne quickly went from touring for massive crowds with Brad Paisley in 2009 to walking across deserts in the Southwest the next year, meeting fans and advocates for homeless youth — a literal street team for the cause — along the way. His success in bringing attention to the plight of disconnected youth brought Wayne in front of a very prestigious audience: the U.S. Congress. The singer inspired elected officials, young people, and advocates with his challenge to communities during a special National Foster Care Month briefing on Capitol Hill earlier this year. He asked participants to get up from their seats. "That's how easy it is to help," he said. "Just stand up for kids."

That spirit to engage others in the struggle is winning Wayne recognition. Asked what's next for him he responds, "I just walked 1,700 miles for kids. What are *you* going to do?"

Editor's Note: Wayne will be a keynote speaker at Casey Family Services 2011 Parents Conference in May. Learn more about his efforts at www.projectmmh.org.

Discover new resources for child welfare professionals by following Casey Family Services on Twitter at @caseyfamily.

Resource Corner



Amplifying Youth Voices to Advance Child Welfare System Reform

THE ANNIE E. CASEY FOUNDATION/CASEY FAMILY SERVICES
OCTOBER 2010

Voice is published biannually 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 services throughout New England and Baltimore, Maryland. Offerings include foster care and adoption, family reunification, family preservation, family advocacy and support, family resource centers, and ongoing support to families who have legally committed to a child from care. Casey Family Services is part of the Casey Foundation's Center for Effective Family Services and Systems.

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

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 info@caseyfamilyservices.org.

Amplifying Youth Voices to Advance Child Welfare Reform

Over the past decade, young people increasingly have been involved in foster-care reform efforts. In addition to improving the system and its outcomes, the benefits to the individual youth advocate also are significant. This report describes how Casey Family Services supported young people in Connecticut's foster care system to effectively advocate for change. It then shares the lessons learned through this engagement process in order to inform other agencies' efforts to engage youth in systems reform.

To download, visit www.caseyfamilyservices.org and click on "Resources."

Meeting the Education Requirements of Fostering Connections: Learning from the Field

This brief aims to help agency leaders, policymakers, judges, and their partners understand and respond effectively to the education requirements of the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008. Sponsored by the Connected by 25 initiative, the Finance

Project, and the Youth Transition Funders Group, the report reflects on lessons learned from a decade of initiatives to improve education outcomes for youth in and leaving foster care.

To download, visit www.financeproject.org.

Transition Toolkit

For most youth in care, the move to adulthood brings feelings of uncertainty. FosterClub's easy-to-use Transition Toolkit helps young people and the adults close to them prepare for life after foster care with resources to help youth identify their current assets, gain commitments of support from others, and develop plans for housing, education, health, and money management.

To view, visit transition.fosterclub.com.

Back on Track: Transforming Virginia's Child Welfare System

This report highlights how a focus on results helped the Commonwealth of Virginia transform its child welfare system. Through a partnership with the Annie E. Casey Foundation's Child Welfare Strategy Group, the state introduced a new family-centered practice model; increased permanency rates for children in foster care; and reduced spending, the number of children in custody, and congregate-care usage within three years.

To download, visit www.aecf.org and click on "Publications/Media."



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Voice

In This Issue



i From the Desk of Raymond L. Torres

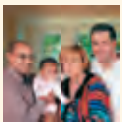


2 Exchange:
School Stability is Critical to Success of Youth in Care
Goals and Recommendations of the Legal Center for Foster Care and Education
Social Work Practices to Support School Stability

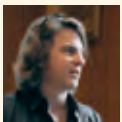


10 Close-up:
Brenda Donald, The Annie E. Casey Foundation

12 Exchange:
National Adoption Day: Building a Movement for Kids and Families
Foster Care Adoption in the United States
Voices of Adoption: Adopting 25-Year-Old Changed One Family Forever



16 News & Highlights
Jimmy Wayne: Walking the Walk for At-risk Teens



17 Resource Corner