

CONNECTS

CASEY

SPRING 2005
A REPORT FROM THE
ANNIE E. CASEY FOUNDATION

IN THIS ISSUE: Pursuing Permanent Families for Children and Youth; Notes of Recognition; Reducing Racial Disparities in Child Welfare; INSITES

PURSUING PERMANENT FAMILIES FOR CHILDREN AND YOUTH

“When I was in foster care, it didn’t seem like I had any choices for any future. All kids deserve families. They need a family, to have someone, this is father, this is mother—they need a family so they can believe in themselves and grow up to be somebody. This is a big deal that people don’t realize. I wish everyone could understand.”

The words of this former foster child, quoted in a 2004 Pew Commission Report on Children in Foster Care, make it glaringly clear that all children need and deserve permanent families to love, nurture, protect, and guide them. A permanent family is one that provides a child with safety, stability, love, and an unshakable sense of belonging—not just for a period of time, but for a lifetime.

Nationwide, about half of the more than 523,000 children and youth in out-of-home care are between the ages of 10 and 17. Most are children of color. For an alarming number of these children, state child welfare agency “permanency planning” focuses mainly on independent living, effectively ruling out the probability of finding an adoptive family, kin, or other committed, caring adults. Consequently, most of the 20,000 youth who “age out” of the foster care system at age 18 each year do so without any meaningful connection to an adult. Outcomes for these young people too often include homelessness, unemployment, substance abuse, or incarceration.

To ensure each child every opportunity to exit care with a family relationship intended to last a lifetime, Congress passed the Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997. The legislation presented five ways to achieve permanent connections for children: reunification with the child’s birth parents, adoption by relatives or non-relatives, legal guardianship, permanent



To prevent her niece and nephews from being separated in foster care, Andrea R. adopted all six children with support from Casey Family Services.

CASEY CONNECTS

Spring 2005

*A quarterly newsletter published by
The Annie E. Casey Foundation*

701 St. Paul Street
Baltimore, MD 21202
Phone: 410.547.6600
Fax: 410.547.6624
www.aecf.org

James P. Kelly
Chairman

Douglas W. Nelson
President

Ralph Smith
Senior Vice President

Tony Cipollone
Vice President

Dana Vickers Shelley
Director of Strategic Communications

Joy Thomas Moore
*Manager of Grantee Relations and
Media Projects*

Deborah L. Cohen
Editor

Betty Marton, Betsy Rubiner,
Tiffany Thomas-Smith
Contributing Writers

Kristin Coffey
Copyeditor

Kathryn Shagas Design
Design and Production

© 2005, The Annie E. Casey Foundation,
Baltimore, Maryland

The Annie E. Casey Foundation is a private charitable organization dedicated to helping build better futures for disadvantaged children in the United States. The primary mission of the Foundation is to foster public policies, human-service reforms, and community supports that more effectively meet the needs of today's vulnerable children and families. In pursuit of this goal, the Foundation makes grants that help states, cities, and neighborhoods fashion more innovative, cost-effective responses to these needs.

NOTES OF RECOGNITION

DAVID KAKISHIBA Nearly 30 years ago, a dozen Asian-American immigrants from Berkeley High School got together to provide each other with friends and support. Fast-forward to 2004: The East Bay Asian Youth Center (EBAYC) has a membership of over 500 Asians, Latinos, and African Americans from Oakland's Lower San Antonio neighborhood who work together to provide academic support programs, after-school enrichment, family support services, and health centers. Last fall, EBAYC, a partner in the Foundation's *Making Connections* site in Oakland, was one of 18 organizations selected from more than 1,000 applicants to win a \$115,000 *Leadership for a Changing World* award.



PHILIP COHEN

"EBAYC shows how cross-cultural groups can really build power and coalitions within a community," said Laura Chambers, director of the *Leadership for a Changing World* program. "We were also impressed by EBAYC's willingness to talk about race and class in a public school system."

The award program also brings the winners together for training and workshops and to share their experiences tackling the nation's most entrenched social, economic, and environmental challenges.

"It's a real honor to be recognized for the day-to-day work we do," said David Kakishiba, EBAYC's executive director, "and it's amazing to interface with other winners who are doing incredible work in different parts of the country."

TAMMI FLEMING was a single teenage mother from the projects in New Orleans when she began volunteering at Plain Talk, the neighborhood-based initiative launched by the Casey Foundation in 1994 to reduce adolescent sexual risk-taking. Fleming studied at night to get her GED and continued her education to earn a bachelor's degree and a master's in public health. Now the mother of five children, including twin girls, Fleming's ambition and ingenuity have moved her through the ranks to become Plain Talk project director and a dynamic promoter of community-based health programs through the nonprofit Kingsley House. And, in January, while participating in a panel discussion at the National Institutes of Health in Maryland, Fleming was recognized by President Bush for her outstanding grassroots efforts.

Her success also led to her award as "Outstanding Teen Parent" by the Healthy Teen Network, formerly known as the



YOLKEBA DAVIS

National Organization on Adolescent Pregnancy, Parenting and Prevention. Fleming “is the epitome of what we think teen parents are capable of if they’re motivated and supported, despite the odds,” said Pat Paluzzi, director of the Network.

Awardees in the Casey Foundation’s FAMILIES COUNT: National Honors Program, which honors organizations that do an exemplary job of strengthening families and neighborhoods, continue to earn recognition from other organizations for their outstanding contributions. For example:

BETHEL NEW LIFE In 1979, members of a small neighborhood church began to turn the tide against poverty and unemployment in Chicago’s West Garfield Park community by investing \$9,600 and countless hours of sweat equity in a three-flat apartment building. Today, Bethel New Life (FAMILIES COUNT 2002), with a \$10 million annual budget, 348 employees, and nearly four times that number of volunteers, has brought over \$110 million into the community, placed more than 7,000 people in living-wage jobs, and developed 1,000 new units of affordable housing.

Bethel’s accomplishments were honored last fall by the Bank of America’s Neighborhood Builders program with \$200,000 in grant funding for operational support, which it will use for additional staff and toward a 200-unit development located within walking distance of a transit stop. The award program also provides workshops on topics from strategic thinking and business planning to leadership development and building a diverse funding base.



“Bethel New Life has a proven ability to address community needs,” said Julie Chavez, Chicago market development manager for Bank of America. “It transforms people and the community with clear goals, measurable outcomes, and a well-defined strategy.”

DAVID ARIZMENDI Homeownership, an elusive dream for many low-income residents, is a reality for many colonias families in Hidalgo County along the Texas/Mexico border. Through Proyecto Azteca (FAMILIES COUNT 2003), families have access to everything from house plans to tools and know-how as they work together to build their own 816-square-foot, three-bedroom, one-bathroom wooden frame houses. Once constructed at Proyecto Azteca’s San Juan, Texas, building site, the houses are moved to lots purchased through interest-free mortgage loans secured by Proyecto Azteca.

Long-time community and economic development organizer and Proyecto Azteca Executive Director David Arizmendi was awarded the 2004 Housing Assistance Council Skip Jason Community Service Award. Arizmendi also serves the financial needs of colonias residents as CEO and president of Azteca Community Loan Fund and has contributed to the creation of a myriad of other financial, education,



child care, and nutrition programs for immigrants.

“David has used creativity and strength of character to bring water, decent housing, and other fundamental human needs to some of the very poorest communities in the United States,” said Housing Assistance Council Executive Director Moises Loza.

AVANCE September 2004 was a big month for Avance (FAMILIES COUNT 2001), the pioneer parent education program for Latino families. In addition to the grand opening of its new

CONTINUED ON PAGE 6



PURSUING PERMANENT FAMILIES

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

placement with a fit and willing relative, or another “planned and permanent living arrangement.” States have struggled to address the implications of the legislation, especially for older youth in care. Over the past few years, a grassroots movement has emerged calling for better permanency planning for older foster youth.

Successfully delivering on the promise of permanency for all children requires flexibility, commitment, and a willingness to rethink the meaning of a child-centered approach, many experts say.

“What we’re aiming for is a lifelong connection to a family, to a meaningful adult, to someone who can see children through the good and bad times. That will mean going a step beyond the norm in child welfare practice today to help these kids have a stronger foundation and a stronger future,” says Raymond Torres, who heads the Casey Foundation’s direct services operation, Casey Family Services. The agency is based in New Haven, Connecticut, and offers a range of services for vulnerable children and families throughout New England and in Baltimore.

“We know that there are multiple paths to permanency. A child’s birth family or an adoption, though preferable, is not always possible,” says Patrick McCarthy, vice president for system and service reform at the Foundation. “A family may be willing to make a commitment to stay involved in a child’s life, but may not be in a position to adopt, or the child may not want to be adopted.” McCarthy is also a member of the Foundation’s Child Welfare Strategy Group, which includes representatives of grant-making, technical assistance, policy, and direct service staff who focus on improving the child welfare system.

“The full continuum of permanence starts with trying to strengthen and preserve families,” says Joy Duva, deputy executive director of planning and policy for Casey Family Services. “When that’s not possible, and children enter foster care, then we must provide timely services to families to resolve the problems that led to the child’s removal. If reunification cannot happen, then we work with foster families and others who are important in the child’s life to achieve adoption, legal guardianship, or connection to kin or to another caring adult.”

Finding these alternatives involves tapping into a child’s extended network of family and friends—such as aunts, grandparents, foster parents, family friends, or favorite coaches—to identify someone to play an active part in planning for the child’s future.

Continuing to help families who take in these children is also critical. In the past two years, Casey Family Services’ Center for

What we’re aiming for is a lifelong connection to someone who can see children through the good and bad times.

Effective Child Welfare Practice has worked with about 20 states on permanency and post-adoption or post-permanency services.

“Our goal is to build on the successful practices we’re engaged in and share them in the field in a reciprocal way,” says Sarah Greenblatt, the center’s director. The center’s technical assistance with Connecticut agencies, for example, recently resulted in the funding of a program devoted to finding permanent families for older teens. A team of people involved in the teen’s life—including birth parents where possible—brainstorm to find someone in the young person’s life willing to provide a lifelong family tie.

Collaborations with Yale University’s Child Study Center, the Stuart Foundation, the New England Association of Child Welfare Commissioners and Directors, and others have sparked many discussions examining the role of lifetime family connections in the healthy development of children and youth. In addition, Casey Family Services recently sponsored a meeting including guardians, attorneys, and judges to help relatives and others within the child’s network better understand how to obtain legal child custody.

Recognizing that commitment from state leadership is fundamental in making permanency policies a key priority, Casey Family Services, Casey Family Programs, and the Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative (JCYOI) have joined with the Stuart Foundation, Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption, and the Peninsula Community Foundation to cosponsor a National Youth Permanency Convening in April. Seven teams from states with JCYOI projects as well as the six New England states where Casey operates foster care programs will attend. The teams will include agency executives, child welfare directors, independent living/adoption directors, and judicial leadership.

The Casey Foundation supports other nationwide initiatives that also contribute to the goal of permanency, such as its Family Economic Success work, which seeks to remove financial stressors that are the most common causes for parents losing their children to child welfare; Family to Family, a national model demonstrating the efficacy of neighborhood foster care; and the Community Partnerships in Child Welfare.

“The goal is that no child will have to grow up in the foster care system,” says Duva. “Permanence is not a new concept, but there’s a renewed vigor at Casey to do an even better job with the kids the system has not served well.”

REDUCING RACIAL DISPARITIES IN CHILD WELFARE

Even though children of color aren't abused more than others, they are put into foster care faster, stay in care longer, receive fewer services, and are reunified with their families less often than Caucasian children. According to data compiled by the Annie E. Casey Foundation and the Center for the Study of Social Policy, African Americans and Native Americans are about three times more likely to be in the child welfare system nationally than Caucasians, and Latino children are overrepresented in foster care in selected states and cities.

In March 2004, representatives from the Annie E. Casey Foundation, including Casey Family Services, met with representatives of Casey Family Programs, the Marguerite Casey Foundation, the Jim

the work of these organizations touches more than three-fourths of all children and families in the child welfare system."

The alliance aims to "reduce and eventually eliminate racial disparities in child welfare, so that you can't predict outcomes for children in the system because of their race," says Frank Farrow, Casey's director of Community Change Initiatives. "Right now, you can."

The alliance plans to demonstrate national leadership and commitment in addressing inequities in child welfare policies, practices, and stereotypes. Khatib Waheed, a senior fellow at the Center for the Study of Social Policy and the coordinator of the alliance's work, says there is room for change at every step in the child welfare

the alliance, we're applying this racial equity lens," says Sania Metzger, director of policy at Casey Family Services. "African Americans, Latinos, and Native Americans are overrepresented in placements and in lengths of stay." While its work is still in the early stages, an important accomplishment is that all of the partners have come together around a shared set of definitions and a shared agenda. "We've agreed to commit to this over a period of years," Metzger says.

"This is the first time all the 'Casey cousins' have come together as a collective, created an agenda, and pooled resources toward it," observes Wanda Mial, a senior associate in child welfare at the Casey Foundation. "Racial disparity and its effects permeate all systems. If we

The alliance aims to reduce and eventually eliminate racial disparities in child welfare, so that you CAN'T PREDICT OUTCOMES FOR CHILDREN in the system because of their race. Right now, you can.

Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative, and the Center for the Study of Social Policy (CSSP) to explore this phenomenon. For years, each has worked separately on the topic; this marked the first time all the Casey organizations have come together to acknowledge a common concern around racial inequity and explore a joint approach to address it. The Casey/CSSP Alliance for Racial Equity is the fruit of that retreat.

Patrick McCarthy, the Foundation's vice president for system and service reform, notes that the alliance has the "access, credibility, and evidence to bring this issue to the fore in child welfare. Taken together,

decision-making process: by preventing unnecessary placements, decreasing the number of placements each child experiences after being removed from home, reunifying the child with his or her family, and improving the outcomes during the youth-to-adult transitions. Committing to specific kinds of support for children of color is foremost on the agenda.

The Foundation's direct services operation, Casey Family Services, which offers services for vulnerable children and families throughout New England and in Baltimore, has increasingly promoted the importance of securing permanent families for children of color. "Through

can begin learning here, other areas can both inform and benefit from this process."

The Casey-CSSP Alliance plans to form coalitions with organizations and initiatives, such as the Race Matters Consortium and other groups working to address racial inequities, as well as organizations outside the child welfare field that can influence public opinion and policy. "We cannot eradicate racism tomorrow," says Gretchen Test, program associate in child welfare with the Annie E. Casey Foundation. "But there are things we can do in the next week, the next month, or the next six months to diminish its effects."



The Annie E. Casey Foundation
 701 St. Paul Street
 Baltimore, Maryland 21202
 Phone: 410.547.6600
 Fax: 410.547.6624
 www.aecf.org

Return Service Requested

PRSRT STD
 U.S. POSTAGE
 PAID
 LONG GREEN, MD
 PERMIT NO. 2

NOTES

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 3

headquarters in San Antonio, Texas, Gloria G. Rodriguez, who established the program in 1973, took the stage at the Kennedy Center in Washington, D.C., to receive one of six awards from the Hispanic Heritage Award Foundation.

“This year’s honorees embody all the qualities that characterize great leaders and visionaries—creativity, commitment, and compassion,” said Pedro Greer, Jr., chairman of the Hispanic Heritage Award Foundation. “They remind us on a daily basis what it means to believe in a dream.”

Rodriguez, who has received numerous honors for Avance, credits her inspiration and determination to her mother, who as a young widow with a third grade education succeeded in raising five children through the support of extended family and community members.

“If parents are given essential education and support, their children will gain the necessary self-esteem, confidence, and competence to move forward on a positive track,” she said.



CAROL HIGHSMITH

CHILD AND FAMILY NETWORK CENTERS Christmas came early last December to Barbara Mason, head of the Child and Family Network Centers (FAMILIES COUNT 2003), a free preschool program in Alexandria, Virginia. During the inauguration of the program’s newest branch, she learned that the Freddie Mac Foundation was adding \$100,000 to the \$350,000 it had already promised. The extra funds will enable the centers to serve an additional 32 children.

“I was completely surprised,” Mason said. “Support from foundations like Freddie Mac and Annie Casey is a powerful endorsement of our programs and allows us to leverage other dollars to expand our services.”

Mason helped create the centers in 1984 when she saw the discrepancy between the achievements of middle-class kindergartners and their low-income peers.

From the first class of six children, 172 children now attend preschool at the program’s six sites, although many more remain on waiting lists. Mason’s work demonstrates what a recent long-term study by the High/Scope Educational Research Foundation underscores: children from low-income families who attend high-quality preschool are more likely to grow into scholastically, professionally, and economically successful adults.

INSITES

SPRING 2005
A REPORT FROM THE
ANNIE E. CASEY FOUNDATION

FINDING A LASTING FAMILY CONNECTION

Although a family can be defined in a number of ways, one fact remains constant: Every child needs one. For children or youth without a family to call their own—forever—life all too often becomes a series of missteps and disappointments colored by isolation and loneliness. “Permanency” is the term most often invoked by child welfare experts today to describe what all children need to achieve healthy development and success as an adult. At its root, permanency means that every child—no matter what age—needs a responsible adult to provide love and guidance, and every child needs a safe place to belong.

Although everyone agrees that nothing can trump the value of a child being able to stay with his or her family of origin, when that’s not possible, other options include services to help safely return children in out-of-home care to their birth families or kin, as well as supports to help sustain those reunions. If needed, the search must then widen to include extended family, foster parents, and friends. Although even under these circumstances, a permanent legal arrangement such as adoption or guardianship is in the child’s best interest, it’s also important to recognize the viability of other lasting but more informal ties.

Here are examples of efforts that go the extra mile to find a child a loving family to count on for a lifetime.



Open communication, mutual respect, and close cooperation between foster and birth parents like Janice M. and Tonya B., above, are signature features of Casey’s approach to reunification.

A Special Family Reunion

Last Christmas Eve, two-year-old Elizabeth (not her real name) was surrounded by family—not only members of the foster family she lives with, but also her birth mother.

“That was just awesome for Elizabeth—to see her mom coming to the house where she was living,” says Janice M., Elizabeth’s foster mother in Portland, Maine. “I don’t think a lot of other biological parents could have done that. We both really worked hard at it.”

Elizabeth's birth mother, Tonya B., gives Janice equal credit for welcoming her. "Nobody I know would have been able to do that," says Tonya. "And Elizabeth had a really good time."

Open communication, mutual respect, and close cooperation between foster and birth parents are signature features of the Reunification Program offered by the Maine and Connecticut divisions of Casey Family Services.

"The tendency has been more to keep foster parents and birth parents very far apart. This is actually quite different," says Diane Kindler, deputy director of the Maine division. "Emotionally, this is much healthier for kids than to have two separate families they go between."

Designed to reunite children in out-of-home care with their birth or extended families, the program relies on foster parents, like Janice, who are specifically trained to support the child's relationship and possible reunification with birth parents. The foster parents, along with the birth parents, are part of a team that develops a permanency plan for the child. The foster parents make a long-term commitment to remain part of the child's life, including a possible adoption.

As a result, the program helps prevent the uncertainty and loss foster children frequently experience. They often feel torn between their loyalties to both foster and birth families. When they find a permanent home, they often lose important ties with loving adults from their foster or birth home.

From the start, Janice and Tonya have worked successfully to avoid the tension that can develop between foster and birth parents. They talk almost every night after Tonya calls Elizabeth, often discussing parenting issues and approaches. Sometimes they go together with Elizabeth to medical appointments. Elizabeth often walks holding each of their hands during Tonya's weekly visit.

The message to Elizabeth is clear and positive. "We're all here on this team, we're all parenting you," says Janice, who has a master's degree in social work.

This has helped Elizabeth. When Elizabeth was removed from her birth home due to neglect and arrived in foster care, she often banged her head, vomited, and gagged. These physical symptoms of emotional distress have almost disappeared. "She hasn't felt torn between two sets of people who love her," says Janice. "She's less stressed, more comfortable. She knows we get along well."

Linda and Ray P. of Coventry, R.I., say the training, services, and support they received were instrumental in their decision to adopt Michael, now 11, and David, 13, from foster care.

Consistent Support through Challenges

Linda and Ray P. of Coventry, Rhode Island, knew they were in for a challenge when they adopted two boys in 1999. They'd already spent several difficult years caring for them as foster parents through Casey Family Services' Treatment Foster Care Program, which offers intensive services for children with major behavioral problems caused by severe trauma.

When David, then 8, and his brother Michael, then 5, became eligible for adoption, Linda and Ray didn't hesitate, even though they already had three sons between ages 11 and 16. "There was no way we could tell them, 'You've got to go somewhere else,'" says Ray.

As treatment foster care parents, Ray and Linda had received specialized training and met regularly with a Casey team that includes social workers, a psychologist, psychiatrist, and educational consultant. Linda also received a subsidy so she could stay home full time, especially for David.

As a result of all their training, Ray and Linda knew a lot of the problems the boys would run into as teens. In opting to adopt them, a deciding factor was the post-adoption services they knew Casey Family Services would offer. David and Michael still endure post-traumatic stress resulting from prior severe abuse and neglect. "There's no way that we could handle it on our own," says Ray.

"It's a great message for the kids to know they have a forever family, but that doesn't erase all the trauma and behavior they may bring into a family," says James Gannaway, director of the Rhode Island division of Casey Family Services. "We say



Peggy C., far left, and Jose F. are working toward adopting Jessica, left, and Yolanda, right, with the help of Families for Teens, a New York City program that seeks permanent family connections for older foster children.



‘Everything you got the day before they were adopted that you need is still there the day after.’”

The boys’ biological mother also has helped out. Under an open adoption, David, now 13, and Michael, 11, see their birth mother occasionally, and last year, David lived with her for the summer. “They had a relationship, and Ray and I didn’t want to rip that from them too because they had lost so much,” says Linda. “I have a very good relationship with their mom.”

While David’s behavioral and emotional issues have improved, his teenage years are just beginning. His parents are ready. “They’ll always have our family,” says Linda. “I’ll never turn my back on them.”

Building Hope for Teenagers

For Jessica R., 16, it was a surprise. After years of living in a group foster care home, she and another girl from the home have found a permanent family.

‘I’m lucky,’ says Jessica. “A lot of people wouldn’t take two teenage girls. I appreciate everything because I’ve really never had anything like this—family-wise, all the attention.”

For Peggy C. and Jose F., it’s been a surprise too. After originally thinking they’d adopt a young child, the couple has brought two teenagers home to their Queens, N.Y., neighborhood.

“If it were up to me, I’d take a lot more than two. They’re great kids,” says Peggy, who was inspired to adopt foster teens after hearing of their struggles.

Creating these new connections is what Families for Teens—a major initiative of New York City’s Administration for Children’s Services, ACS—is all about. The child welfare agency’s goal is to provide better options and outcomes for teenagers in out-of-home placement by working harder and smarter to find them each a permanent nurturing family connection.

The Casey Foundation has helped fund the massive project. And the Foundation’s Casey Strategic Consulting Group has provided intensive strategy and implementation assistance.

The changes in New York City are a response to mounting concern that too many teens have been placed in group homes or residential treatment centers that fail to provide proper guidance, structure, and a close enduring family tie. When these young people must set off on their own, many are alone, adrift, and vulnerable.

“There are families for teenagers. They don’t need to ‘age out’ to homelessness and despair,” says Alexandra Lowe, special counsel to the ACS Deputy Commissioner for Family Permanency Services. “We’re trying to shift the paradigm and start pulling kids out of group homes that can’t provide the kind of emotional and educational support that a committed parent offers.”

As part of efforts to find them a much better place, Jessica and Yolanda C., 15, spoke last summer to a parent training class offered by You Gotta Believe!, an older teen adoption agency. Peggy and Jose were in the class. A few months later, the girls moved into the couple's house. Adoption efforts are underway.

"It's been good," says Jose. "A little crazy at times... They're definitely a handful and they're very funny—just teenage stuff. We're enjoying them." The couple has established rules, including a curfew. "They know that yes, I will check up on them. I will call school to make sure they came. They never had that. Nobody really cared," says Peggy.

"Here I have rules, guidance, and structure I never had before," says Jessica.

Before she met Peggy and Jose, Jessica was bracing for the "very scary" reality of aging out of the system with little financial or emotional support. Jessica now feels more confident about adulthood—she wants to get a master's degree and perhaps become a psychologist—because she has Peggy and Jose.

"It puts me in a safer environment with a better future because I have a family who will guide me to do the right things," she says. "I'll still have somebody to come to when I need to talk."

Help with Unexpected Parenthood

After raising five children of her own, Andrea R. began to relax and look forward to grandparenthood. Then life threw her a curve. When Andrea's brother and his wife could no longer care for their six children, Andrea was faced with an unanticipated choice: take her niece and nephews into her home or risk having them be separated in foster care.

Not only did Andrea provide a roof over the heads of all six children, whose ages ranged then from 7 to 13, but when the state determined that they could not safely return to their birth family, she decided to become a parent again. She formally adopted the children about five years ago.

"I wanted to make sure they stayed together as a family," Andrea explained.

The road ahead would be a difficult one, as Andrea and the children struggled with insufficient living space, the children's sinking grades in school, and then the death of a beloved grandmother with whom they all lived. When their



COURTESY OF CASEY FAMILY SERVICES

Services including counseling, play therapy, and assisting their adoptive mother in working with the school system have helped these children succeed in their new home.

situation seemed to be spinning out of control, Andrea turned to Casey Family Services for help.

"The children's grief over the loss of their parents, and then the death of their grandmother who was actively involved in their upbringing, was interfering with their progress in other areas of their lives," says Ivette Negron, a social worker in Casey's Bridgeport, Connecticut, division. "So we began by providing grief and loss counseling to help them cope with their intense feelings of sadness and anger." Through play therapy and creative activities, which included letters to their grandmother sent to heaven in balloons, the children found ways to express their feelings appropriately.

Facing the school system created another challenge. Andrea, more comfortable speaking Spanish than English, found it difficult and intimidating to try communicating with the school staff. When Casey staff intervened and explained the family's situation, the school responded, providing each child with evaluations and tutoring services to improve skills and growth potential. Casey also has helped ensure that Andrea and the school staff meet at least twice a year with each child to review challenges, plans, and progress.

"The children are doing much better now," Andrea observes proudly.