



**2025-2027**  
**CLASS OF**  
**CASEY**  
**CHILDREN**  
**AND FAMILY**  
**FELLOWS**

**THE ANNIE E. CASEY FOUNDATION**



# A LIFE-CHANGING PROGRAM. AN INVESTMENT IN THE FUTURE.

Strong results-driven leaders with the vision, skills and ability to champion and drive change are essential to making a lasting difference for large numbers of children, youth, families and communities. The Children and Family Fellowship® is the Casey Foundation's signature program to develop this potential in leaders of public, nonprofit and philanthropic organizations.

Over more than 30 years, the program has hosted 13 Fellowship classes and maintains a national network of 155 highly accomplished alumni Fellows. The Fellowship brings together midcareer leaders from varied professional backgrounds, geographic regions and racial and ethnic groups who are ready for significant professional growth and expanded leadership roles. It increases the pool of diverse, visionary leaders with the confidence and competence to lead and sustain major system reforms and community change initiatives. The 23-month executive leadership program attracts individuals who lead with passion, inspire others to action and persevere, often against great odds. Fellows think strategically, get things done and measure the difference they are making for the well-being of the nation's children and families.

# SIXTEEN

## ACCOMPLISHED, ASPIRING LEADERS

We are delighted to introduce the 2025–27 class of the Casey Foundation’s Children and Family Fellowship. Like the Fellows who have preceded them, the 16 members of the current class are dynamic leaders from a wide variety of backgrounds. Their work includes the fields of education, health, youth development and affordable housing, and often involves cross-sector collaboration. While they work in different disciplines, they share a common set of beliefs:

- All children, youth and families deserve to thrive not just survive.
- The people closest to the problem should drive the solutions.
- Data can both mask and illuminate entrenched disparities.
- Small solutions are not enough.

Compelled by the trials and triumphs of their families and communities — and by mentors who inspired them — the new Fellows are committed to a brighter future for the nation’s children, youth and families, their communities and the systems that serve them. The Fellows work to ensure that more children and youth have nurturing and supportive families and more families live in thriving communities.

Beyond setting and advancing individual objectives, the Fellows' work contributes to a shared result: Ensuring that all youth ages 14 to 24 have the necessary connections to school, work and family to achieve equitable outcomes of success. This work will involve learning about and applying the competencies of Results Count® — Casey's signature approach to leadership development — to leverage data and drive decision making around concrete goals.

The Fellowship will be enriched by the exemplary leaders profiled in these pages.

Leslie Boissiere

*Vice President, External Affairs*

Barbara Squires

*Director, Leadership Development*

**CLASS 13  
CHILDREN AND  
FAMILY FELLOWS  
PROFILES**



## MAYRA AGUIRRE

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Mayra Aguirre finds inspiration in the strength and possibility of communities, especially among those furthest away from opportunity.

“As a foundation, we exist to stand alongside and strengthen the work that’s already being done,” says Aguirre, president of the Hall Family Foundation in Kansas City, Missouri.

“There’s still a great sense of people doing right by one another, supporting each other in small but powerful ways. I saw that in my family and my community. It is how I learned what community looks like.”

Under Aguirre’s leadership, the Hall Family Foundation makes investments in education, family stability, economic mobility and the arts in six counties in Missouri and Kansas, guided by the voices of community members.

“Within our early education work, we asked what it would look like to foster resilience in everyone connected to the classroom — the teacher, the parent and the child — so that each person can thrive and reach their full potential,” she explains. “Our partners lifted up the importance of supporting mental health for all as essential to the well-being of families and communities.”

Aguirre sees the Fellowship as an opportunity to deepen her understanding of what it takes to move shared goals ahead, together.

Aguirre credits her parents’ courage as Mexican immigrants with shaping her sense of purpose. Because of them, she says, “I take imagining the world seriously. They believed something better was possible and that belief lives in me.”



## CHRISTINA AUTIN

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“I always had a nontraditional idea of what I wanted to achieve by studying the law,” says Christina Autin. “My highest use wasn’t going to be in a courtroom. I stood on the shoulders of the resilient immigrant women who came before me, and I needed to use that privilege to amplify the voice of the community.”

Today, Autin is the chief external affairs officer for Archer Greenwood Companies, a mission-driven real estate developer and advisory services firm that creates high-quality, mixed-income and affordable housing developments. In her role, she cultivates and manages relationships with community leaders, nonprofits, agencies and elected officials to ensure responsive stewardship of resources and assets. “Our goal is to leave neighborhoods better than we found them,” she says.

Autin’s work is not without challenges. Harmful mental models about subsidized housing and a lack of trust in private developers persist. Still, she is motivated by the potential in doing this work, exemplified by a growing relationship with a school in Baltimore.

“We’re working on plans for rental housing and homeownership near that school,” she says. “The investment could benefit residents who live near the school already along with students and families traveling from all over the city to attend this school.”

The Fellowship will help Autin build bridges between housing and intersecting issues. She explains, “My experience underscores that housing is more than shelter; it’s a platform to access and achieve everything else in your life.”



## ADRIANA CADENA

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“The experience of coming to this country as a child, being afraid of law enforcement into my adult years, not feeling like I belong — all of this has always sat with me,” says Adriana Cadena, executive director of the Protecting Immigrant Families Coalition. This national group of 800 multisector members works to ensure that immigrant families are included in the nation’s safety net, offering healthcare, nutrition, housing and economic support.

“Right now, we are in a defensive mode,” Cadena says. “In one week, we received four different notices detailing what programs can no longer be used by immigrants. Our long-term vision is to restore and expand access so immigrant families have the essentials they need to thrive.”

The coalition’s work is broad and far-reaching. One in four children in the United States has an immigrant parent, and 27% of the U.S. population lives in immigrant families. Cadena explains, “The highly visible detention of immigrants, including naturalized citizens and others legally in this country, is a really traumatic environment — especially for children.”

With a background in community organizing, Cadena initially joined Protecting Immigrant Families to run issue campaigns, but she quickly stepped into leadership when she realized the organization needed a strategy and fundraising to meet its mission. Cadena found the Fellowship on LinkedIn and was eager to meet thought partners struggling with the same issues and develop frameworks “to make sense of the chaos.”



## ABE FERNÁNDEZ

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“Growing up in the Bronx to immigrant parents in a community that struggled, I got really lucky,” says Abe Fernández, vice president of collective impact and director of the National Center for Community Schools at Children’s Aid.

In fifth grade, Fernández was selected for Prep for Prep, a program that offers talented public-school students a scholarship to an independent school. Fernández describes the experience as “life changing.” But he adds, “There were another 29 kids in my class that didn’t get that shot, though. Is luck really the only path to opportunity? I hope not.”

Fernández is focused on changing kids’ odds by expanding the community school strategy. The National Center provides technical assistance to reimagine schools as holistic hubs of resources and support for families, beyond academics.

Funding for community school coordinators is at risk. “Our work is in many ways an equity strategy,” says Fernández. “It recognizes that if we want to see population-level change, we must get to know each and every kid in the school and recognize that some kids require more [to thrive]. To have the notion of equity be challenged really affects our work.”

Fernández will use the Fellowship to help quantify the impact of the organization’s capacity-building work. “I look forward to sharpening my tools in community with the other Fellows while continuing to position the National Center as a leader in community schools,” he says.



## SHAMOYIA GARDINER

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“I never on a career day in my entire life said I wanted to work in local government,” says Shamoyia Gardiner, deputy chief of staff and legislative director in the office of the Baltimore City Council President since 2025. “I got here through a lot of education and a firm belief that children deserve everything.”

Gardiner spent years as an educator and education policy advocate. When her experience in the classroom left her questioning the priorities of those in charge, she turned to policy work to address the needs of children systemically and holistically.

Previously, as executive director of Strong Schools Maryland, Gardiner led statewide implementation monitoring and advocacy in support of the Blueprint for Maryland’s Future, a landmark public education law. In that role, her understanding of how relationships and inside-outside politics shape policies deepened. She sees her legislative work at the city level as a new way to leverage her knowledge and experiences for the benefit of Baltimore’s young people — and the Fellowship as an opportunity to learn additional approaches to problem solving.

“[Through the Fellowship] I’ve been given new frameworks, had preconceptions challenged and been reminded that who I was and what I experienced as a child is part of my own leadership and the impact I have on kids today,” she says.



## DEIDRE GRIFFITH

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Deidre Griffith's experience in community engagement began as a young adult, knocking on doors with her uncle in southern Louisiana to educate community members about the risks of toxic waste dumping in their neighborhoods.

“He showed me what can be achieved when you authentically engage community and elevate the voices of people with lived experience,” Griffith says. “I’ve been fortunate to be in influential institutions that can affect change, but I have the clarity that the most impactful change occurs when you center community.”

At BJC Health, Griffith oversees the system-wide strategy to advance health equity, leading a team of professionals dedicated to removing socioeconomic barriers to better health outcomes.

“The primary theme throughout my career has been making the healthy choice the easy choice,” she says. “Addressing infant and maternal health, youth development, healthy eating and other urgent and emergent community needs such as firearm violence often involves addressing the social issues that stand in the way.”

The Fellowship, Griffith says, “is a chance to learn from other dynamic leaders who have their own lens and approaches to similar issues.”



## KELLYANN KIRKPATRICK

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Growing up in a multigenerational, immigrant home, KellyAnn Kirkpatrick acted as a navigator as her family members encountered inequities and barriers in public systems.

“My grandmother retired well past retirement age because of the cost burden of living in New York City, having children with special needs and making uninformed financial decisions,” she says. “I am the product of trying to process all of that on behalf of others.”

Now, in her role as grants and partnerships lead for the Amazon Housing Fund, Kirkpatrick makes hyperlocal grants in three Amazon hubs — Seattle; Arlington, Virginia; and Nashville, Tennessee — to bridge gaps in affordable housing development, research and policy. Kirkpatrick is focused on “workforce housing” projects in high-opportunity areas near transit, which help groups like single parents, nurses, teachers and firefighters live affordably and well.

“The Fellowship is so exciting to me because I am learning the tools and the language to translate my personal experiences into meaningful change in communities,” she says.

Kirkpatrick reflects that no matter what was going on with her family during her childhood, she never had to worry about where she was going to lay her head at night. “There are so many children who don’t have that. It’s hard to focus on anything else.”



## JAKE LEOS-URBEL

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“All I’ve ever done has focused on children, youth and families and the belief that all children can thrive,” says Jake Leos-Urbel.

The son of a teacher and a social worker, Leos-Urbel has approached equitable outcomes for children from a variety of angles, including by serving in the Peace Corps in Namibia and teaching and researching child and youth policy in university-based settings. Now, as the senior director of learning and evaluation for Oakland Thrives — a collective-impact strategy designed to improve the health and well-being of Oakland’s children, families and communities — he supports partners in collecting and using data to inform and strengthen their work.

“As a backbone organization [for collective work], we have a lot of influence, but not a lot of authority,” says Leos-Urbel. “We work to meet the goals the community already has.”

One of the project’s biggest initiatives is Rise East, a cradle-to-career effort supporting young people throughout every stage of life, from early childhood through adulthood, in a 40-by-40-block area of East Oakland, spurred by a \$50 million national philanthropic investment and \$50 million in local funds. The effort is steered by four Black-led community organizations in East Oakland, and Leos-Urbel guides learning and evaluation.

The Fellowship is helping him lead with intention and awareness. “I’m focused on collaborative leadership that values the experiences of a lot of people,” he says. “I want to show up authentically. I’m already getting helpful feedback in the Fellowship about how to do just that.”



## MICHAEL LYNCH

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Raised by a “phenomenal” father and a community of neighborhood moms, Michael Lynch had a network of support that enabled him to weather the instability all too common for young men of color.

“Almost all of the men in my family have been incarcerated at some point,” says Lynch, co-founder and CEO of Improve Your Tomorrow. “They had tremendous abilities but limited opportunities to harness those skills.”

Lynch always knew he wanted to do something for young men of color. Inspired by a 2008 campaign rally for then-U.S. Senator Barack Obama, Lynch worked as a senior legislative advisor in the California State Legislature before co-founding Improve Your Tomorrow at a Sacramento school in 2013.

Improve Your Tomorrow equips young men of color to attend and graduate from college through a 12-year commitment of wraparound support beginning in sixth grade. Participants benefit from a college access mentor, study halls and workshops, brotherhood events and college tours. Lynch recalls one student who went from receiving failing grades to earning a 3.8 grade point average, graduating from college and returning to the program as a mentor and leader.

Improve Your Tomorrow now serves six states, and Lynch sees the Fellowship as a means to learn the skills he needs to scale the organization’s programs nationally. “When we’re successful, all young people will grow up with fathers or father figures who provide the love and joy they need to thrive,” he says.



## ROBERT MARCUS

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Beyond their physical benefits, sports were transformational in shaping Robert Marcus as a young person. “When done right, sports provide safe places, caring adults, mentors and life skills,” he says. “Without access to these developmental experiences, how do youth thrive?”

As chief strategy and impact officer for the Positive Coaching Alliance, Marcus works to eliminate systemic barriers that prevent youth of color, youth from low-income communities and girls from accessing sports at the same rate as other young people. In his role, he builds cross-sector, sports-equity coalitions at the community level and connects them with data on the availability and costs of local sports programs. In response to barriers and inequities identified by coalition members, local agencies and funders have added millions of dollars to the ecosystem, and now thousands more students are playing sports.

Marcus believes his Results Count® work through the Fellowship is integral to his goal of seeing 350,000 more kids participating in sports in the next five years.

“Oftentimes, you do systems-change work, but things aren’t changing,” he says. “They don’t get better or [the changes] aren’t measurable. Being able to tap into the Foundation’s frameworks and networks to produce something sustainable is a high motivation for me.”



## CHRISTIAN MOTLEY

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Christian Motley grew up in rural Alabama, in a small community across the railroad tracks from wealthier neighborhoods. “People worked hard,” he says. “But the distinction between those who had, and who didn’t, was very clear.”

Motley’s early experience sparked a lifelong commitment to understanding and addressing the kind of inequity he witnessed. After studying public school segregation at Berea College, he began his career in government and nonprofits focused on supporting urban and rural communities, working together across sectors to make a difference for youth and families.

In his current role as senior vice president and chief program officer at Results for America, Motley works alongside public sector leaders and local stakeholders to shift billions in public funding toward evidence-based strategies. He believes that data-informed policymaking ensures that lawmakers advance the most effective solutions that ultimately improve lives.

“People are losing trust in government and so many [other] systems that impact us every day,” he says. “Rebuilding that trust begins with getting results that people can feel.”

For Motley, the Fellowship is an opportunity to grow alongside his class and think critically about how they maximize their contributions together in this moment. “These are powerhouse individuals,” he says. “Each time we get together, I draw insights from their deep cross-sector experiences that I can apply immediately.”



## ADRIENNE OLEJNIK

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Adrienne Olejnik's start in finance didn't predict her role as an advocate. She joined the board of Kansas Action for Children (KAC), the state's largest policy advocacy organization, while working at a financial services firm.

"I was a new mom in my mid-20s, and it really opened my eyes to the possibilities of this work on behalf of children and families," she says. "Serving on the board for six years changed my life."

Inspired by her experience, Olejnik set out to make a difference. She narrowly lost a race to unseat her state representative, became a library director and served on the city council. When looking for a new way to improve outcomes for families, she returned to KAC, joining the staff in 2018. As vice president, she oversees the policy research, data and legislative teams and serves as a strategic partner to dozens of organizations statewide while keeping children's well-being at the center of her work.

Olejnik sees the Fellowship as a chance to think strategically about the seismic shifts in childhood brought by technology in the past 15 years. "In Kansas, the context is very divided, but this is a possible area for collaboration," she explains. "I want to understand how policy change can protect children while recentering our connection to each other."



## JOVON PERRY

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Jovon Perry wants every Minnesota family to have equitable access to health and wellness, economic assets, social capital, career pathways and nurturing learning environments. She helps make this a reality in her role overseeing cash and food assistance and employment programs for the state.

Perry believes the right strategies can help “families go beyond the minimum definition of self-sufficiency to truly thriving.” Among the best ways, she believes, is to serve children and their caregivers simultaneously, which is known as a multi-generational or whole-family approach. This recognizes that a child’s success is tied to their caregivers’ stability. Also, it addresses families’ needs such as health, financial stability, employment and education together, rather than in silos.

For Perry, success would mean the whole-family approach becomes a directive for all Minnesota state systems and a model for all state governments.

Perry describes growing up among hardworking people trying to survive poverty and learning that families and communities know what they need. Now, she’s committed to co-creating systemic solutions to poverty and inequity with low-income families, community organizers, tribal members, direct service providers and state staff. “It’s not that people aren’t working hard enough, are lazy, or undeserving,” Perry said. Rather, it’s that our systems are designed to create haves and have-nots.”

Nelson Mandela’s quote “It always seems impossible until it’s done,” sustains Perry as she grapples with solutions to complex social problems.



## ANN REILLY

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“I have said in a few bold moments that I think we can end foster care in the District of Columbia,” says Ann Reilly, deputy director of the Office of In-Home and Out-of-Home Care for the D.C. Child and Family Services Agency.

In her 17 years at the agency, Reilly’s roles have included social worker, hotline manager and supervisor. Her focus has remained constant: supporting, not separating, families through case management and community-based services. “If we pay the electricity bill and provide other concrete resources to keep families together, we make it easier for them to focus on parenting skills and participate in interventions that will help stabilize family life,” she explains.

Reilly hopes the Fellowship provides her with skills and relationships to change the systems D.C. families encounter. “Child welfare is the deep end of the system, the last resort for families in need,” she says. “To reduce the need for child welfare, we have to focus on bringing needed resources to bear much earlier.”

Reilly believes the end to foster care depends on protective factors like extended family and friends. “You can find out who a young person’s community is and use the courts to make those relationships legal,” she says. “The solutions to what our families need lie within them and their communities.”



## ALGER **STUDSTILL JR.**

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For Alger Studstill Jr., executive director of the Social Services Administration at the Maryland Department of Human Services, improving systems and outcomes for young people involved in Maryland’s child welfare system is business, but it’s also personal.

Studstill’s education and training in business administration enable him to look for innovative and unconventional ways to solve complex problems. His personal experience with family and kinship care motivates him to cultivate community and connection for caregivers and young people alike.

“Maryland has one of the lowest foster care entry rates, but once you’re in, you don’t leave,” says Studstill. “I had to ask, what are we doing that’s causing relatives and kin to avoid being part of the system?”

What he found were outdated, burdensome requirements and barriers — like a rule against bunk beds — that made it hard for willing family members to become licensed caregivers. While he works to change those rules, Studstill sees the Fellowship as a way to enhance prevention efforts so families never face separation.

“I want to become a better leader in this space,” he says. “I’ve only known state government; the Fellowship connects me with the nonprofit side, with philanthropy, with housing and education, to see how we can all lean in to affect children and families together.”



## SHARON VIGIL

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Sharon Vigil sees her own story in some of the students her organization serves. “My parents were hard workers, and like many families, we faced real challenges,” she says. “I had someone in school who reminded me that my life did not have to be dictated by my circumstances. I live with a level of urgency because I have seen many of my peers not get that one adult who changes everything.”

As CEO of Communities In Schools of Central Texas, Vigil oversees direct service programs on 123 high-need campuses, serving nearly 80,000 students across the region. She also serves as board president of Communities In Schools of Texas, a volunteer appointment in which she guides advocacy strategy for 27 affiliates statewide. Her work to support the holistic physical and mental health and well-being of students has faced new challenges in a charged political environment.

“In Texas, education is a battleground,” Vigil says. “The reimagining of politics in the classroom is making it challenging to create safe and inclusive spaces for all students.”

Vigil knows that her connections in both schools and the state house provides opportunities for systems change. “We have the trust of kids, principals, parents and superintendents,” she says. “How can we leverage that trust, and what is my personal role in doing so?”

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## ABOUT THE ANNIE E. CASEY FOUNDATION

The Annie E. Casey Foundation is a private philanthropy that creates a brighter future for the nation's children and youth by developing solutions to strengthen families, build paths to economic opportunity and transform struggling communities into safer and healthier places to live, work and grow. For more information, visit [www.aecf.org](http://www.aecf.org).  
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