

# FAMILY **TO** FAMILY:

## Building Bridges for Child Welfare with Families, Neighborhoods, and Communities

*By Joanne Omang and Kathy Bonk*

**I**n the field of child welfare, the list of migraines can be a long one. Agency frontline workers are laboring at or past capacity and yet have great difficulty achieving desired outcomes. Caseloads can be enormous and seem only to be growing. Children and youth from communities of color are disproportionately represented in out-of-home placements. Foster and adoptive parents seem more scarce than ever, and children are staying far too long in temporary living situations. The catalogue of problems faced by children at risk is more serious and difficult than at any time in the past 25 years.

In states as diverse as Pennsylvania and Maryland and in such urban areas as New York City, Cleveland, Cincinnati, Philadelphia, and Los Angeles, child welfare agency leaders have developed a response that is addressing these challenges. With the help of the Annie E. Casey Foundation, they have adopted a set of strategies and practices called Family to Family: Tools for Rebuilding Foster Care. It is a systemwide overhaul of child welfare services that combines traditional and tested principles with new practical tools for daily practice.

### **Successes and Challenges**

Nationwide, the number of children in out-of-home care has skyrocketed to an all-time high.

Best estimates are that more than 500,000 infants, children, and youth are under the care of child welfare agencies on any given day. Los Angeles County has about 50,000 in custody; New York City is responsible for nearly 40,000. Cities the size of Cleveland have roughly 6,000 children in care. These figures have doubled since the mid-1980s, with only a handful of communities reporting a decline until the past few years.

Driven in part by increases in the number of children at risk of abuse and neglect, the growth also reflects the difficulty child welfare systems experience in responding to higher levels of need. Many children now suffer from behavioral and physical problems linked to parental drug abuse, environmental health degradation and other consequences of poverty, as well as from physical abuse. The AIDS crisis has left HIV-positive infants and young children without parents and in need of special care. The untroubled blue-eyed poster-child orphan who needs only a loving home to develop and prosper is a long-extinct myth, if it ever was a reality.

This has meant far greater demands upon foster and adoptive parents. Child welfare workers cite revolving-door turnover rates as many volunteer parents find they have taken in youngsters with more troubles than they know how to handle. A child's multiple needs now require

multiple responses and expertise, not only in child care and discipline but also in special education, learning disabilities, health care, psychology, and rehabilitation. Foster parents leaving the system often complain that they received inadequate support from the child welfare agency to meet these multiple needs. The bottom line: the pool of available foster families has been in steady decline across the United States, just as children coming into care have been increasing in numbers.

Some agencies worry that they have exhausted their community's available supply of foster and adoptive parents. Or they categorize even

10-year-olds as "unadoptable" until they age out of the system. Teenagers are routinely placed in group care only. Children removed from their birth families for their own safety often wait a long time for permanent placement; even infants entering care can wait four or more years for permanent families. Large numbers have been placed in shelters, group homes, and institutions, or with relatives who may not have the resources to care for them.

"When the Family to Family initiative began in 1992, these trends were widely thought to be irreversible," noted John Mattingly of the

Annie E. Casey Foundation. "But we knew from experience in some public child welfare agencies that children, families, and communities could be linked with child welfare workers and foster and adoptive parents in a strong partnership for the benefit of the children." Consultation with national experts and extensive hands-on work with frontline social workers, community leaders, agency supervisors, and policymakers in

child welfare yielded a set of innovative strategies and tools to overcome old barriers and put working concepts into practice.

### The Principles of Family to Family

Family to Family is not another social services fad or a new "model" for child welfare work. It is not a quick fix, nor is it a revolutionary approach. Instead, it is a set of value-driven principles that guide a tested group of strategies that, in turn, are implemented by a practical set of tools for everyday use by administrators, managers, and field workers. Together they offer a way to achieve the longstanding objectives of the best child welfare agencies nationwide.

The program began in five states (Alabama, Maryland, New Mexico, Ohio, and Pennsylvania) and five Georgia counties in August 1993. Los Angeles County joined in 1996, and New York City adopted the neighborhood-centered approach a year later. All were committed to developing family-centered, neighborhood-based child welfare and foster care service systems within one or more local areas.

Family to Family was not introduced as a pilot project, a program to be tried by a select group of social workers in an isolated unit of the agency. Rather, the goal was systemwide change that would be fully integrated into a new way of providing child welfare programs.

The good news is that the initiative has been effective in improving child welfare program operations and has also improved outcomes for children and families they serve. Previously demoralized big-city agencies that had been losing more than 100 foster families per year can now point to net increases of 70 to 80 percent in their numbers of active foster families. Neighborhoods that had no foster and adoptive families now have as many as 30. Children coming into care now experience half as many placement moves as they once did. Agencies serving communities as different as Cincinnati, Ohio, Anne Arundel or Prince George's counties, Maryland, and Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, are now regularly using outcome data they were unable to track four years ago.

As the Family to Family evaluation by the University of North Carolina and the Research Triangle Institute reported, "Neighborhoods in which child placement rates are high are also capable of supporting families in which children

**Family  
TO  
Family**  
TOOLS FOR  
Rebuilding Foster Care



**Judith Goodhand, former executive director of the Cuyahoga County Department of Children and Family Services.**

are at risk of placement. . . . Shifting to assessment approaches that emphasize group decision making helps identify resources for families and communicates the child welfare agency's openness to building a new relationship with families and communities." And, perhaps the most telling part of their evaluation stated, "Experience in Family to Family suggests that enduring reform in the child welfare system is difficult but can be accomplished."

It has not been a simple one-step process for anyone involved. Family to Family is not a piecemeal approach but a systemic reform, and the changes it requires in both attitude and behavior are fundamental ones. Both support and resistance can be expected from staff workers, agency managers, birth families, foster and adoptive families, and community contacts, as well as from others in state or city agencies involved with child welfare who may not believe that change is possible. But participating sites agree that the results are well worth the effort and hard work. The necessary changes do not happen all at once or overnight, but the fact that major improvements can happen at all is good news indeed.

### **Building Bridges as a Foundation for Change**

Douglas Nelson, president of the Annie E. Casey Foundation, described the initiative as a "significant departure" for agencies and the families they serve. "Foster care is a bridge rather than [the traditional] rescue, removal, and return," he noted.

Like most urban centers, Cleveland is a city of highways and rivers. As Family to Family unfolded in Cuyahoga County (which includes the Cleveland metropolitan area), the symbol of a bridge became the best way to visualize the new way of doing business for child welfare.

Hardly anyone disagrees in theory with the most basic Family to Family principle, which is that of child welfare agency partnerships with



**Family to Family participants.**

foster and adoptive families and relatives, with neighborhoods and communities, and with other public and private agencies. But in practice, child welfare workers have always run the procedure and made the critical decisions, too often regarding birth parents as adversaries and foster parents as employees in the day-to-day work of caring for children at risk.

"Agency folk needed to learn how to build bridges to make these partnerships work," Terri Ali, Family to Family neighborhood liaison in Cuyahoga County, points out regularly in training sessions with colleagues from around the country.

Family to Family changes the traditional approach at every level. It overturns the assumption that the interests of birth parents and foster and adoptive parents are diametrically opposed. Birth parents are brought into a working relationship with foster parents where possible, while child welfare workers play more of a mediating and coordinating role.

Before Family to Family, one of the most troubling practices for Judith Goodhand, former executive director of the Cuyahoga County Department of Children and Family Services, was the total separation between foster parents and birth parents. "I've seen so many children over the years who were just devastated by the

way their foster parents spoke about their birth parents,” she said. “Not enough people in the traditional system appreciated the simple fact that the emotional bond between parent and child is a powerful force, and that most children love their birth parents no matter who they are and what they do.”

“Family to Family strategies educate and encourage not only birth families and foster and adoptive families but also agency staff to work together for the children’s best interests, involving even the children in decisions that affect their own lives,” Goodhand continued. “We call it team decision making, but work from the starting point by asking what’s best for the child or the teen. Then everyone stays on the same

side of the table as the birth parents, who are treated not as adversaries but as stakeholders,” Terri Ali added.

### **Building Community Partnerships**

Community involvement is often named as an essential element of child welfare services. But tensions often develop, with some community leaders fearing child welfare workers as strangers who parachute into a neighborhood and remove children, sending them back only as angry young men and women who have never experienced family love or community support. Similarly, local media attention often focuses only on system failures, especially when abused or neglected children die while in agency placements.

Peter Digre ran the Los Angeles County Department of Children and Family Services for more than eight years. Before that, he was chief operating officer of the Florida Department of Health and Rehabilitative Services, a \$7 billion annual provider of all of the state’s health and human services, including child welfare.

“Community involvement was the critical factor for our successes. I saw the neighborhoods and children’s advocates as an extension of our agency, especially our local churches. They were our partners for recruitment and services as well as a buffer with media and elected officials,” Digre noted.

Today, Los Angeles County has contractual and subcontractual relationships with more than 500 community-based organizations, but it took years to cultivate lasting relationships. “Most of all, I loved being in the community, meeting and working with people on their own turf,” Digre added. “I found renewed energy being outside the confines of a bureaucracy each day.” Digre and Goodhand are now working with the Casey Foundation directly to help others learn from their experiences—Goodhand from a base at the University of North Carolina and Digre as a consultant in Los Angeles.

Family to Family offers mechanisms for building genuinely collaborative relations with the communities from which most of an agency’s children come. Community members and leaders can be recognized for their capacity as caregivers, neighborhood liaisons and information sources, and they can become agency helpers and advocates for the children of the area.

Developing and using Family to Family tools, sites enlisted existing networks of community

**Family  
TO  
Family**  
TOOLS FOR  
Rebuilding Foster Care



**Peter Digre with Beresha Black, an emancipated foster youth who is now a leader in the California Youth Connection, an organization of emancipated and older foster youth. Black recently received an associate degree from Pasadena College. She is currently pursuing her bachelor’s degree from California State University.**

# Family to Family Tools for Rebuilding Foster Care

**B**ased on the success of this initiative, the Annie E. Casey Foundation and its Family to Family grantees developed a set of 17 tools, listed below, to help others build a neighborhood-based family foster care system. These manuals

offer indispensable elements for real change in child welfare at the community, state, and federal levels among all types of policymakers, service providers, and activists. Each manual features a one-page overview, a 12-page summary, and a

full implementation guide of 40-60 pages. All are available free of charge on the Family to Family web site ([www.aecf.org/familytofamily](http://www.aecf.org/familytofamily)) or by writing to the Annie E. Casey Foundation, Family to Family, 701 St. Paul Street, Baltimore, MD 21202.

## ***Recruitment, Training, and Support***

Foster care systems can revamp their treatment of foster and adoptive families to retain them far longer with timely follow-through on foster parent concerns, better training, and neighborhood support services.

## ***The Need for Self-Evaluation***

Policies, programs, and practices can be monitored and analyzed for effectiveness and to guide future actions.

## ***Building Partnerships with Neighborhoods and Local Communities***

Community leaders and groups can become natural helpers for a child welfare agency.

## ***Team Decision Making***

The family and the community can become involved in child welfare decisions, building support for the outcomes.

## ***Walking Our Talk in the Neighborhoods***

Pitfalls to successful relationships can be overcome with care and commitment.

## ***People Helping People***

The role of natural helpers in support of professional child welfare workers in Tacoma, Washington, provides a model of a neighborhood-designed helping system.

## ***Back from the Brink***

Widespread drug abuse, particularly of crack cocaine, puts new pressures on caseworkers to recognize and deal with its effects on parents and children.

## ***Working with Drug-Affected Families***

Caseworkers need new skills for coping with the problems raised by drug-affected families.

## ***START: A Child Welfare Model for Drug-Affected Families***

The Sobriety Treatment and Recovery Team (START) pilot project worked well in Cleveland, Ohio.

## ***A Model for Public and Private Child Welfare Partnership***

Collaborations between public and private child welfare agencies can take many forms; some are outlined here.

## ***Partnerships Between Corrections and Child Welfare***

The two systems are dealing with many of the same people and can learn to work well together.

## ***Strategic Communications***

Good media relations are always helpful and can be vital in times of crisis, and should be cultivated by any child welfare agency.

## ***Policies and Practice to Shorten Children's Stays in Temporary Care***

Barriers to placement can be combated in public policy, program management and structure, and in program operations.

## ***Innovative Programs to Shorten Children's Stay in Temporary Care***

A companion to the policies outlined above, with examples of programs that work.

## ***Safety First***

Any agency should prepare for the daily risks and challenges to the safety of its frontline workers.

## ***The Resiliency Workshop***

Burnout is an occupational hazard, so this program and curriculum build resiliency into the basic team of child welfare supervisor and workers.

## ***Building Support for Innovation Inside Child Welfare Agencies***

Child welfare work is all about frontline practice, where leaders need to help their people manage continuous change and remove roadblocks to desired results.

The Family to Family short video and an Initiative Overview piece, "Family to Family: Reconstructing Foster Care" are also available upon request, or may be ordered from the web site.

and church-related centers to help recruit foster homes and provide essential services and places for team meetings. Before that, "we didn't know a neighborhood leader if we tripped over one because we weren't in the neighborhoods," said Goodhand. Today, the agency goes to the neighborhoods and the community comes to the agency. Recruiting, training, and supporting foster and adoptive parents have become the cornerstone of the Family to Family initiative.

Denise Goodman is a consultant with many Ohio child welfare agencies, and has trained thousands of foster parents in more than 15 states. In Cleveland, the agency combines foster

and adoptive parent recruitment with preservice training. As Goodman recently told a Family to Family seminar, "One problem we don't have is huge attrition during training. They come. They stay. They finish. They come back to makeup classes. Training is our opportunity to socialize people to the Family to Family philosophy and values."

Terry Ali also plays an important role in supporting foster parents before, during, and after their training and certification. She is especially pleased at how many volunteer foster and adoptive parents have met the challenge in a wide range of communities around the Cleveland

metropolitan area. “Children used to be placed often outside their zip codes, or even outside their area codes, but now most are placed in their own communities,” she said. “In addition to recruitment, neighborhood centers are developing after-school programs, weekend programs, and respite care for foster families.”

Better community relationships mean not only more options for recruiting foster and adoptive parents but better cooperation with other city and county organizations dealing with children at risk—mental health agencies, special education centers, juvenile justice officers, police departments, elected officials, and the judicial system.

For example, about 1.5 million children nationwide have parents behind bars; 75 percent of the women in prison are mothers, typically of two to three children. Child welfare and criminal justice systems need to cooperate, for they are working with many of the same people. In most jurisdictions, these systems have little contact, but a Family to Family tool outlines ways to cement a working relationship to benefit both parties.

Community partnerships also mean attention from the media beyond the usual sensational coverage when a child dies. Outreach that targets specific audiences through mainstream and community-based media can support recruitment, expand funding, and provide access to elected officials, even as it familiarizes local reporters with agency operations. All this can prove invaluable when and if a crisis occurs and the agency is suddenly in the media spotlight.

### **Maintaining Stable Family and Community Ties**

An equally important principle of Family to Family is the centrality of a safe, stable, and permanent family life for all children.

Nicholas Scoppetta is the commissioner of New York City’s Administration for Children’s Services. The agency has embraced key elements of Family to Family by making a firm commitment to neighborhood-based services. “Perhaps the most important fact affecting policy is that 80 percent of the kids in our system go home to parents or relatives,” Scoppetta frequently tells policymakers and audiences. “That being the case, the Family to Family program makes eminent good sense. Preserving and enhancing the relationship between birth parents and their children during the temporary intervention of

foster care reduces the trauma of removal and facilitates speedier and more effective reunification when it is safe to do so.”

With its strategy of focusing on the needs of the child, Family to Family allows everyone who cares for that child to have a continuing relationship with him or her during the period when the child is separated from the birth family as well as after the family is reunited. The child’s family is in effect enlarged to include new caregivers, rather than torn asunder. The birth family remains a part of the child’s life during foster care, and the foster family can do likewise when the birth family is reunited. The approach also achieves the larger goal of avoiding long-term foster care and “independent living programs” as much as possible.

### **Implementing Strategies for Change**

A vision and firm principles are essential, but they must be put into action through strategies that address whatever barriers have kept agencies from achieving them. Family to Family strategies involve every agency employee, from director to receptionist, in taking ownership for better outcomes for children.

One critical strategy involves paying careful attention to sequencing—starting with enhancements to the placement system, proceeding through changes in the decision-making processes, and continuing into staff training and safety practices. Feedback and consultation occur at every stage, and new vocabulary is introduced to demonstrate the leaders’ commitment to an irreversible process of change. For every child, an individual plan is conceived with input from all parts of the agency, and it is implemented the same way.

As William M. Denihan, Goodhand’s successor, summed up, “Our mission statement says our purpose is to ensure that children at risk of abuse or neglect are protected and nurtured within a family and with the support of a community. Prior to Family to Family, we seemed to be missing the ‘within a family and with the support of a community’ part. This initiative has changed that.” ●

***Kathy Bonk is executive director of the Communications Consortium Media Center in Washington, D.C., and a former foster parent. Joanne Omang is a freelance journalist and consultant for the center.***