



THE ANNIE E. CASEY FOUNDATION

# MECKLENBURG COUNTY: REMAKING A CHILD WELFARE SYSTEM

Achieving Results and Improving the  
Lives of Children, Youth and Families

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# MECKLENBURG COUNTY: REMAKING A CHILD WELFARE SYSTEM

Achieving Results, Advancing Racial Equity and Improving the Lives of Children, Youth and Families

## NEW APPROACHES TO STRENGTHENING FAMILIES

In 2013, child welfare leaders in Mecklenburg County, North Carolina, determined that they needed new approaches to keeping families together safely — and they wanted to center their efforts around the well-being of children and young people. For situations in which foster care was the only option, they wanted it to be temporary, with fewer disruptions and less trauma for children and families in the system.

Four years later, thanks to a clear vision built on shared values, better data systems for analyzing trends, new ways of working with families and communities, and a partnership with a national team of experts, the county's Youth and Family Services (YFS) Division is seeing significant, positive results. These include reduced entries into foster care, fewer young people in the system living in group settings, less staff turnover with improved morale, more support for kinship care and increased efforts to end racial disparities.

This report is designed to inspire and equip child welfare leaders who seek to make improvements in their jurisdictions. The story of Mecklenburg County's journey provides insights into the lessons learned at a time when the COVID-19 pandemic required swift decisions and new procedures across the agency.

## FIRST STEPS ON THE JOURNEY TO ACHIEVING BETTER RESULTS

Mecklenburg County includes Charlotte, the most populous city in the state, and its surrounding suburban towns, unincorporated communities and a few rural areas. A nine-person board of county commissioners and a county manager administer county operations and budgets. Like many U.S. cities, Charlotte has some of the state's wealthiest neighborhoods and some of its poorest communities. And, like other child welfare agencies across the country, Mecklenburg's data told a troubling story.

Families and youth of color were three times more likely to have a screened-in report of abuse and neglect. Although Black youth only make up 33% of Mecklenburg's general population, up to 50% of youth entering YFS custody were children of color. When children and youth went into foster care, they often moved from place to place, as many as three times a year.

# 50%

of the youth entering YFS custody (in 2014) were children of color, mostly Black youth — even though only 33% of the general population in Mecklenburg County is Black.

In December 2013, YFS division director Charles Bradley, who had recently been promoted after nearly a decade with the agency, and then-Department of Social Services director Peggy Eagan began brainstorming about ways to improve the support systems for children, young people and families.

“As we talked over a year or so, a key question kept coming up: How could we be one of the best child welfare jurisdictions in the nation? We knew that YFS had some good practices, promising practices, but that there were some additional things we needed to address to get better,” Bradley says. “We could see there were increasing numbers of older youth in residential care. We were also struggling with consistent practice and high staff turnover.” Bradley and Eagan wanted the agency to better reflect the priorities, perspectives and voices of the many people — staff, county leaders, community members, parents and young people — involved in making changes, so the changes would have a sustaining, positive impact on families.

A critical early step was to conduct a comprehensive assessment of YFS policies, practices and operations. Agency leaders and the board of commissioners embraced the external review’s findings, which recommended improving hotline procedures, installing a new data system and developing a practice model to guide the organization’s work. “The assessment confirmed that we were on the right track, doing good work and poised to do even better. We decided we wanted to move from good to great!” Bradley says.

At about the same time, in March 2016, the Annie E. Casey Foundation was hosting a child welfare national convening in New Orleans. Doreen Chapman, a senior associate with the Foundation, had previously worked with Bradley and invited him to attend.

YFS leaders learned that many jurisdictions around the country seeking to improve their systems started by developing and implementing a child welfare practice model — a conceptual map and articulated organizational ideology of how agency employees, families and stakeholders should partner in creating a physical and emotional environment that focuses on child and family safety, permanency and well-being.

“One of the things that really stood out [at the convening] was that our agency lacked a clear and understandable practice model, which became one of our first goals,” Bradley says. “With input from all levels of staff, and engagement by community members, we rolled up our sleeves and got to work.”

### THREE OVERARCHING PRIORITIES

- Eliminating racial inequities that were leading to disproportionately high numbers of referrals of Black children and families, as well as longer stays and multiple placements for kids of color
- Decreasing the use of emergency shelter placements and residential care for older youth
- Improving data capacity

**“With input from all levels of staff, and engagement by community members, we rolled up our sleeves and got to work.”**

CHARLES BRADLEY, YOUTH AND FAMILY SERVICES  
DIRECTOR, MECKLENBURG COUNTY

After the New Orleans convening, Bradley and Eagan contacted Casey for technical assistance in the design and implementation of recommendations from earlier assessments, and to identify other areas for improving YFS services.

Agency staff and Casey formally began a four-year partnership in June 2016, with Chapman heading up a technical assistance team of 10 comprised of staff members and consultants with expertise in child welfare data analytics, best practices to achieve permanency for children and youth, family engagement and racial equity.

## CRITICAL COMPONENTS FOR CHANGE

“The team in Mecklenburg was committed to rethinking how it was supporting families to ensure kids and families of color are treated and supported equitably at every stage of their involvement with the child welfare agency,” says Rodney Brittingham, an associate director with Casey’s Family Well-Being Strategy Group, who attended various collaborative sessions with the YFS team.

YFS requested technical assistance in five areas:

- data reporting;
- hotline and intake call center operations;
- investigations of abuse and neglect; and,
- practice model development;

During its partnership with the Casey Foundation, YFS identified these additional critical areas:

- racial equity and inclusion (REI);
- kinship care;
- older youth permanence; and
- workforce stability.

## DATA REPORTING: IMPROVED ABILITY TO MEASURE EXPERIENCES

YFS staff wanted to improve their use of the agency’s data to understand the experiences of the children and families they served. They knew this information could help them better partner with young people and parents in developing solutions so families could thrive together.

“Prior to Casey’s engagement, data were mainly viewed as a tool that supervisors and upper management could use as needed,” explains Brent Cook, a member of YFS’s data team. “Few of the frontline staff even had access.”

To address this need, YFS invested in the child welfare reporting application SafeMeasures® from the nonprofit [Evident Change](#) — a full-agency data management system for social services that produces comprehensive management reports, enabling all staff to examine trends, patterns and other indicators. The platform was purchased in September 2016 and rolled out in August 2017, with a SafeMeasures team providing tools and training for staff at all levels. A train-the-trainer model was developed to build internal capacity to maintain the YFS staff’s skills and knowledge.

Casey worked with YFS to identify safety and well-being measures and connect them to the new data-reporting system. YFS used the data to develop reports that allowed staff to analyze the real experiences of children in foster care and determine how to help them reach standards of well-being built around prevention, safety and support. By 2020, YFS had 43 unique reports — all disaggregated by race and ethnicity — to guide their decision making and best-practice strategies.

### **HOTLINE AND INTAKE CALL CENTER OPERATIONS: FASTER RESPONSES AND ACCESS TO BETTER, MORE TARGETED SERVICES**

Over time, the YFS general phone line had become a catch-all for a wide range of calls, from simple questions (such as, “Who is my social worker?”) to reports of serious abuse and neglect. In 2017, YFS established a dedicated child abuse and neglect hotline that was promoted in a variety of outreach activities and published on its website, as well as an alternate phone number for general inquiries about Child Protective Services, existing cases and needed community resources. This simple change allowed callers to more efficiently reach the correct staff to address their needs. Within three years, calls to the hotline were reduced by half — from 33,320 in federal fiscal year (FFY) 2017 to 15,073 in FFY 2020 — with general, routine calls increasingly going to the information assistance line.

But appropriately handling abuse and neglect hotline calls takes more effort than establishing an additional phone number and using new systems, especially in the wake of COVID-19. Throughout the pandemic, the media put a national spotlight on hotline calls, asking whether reductions in hotline calls meant that cases of abuse and neglect were going unreported. YFS needed to show that its system improvements were real, and not the result of underreporting during pandemic-related school closings that put mandatory reporters such as teachers into less direct contact with children.

For example, after the closing of Charlotte-Mecklenburg’s school system in 2020 — a district of about 148,000 students — teachers identified about 3,000 young people who had not attended virtual classes or picked up school-provided laptops. The school system wanted to know if these were reportable cases of neglect and if full investigations were needed. One theory that emerged from discussion between YFS and the school system was that students might not have been able to connect to their classes by computer; if this was the case, opening a YFS investigation for neglect would not be required. To make a determination, the county school system enlisted 18 two-person teams of social workers, including seven fluent in Spanish, to visit these young people’s homes to identify barriers and support families in getting their children online and learning.

By developing a method of support rather than surveillance, social workers successfully met the needs of families — a majority of whom were Black or Latino — on their terms, and prevented potentially 3,000

new YFS cases of neglect. By mid-June 2020, 70% of families had had face-to-face visits, with none of the children or teens deemed to be at risk of abuse or neglect. Instead, they needed help with issues such as poor internet access, financial and food insecurity and language barriers.

### **INVESTIGATIONS: SIGNIFICANTLY REDUCED BACKLOGS AND WORKER CASELOADS**

The YFS team reduced overdue investigations from a backlog of 498 cases in mid-2018 to 45 cases in mid-2020, a decrease of 91%. In that same period, new policies and procedures outlined in the practice model led to a decrease in investigations workers' average caseload from 45 to 10.5 cases, a 76% drop. (The Child Welfare League of America recommends a caseload of 12 to 15 children per worker.) The Casey–YFS team designed and implemented a short-term process of creating special teams to make decisions on backlogged cases and close out those that were unnecessarily delayed. The special teams included the assigned social worker, supervisor and managers who met weekly on backlogged cases that were deemed low to medium risk. In addition to backlogged cases, there is a statewide practice of investigating all families residing in the same household regardless of whether they are the subject of the referral. This disparate state policy often led to more children of color and their families entangled unnecessarily into the child welfare system. Mecklenburg made the decision to cease this practice and developed a policy to reflect this change.

**By developing a method of support rather than surveillance, social workers successfully met the needs of families — a majority of whom were Black or Latino — on their terms, and prevented potentially 3,000 new YFS cases of neglect.**

### **PRACTICE MODEL DEVELOPMENT: IMPROVING SERVICE DELIVERY AND ENGAGEMENT WITH FAMILIES AND COMMUNITIES**

The YFS practice model became the system's guiding light, having been built on a clear mission about how cases should be handled, where children should live, the importance of working in teams, a respect for cultural differences and a commitment to partnerships and working with communities. But the development and implementation of the model took time and concerted collaboration to establish a foundation of best practices that Mecklenburg County staff would embrace.

"Four or five years ago, when we did not have a practice model, it was commonly felt within the agency that decisions were made by the executive leadership team, and there were inconsistent practices across the agency," Bradley says. "Today, we have a shared language of values and beliefs that grounds our work and promotes consistency. The practice model was created with the voice of staff at all levels, and we have made shifts and adjustments along the way to better engage staff around policy and practice changes that impact their work."

The process of developing the YFS practice model began in September 2016. Chapman's team worked with YFS staff to outline the elements of a practice model based on desired outcomes, including:

- **decreasing the number** of children and young people entering into foster care, the rate of repeated maltreatment and reentry back into the system; and the length of stay for children and youth in out-of-home care; making foster-care placements more stable for children; and reducing the likelihood that children in would have to move from place to place;
- **increasing the percentage** of children and older youth placed with kin and within their own communities, the percentage of youth making a timely exit to permanence, and the percentage of timely adoptions within the established federal guideline of two years; and
- **ensuring racial equity** across all child welfare outcomes.

**“Today, we have a shared language of values and beliefs that grounds our work and promotes consistency. The practice model was created with the voice of staff at all levels.”**

CHARLES BRADLEY  
YOUTH AND FAMILY SERVICES DIRECTOR

After many meetings and multiple draft documents, by November 2017, the practice model had been finalized, and the implementation phase began by involving people at various levels of the agency, including frontline workers, policy staff, data analysts and administrators. Special outreach was done with contractors and community members. Written curricula were developed for five important areas:

1. **Child and family team meetings**, involving a structured meeting process that engages parents, youth, extended family members, professionals and, ideally, a facilitator to aid in the decision about what is in the best interest of the child or young person for both their safety and well-being.
2. **Shared parenting meetings**, held with birth parents and the temporary caregiver — whether a family member, a foster parent or an institutional provider — to share information about the child’s daily routines, special needs, relationships and habits.
3. **Comprehensive assessments**, beginning when youth and families first come to the attention of the agency, and continuing until the case is closed.
4. **Family search and engagement**, to identify family, relatives and important adults who can provide a range of support to promote stability, well-being and permanency outcomes for children and youth.
5. **Supportive supervisory practice**, including teaching, modeling and coaching, to ensure frontline social work supervisors have the knowledge, attitudes and skills to support staff in the effective engagement of children and families from diverse backgrounds, and to make sound decisions.

For these five core practice areas, coaches were hired as “practice experts,” and a policy unit was formed to support alignment and integration of the model throughout YFS. Practice changes related to these five areas were added to training and professional development sessions.

Data dashboards tracked activities defined in each of the areas so that supervisors and managers could monitor the impact. YFS staff, provider agencies and other contractors embedded the practice model into their training programs for both new hires and seasoned employees.

Additional staff were hired to implement and sustain the practice model, and YFS modified official agency policies to reflect practice changes. With a practice model in hand to guide their efforts, YFS leaders and staff realized significant improvements were made with a 13% decrease of all children and youth entering foster care and out of home placements and a 28% decrease among Black youth.

	2016	2020	DECREASE
<b>ENTRIES INTO FOSTER CARE &amp; OUT-OF-HOME PLACEMENTS</b>	335	271	-13%
<b>ENTRIES OF BLACK YOUTH INTO YFS CUSTODY</b>	200	144	-28%

“We have moved to a culture where data is empowering, and not intimidating, on our journey from good to great,” Cook says during a recent farewell message to the Casey team. “Thanks to [Casey’s] guidance, we now have SafeMeasures, so that supervisors and frontline staff can access case data and use it to make more informed decisions.

**RACIAL EQUITY AND INCLUSION:  
ADDRESSING RACIAL DISPARITIES THAT AFFECT COMMUNITIES OF COLOR**

Over many years, YFS had been collaborating and partnering with other systems to address racial disparities and the disproportionality of children and youth in the system. YFS had a history of building a diverse staff at all levels, but, until racial equity was better understood by staff throughout the agency, disparities would continue to affect children and families at disproportionate levels.

When Patrena Bowen led the YFS racial equity and inclusion work in 2017, she felt the issues “sat silently, like an invisible elephant in the room” — with the system’s racial disparities hidden in plain sight. Partnering with YFS, the Casey team highlighted data that prompted conversations about the hard-to-ignore inequities, and supported the system’s efforts with critical tools such as the Foundation’s [Race Equity and Inclusion Action Guide](#).

Like other child welfare agencies across the country, YFS had been talking for several years about racial disproportionality and the challenges, especially cultural and economic, children and families of color face. The conversations were often about insensitivities among staff, foster parents, school systems, the police and other parts of the community. But, until YFS could identify the underlying problems with solid information and data, these conversations did not get far.

The agency’s racial equity and inclusion efforts had to be grounded within all of the strategies that made up the practice model. Staff needed regular trainings. YFS leaders needed to identify ways to surface tough conversations about race and collaborate on solutions with partners in school systems, police departments and hospitals, as well as other county agencies.

To help identify and eliminate disparities, YFS conducted a ZIP code analysis to determine which neighborhoods generated the highest numbers of cases and referrals. They discovered most referrals were coming from communities with the fewest resources.

YFS began working more intensively with mandatory reporters in these communities, including teachers and police, to help them understand trends related to racial disparities and the unintended consequences of formal YFS investigations on both children and their families. Alternative community-based options were put forward as examples of ways that could have better served many families. The data from the SafeMeasures reports showed that schools and police departments were reporting much higher numbers of children and youth of color than could be substantiated as child abuse or neglect by YFS screeners and investigative workers.

In 2019, YFS received 18,177 reports of child abuse or neglect; of these, 48% were reported by law enforcement (35%) or educational personnel (13%). YFS data showed that 55% of the referrals were unsubstantiated, with 25% coming from law enforcement. YFS expanded and adopted new systems and policies based on these and other activities to help address the overrepresentation of children and youth of color coming to its attention. All new policies are now vetted in terms of how they might affect equity, and the agency hopes to continue to reduce disparities over time. “We now have tools to identify how our implicit and explicit biases impact outcomes for children and families, and we have normalized the conversation for advancing racial equity,” Bowen says.

**“We now have tools to identify how our implicit and explicit biases impact outcomes for children and families, and we have normalized the conversation for advancing racial equity.”**

PATRENA BOWEN  
YFS LEADER ON RACIAL EQUITY AND INCLUSION

**KINSHIP CARE:  
CULTIVATING CHAMPIONS AND DEVELOPING ROAD MAPS AS TEACHING TOOLS**

YFS leadership prioritized strengthening its approach to recruiting and supporting relatives as caregivers. They enlisted a group of YFS staff to be kinship champions; developed a road map of policies, timelines and expectations for staff; and created kinship brochures and a kinship care resource guide to help caregivers understand their role and the licensing process. An improved data and tracking system allowed staff to monitor progress for children and youth living with relatives without court-ordered custody.

Kinship navigator staff positions were added in 2019 to expand outreach and support kinship families by helping them become licensed caregivers, navigate social welfare systems and access other services. YFS put in place several additional mechanisms to sustain the work after Casey’s engagement, including:

- stipends for kinship families caring for young relatives who are legally in YFS custody;
- data enhancements to capture all families caring for kin;
- a kinship caregiver training curriculum;

- kinship training for staff; and
- a resource guide to prepare relatives before and during the time children and youth are in their care.

## OLDER YOUTH PERMANENCE: SHIFTING FROM GROUP PLACEMENTS TO FAMILY SETTINGS

As the practice model and new tools were being instituted, the overall number of children entering foster care declined significantly, cut almost in half from FFY 2014 to FFY 2019. But the number of older youths, especially Black youth, spiked.

The data showed that 80% of Black youth were initially placed in group settings, which are the most harmful options on the placement continuum. In 2019, the agency formed a work group to examine this issue and emphasize permanency planning for older youth. Strategies included:

- *Deputy director approval process:* Approval from the deputy director for youth is needed for any young person to enter a group setting. This helped ensure these placements were used only when necessary and in the best interest of the youth.
- *Expedited permanency for youth:* These sessions were convened especially for youth who had been languishing in the system by focusing on the needs and desires of young people, including in-depth interviews to identify relatives and extended family connections and to reexamine the circumstances that led them to foster care, to see how they might safely return home.
- *Youth-guided team meetings:* Youth-driven sessions focused on the placement options and service needs of the individual young person to help prevent entry into foster care and/or speed up the reunification process so permanency could be achieved as soon as possible.

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“As our practice model was introduced, we attended trainings on each of the puzzle pieces, and it was nice to hear new ideas and get tools that we could use to improve our work,” says Megan O’Neil, a YFS permanency planning supervisor who works with adolescents. “As a foster parent, an adoptive parent and a biological parent, I understand the connections that kids need in a family. The strategies that we have been able to develop to help make connections for kids, to get them back to their families and out of congregate care, have been inspiring.”

## WORKFORCE STABILITY: IMPROVED RECRUITMENT AND REDUCED TURNOVER

With high vacancy and turnover rates, YFS set a goal to improve recruitment and retention of their staff, and Casey suggested that agency staff compare notes with other child welfare systems that also had tackled this issue.

As a part of a learning journey and before the COVID-19 pandemic restricted air travel, Casey coordinated a site visit with a group from YFS to Jefferson County, Colorado, to better understand that county's successful workforce strategies. The team brought back several strategies that could be implemented in a short period of time, such as ensuring regular, ongoing job postings; implementing a second shift; monitoring overtime; using an HR dashboard; and instituting telework policies.

In July 2018, YFS had a vacancy rate of just under 20%. By 2019, that rate had been reduced to less than 8%, and by the end of 2020, the rate had fallen to 6% during a time when the pandemic left many employers with too few workers. Out of 273 full-time equivalent job openings, 256 were filled. "Our reduced vacancy rate has resulted in an almost fully staffed workforce," notes Denise Steele-Campbell, YFS deputy director. "I have observed a reduction in staff stress as well as in staff absenteeism. Our progress has had a positive impact on job satisfaction and our staff's ability to focus on meeting the needs of children and families. Essentially, improvement of our staff recruitment and retention strategies has increased our ability to think creatively, to cope with challenges and to positively impact the lives of those we serve," she says.

# 6%

was the staff vacancy rate at the end of 2020, from just under 20% in mid-2018. Out of 273 full-time equivalent job openings, 256 were filled.

## KEY LESSONS

### COLLABORATION: A CORNERSTONE FOR CHANGE

From the start, YFS staff members were eager to do their part to strengthen the agency's work with children and families. "I love the process that Casey took us through to help us understand the importance of having input and inclusion of staff at all levels," Bradley says. "Throughout the journey, there were also opportunities for us to lift up the voices of those we serve. This gave us an opportunity to engage system partners around the work."

In addition to community groups, schools, hospitals and police departments, a critically important partner for YFS has been the court system. Agency staff had many meetings and briefings with judges about the new procedures under the practice model, and both sides understand they are on the same team working for what's best for children and families. According to Juvenile court judge Aretha Blake, "Over these last few years in juvenile court, I have seen the dedication and diligence of this group [at YFS] and their focus on our children, and securing outcomes of safety, security and permanency for them. It is so important for us to reflect on the successes that we've had." Judge Blake adds, "The efforts of our social workers, YFS leaders and our county have been amazing. Over the past three years, the work has only improved in quality in ways that will improve the quality of care for our children for generations to come."

## COMMUNITY AND AGENCY LEADERSHIP: SHARED GOALS AS PATHWAY BUILDERS

Several elements helped the agency work better for kids and families, according to Chapman's team.

First, YFS leadership and staff reflect the community they serve, and they understand the cultural differences and the discriminatory practices that plague communities of color. Upgraded data systems with an ongoing analysis were essential components for addressing racial equity. In light of this, staff are more open to dialogue about race and equity and have embraced practices to mitigate systemic racism by assessing practice and policy through a racial equity lens.

Second, resources were put behind the development of the practice model. This included hiring five practice-model coaches, building a policy unit and adding staff for data management and assessment. Chapman notes, "Along with the development of a practice model, the stability, consistency and commitment of YFS leadership were critical pieces of the puzzle."

In Mecklenburg, starting with Dena Diorio, the county manager, and Anthony Trotman, the assistant county manager, leaders were willing to put resources behind new infrastructure and capacity building, and made YFS a priority.

And third, the ability of YFS leadership and other staff and the Casey team to listen, brainstorm and work together with families to meet the needs of individual children and youth was a critical factor. "This was especially important as levels of trust grew throughout the process. Our focus was always on what can be done within the work to engage with, listen to and keep at the center the voices of youth and families," Chapman says.

## LOOKING AHEAD

Continual improvement is a foundational value at YFS, which means that the agency is already looking ahead. "I'd really like to focus on our kinship care work," Bradley says. "Where possible, children who are not safe from abuse or neglect should stay with relatives. So, while we are doing some great work and making some progress, we have far too many kids who are placed in residential facilities, particularly older youth. I have a bold vision of discontinuing the use of congregate care, because all kids should grow up in a family."

YFS has made remarkable progress for children and young people and their families in four years, through improvements that are designed to last beyond any individual or leader. Bradley says the agency will continually refine its strategic plan and practice model to reflect community and cultural changes. But creating a great child welfare system requires much more than an effective plan or practice model — the people who make up the system are equally important.

"I really have a deep passion for children and families," Bradley says. "During my childhood, I had most of what I wanted, and absolutely everything that I needed. And I am committed to ensuring that children involved in our system have a similar experience of safety and well-being that I had, and that every child deserves. ... Although it can be challenging, it is also so rewarding when people come to our attention and we are able to support them in ways that keep children safe and families together."

# TOP 10 TAKEAWAYS

## Achieving Better Results, Advancing Racial Equity and Improving the Lives of Children, Youth and Families

These top 10 takeaways from Mecklenburg County's Youth and Family Services' transformation may be useful to other child welfare agency leaders, policymakers and advocates.

### 1. Racial equity and inclusion must be central to truly transform child welfare systems and be part all practice model strategies

Tough conversations and needed actions about racial equity are essential — in staff meetings and with partners in school systems, police department, hospitals and other public agencies. YFS took Racial Equity and Inclusion (REI) head on as it expanded and adopted new systems and policies based on data showing racial disproportionality to demonstrate why change was urgently needed. (See page 7 for link to Casey's Seven Steps for Advancing Equity and Inclusion)

### 2. Think transformation, not just reform

Child welfare agencies have learned that to improve outcomes for children, youth and families, a full system transformation is needed with racial equity at the center of change. not small projects, siloed initiatives or reforms. Systems need to put weight on safety, well-being and racial equity, especially in cases of neglect when appropriate support can keep children and youth safe and families together.

### 3. Stay true to the agency's mission, values and principles

An agency's mission, values and principles need to be more than words on a poster or in annual reports. Improving a system starts with staff and policymakers working from core values, especially those that recognize all children and youth need a family for their safety and well-being. Staff need to understand a mission of achieving racial equity and the principles of understanding the dynamics that culture and family history play in keeping families together and helping children and youth not just survive but thrive.

### 4. Prioritize creating and implementing a practice model as a roadmap to improving outcomes

When YFS leadership considered options to transform the agency, it did not have a practice model. They worked with Casey to develop one, which became the North Star for their transformation so that all staff understood how the agency would work internally and partner with families, service providers and other stakeholders. A practice model is a clear, written explanation of how the agency successfully functions.

## 5. Develop and use data systems to measure progress

Once YFS had clarity on priorities for achieving the results for advancing equity and improving the lives of children and families, they identified the critical components for change by improving data system capacities and developing data reporting to improve their ability to measure real-life experiences.

## 6. Upgrade hotline and call center operations to focus on urgent abuse reports

The YFS call system went from 33,230 reports in 2017 to 15,073 calls in 2020 after a dedicated child abuse hotline was established and front-line operators were better trained. But with COVID-19 media scrutiny suggesting that stay-at-home mandates meant unreported abuse cases, YFS needed to show real improvements and not underreporting. By offering support rather than surveillance, a collaboration with school system staffs and social workers making home visits prevented potentially 3,000 new YFS cases of neglect.

## 7. Clear backlogged, overdue investigations

Investigations conducted in a reasonable amount of time more quickly brings clarity about the right services and what is in the best interest of the child or young person. The YFS team reduced overdue investigations from a backlog of 498 cases to a manageable 45 cases, a decrease of 91% as well as a decrease in investigations workers' average caseload from 45 to 10.5 cases, a 75% drop.

## 8. Position kinship care as the best option for temporary out-of-home living

If an out-of-home placement is necessary to keep a child safe, then kinship care is the best option and in the best interest of the child. Kinship care can keep them safe, reduce trauma and promote well-being. Kinship navigator staff positions were added to expand outreach and support kinship families by helping them become licensed caregivers, navigate social welfare systems and access other services.

## 9. Pay special attention to the needs of older youth

The YFS data showed the overall number of children entering foster care declined significantly, cut in half from FY2014 to FY2019, but the number of older youths spiked, especially for Black youth — 80% were in group placements, not living not in families. After examining the data, YFS leaders made policy changes that resulted in Black youth entries into YFS custody being cut by 28% from 200 in 2016 to 144 in 2020. Youth Engagement Permanency Meetings were developed to elevate the voices of youth and ensure their participation was at the center of case planning with more emphasis on kinship care.

## 10. Stabilize staff turnover and vacancy rates — especially in emergency situations

High vacancy and turnover rates can be solved with strategies, some that can quickly be implemented, including ensuring regular job-postings, implementing a second shift; monitoring overtime, using an HR dashboard and instituting telework practices. A critical component during the pandemic was workforce stability to keep children and youth safe, promote their well-being and eliminate racial disparities.