

**Welcome Remarks by Douglas W. Nelson  
President, The Annie E. Casey Foundation  
Public Policy Briefing at the  
Families for Life: 2006 National Convening on Youth Permanence**

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Good afternoon. Hello again to those who have been with us and welcome to those joining us now. We have in this room a remarkable cross-section of the critical stakeholders – the people who will be largely responsible for shaping the future of child welfare in the United States. We have among us foster parents and foster youth leaders; birth family representatives and kin care givers; advocates and academics; judges and lawyers; front line workers and system managers; technical assistance providers and expert consultants; legislative leaders and gubernatorial representatives; corporate supporters and foundation funders.

It is encouraging that we are brought together by a shared aspiration: we come here because we want to make child welfare better, fairer, more successful. More particularly, we want our child welfare systems to enable far more kids in care – for more youth in care – to attach or reattach to the life-long, loving families who they desperately need and they deserve.

As I and others said yesterday – and as grim statistics sadly affirm – we are a long way from where we want to be. Tens of thousands of kids leave care each year unconnected to permanent families. And they suffer for it; they suffer terribly, tragically, appallingly for it. In fact, we all suffer for it.

We must do better. But doing better – I want to underscore this afternoon – will not be – is not – a simple or easy thing. Truth is, there is nothing easy about child welfare. I have long believed that “doing child welfare well” is the most demanding, complex, and difficult human enterprise that states, communities, and frontline workers are called upon to undertake.

Let me remind us all just how hard it is. You know the public tells us – our conscience tells us – that we child welfare professionals have got to do four crucial things just right: first, we’ve got to identify kids who are in danger; second, we’ve got to get endangered kids out of harm’s way; third, we have got to decide how to get them safely back home as soon as possible or, if that can’t work, get them into a caring, permanent new family and do it fast; and finally, we’ve got to make sure that kids are safely, supportively, stably cared for while we’re getting them to a safe, sensible, permanent arrangement.

The complexity of the lives we encounter in this work, the unpredictable potential of individuals and families to change (for the better or for the worse), the inescapable limits of the information we have about kids (who they really are, about where they come from, and what they need) – all of these realities mean that the wisdom of Solomon is not enough to assure that all our decisions will be just and right all the time. But to acknowledge how hard it is – is not to endorse complacency or accept the status quo. We cannot get perfect – any of us, but together

we can and we need to get much better. At a minimum, we need to leave this convening with a renewed resolve to secure prompter permanence for more of our kids. What will that mean?

For starters, we simply have to make “getting to permanence” a more central, a more urgent, and a more prominent priority than it has been. Let’s be honest . . . getting a child out of a dangerous situation is such a straight-forward imperative that it tends to overshadow the obligation we have to work to restore that child to a safe and permanent family. When we are fortunate enough to find a safe and appropriate temporary placement for a child, it’s often hard to remember that this achievement is not really an end, but only a means – a step – to our true goal of restoring lasting, lifetime permanence.

Giving permanence the day-in, day-out priority it deserves requires several things. It requires our systems, from the very top to the front line, to clearly and repetitiously affirm and express lifelong families as a goal and permanency work as the centerpiece of good child welfare practice. It also requires that systems hold themselves accountable – in measured and rewarded ways – for achieving permanency benchmarks with every kid. Avoiding unnecessary delays, finding family settings, reducing moves, shortening lengths of stay, achieving prompt reunification at the earliest safe moment, and expediting adoptions or guardianships – all of these achievements need to be more visibly reinforced, more routinely rewarded, and “more accurately measured” in the day-to-day practice of every child welfare system.

Conferences like this one will help. Today and tomorrow we will sit down together and engage in plenaries, learning sessions, and conversations that can provide directions and a framework for making permanence for older children and youth a priority. These sessions will give us an opportunity to learn from one another about what it may take to achieve true permanence for more older children and youth. For example, we will explore together several family and youth permanency practice strategies that are grounded in a team-planning approach that promotes collaborative decision-making where youth themselves can have a voice in what happens to them. These strategies can enable youth to help in their own case planning; to explore past and present networks of family and adult resources that know and care about them; and to reinforce or rebuild family relationships that can support them through adulthood.

We will get more familiar with promising state policies and procedures that expedite permanence and integrate permanence with preparation for adulthood. We’ll come to understand that there are ways to provide stronger incentives for permanency outcomes; to promote flexible financing to achieve and sustain permanence for youth; and to reduce racial disproportionality and disparate outcomes for older children and youth of color. And that’s just a sampling of the ideas and insights and opportunities that will be shared in the sessions that follow. Because I know how smart the people in this room are, and how committed we all are to better outcomes for kids, I am convinced that this next day-and-a-half of learning can equip each of us to make a greater contribution to greater permanence for a greater fraction of young people in care. I want to remind us all there are thousands of isolated, vulnerable, and lonesome kids out there who expect to accomplish at least that much.

I wish us well and thank you.