



Family
TO
Family
TOOLS FOR
Rebuilding Foster Care

Family to Family:
Reconstructing Foster Care

AN INITIATIVE OVERVIEW



Family to Family: Reconstructing Foster Care

T H E A N N I E E . C A S E Y F O U N D A T I O N

The Annie E. Casey Foundation was established in 1948 by Jim Casey, a founder of United Parcel Service, and his sister and brothers, who named the Foundation in honor of their mother. The primary mission of the Foundation is to foster public policies, human service reforms and community supports that more effectively meet the needs of today's vulnerable children and families.

The grant making of the Annie E. Casey Foundation is grounded in two fundamental convictions. First, there is no substitute for strong families to ensure that children grow up to be capable adults. Second, the ability of families to raise children well is often inextricably linked to conditions in communities where they live. We believe that community-centered responses can better protect children, support families, and strengthen neighborhoods.

Helping distressed neighborhoods become environments that foster strong, capable families is a complex challenge that will require progress in many areas, including changes in the public systems designed to serve disadvantaged children and their families. In most states, these systems are remote from the communities and families they serve; focus narrowly on individual problems when families in crisis generally have multiple difficulties; tend to intervene only when a problem is so serious that expensive institutionalization is the only response; and hold themselves accountable by the quantity of services offered rather than the effectiveness of the help provided.

Family foster care, the mainstay of all public child welfare systems, is in critical need of reform in each of these areas.

B A C K G R O U N D : T H E C U R R E N T C R I S I S I N P U B L I C C H I L D W E L F A R E

The nation's child welfare system continues in crisis. This crisis has four major characteristics:

- ❑ The number of children removed from their families by the child welfare system has continued to grow, from 260,000 children in out-of-home care in the 1980s to more than 500,000 in care by 1997. This growth has been driven by increases in the number of children at risk of abuse and neglect, as well as by the inability of child welfare systems to respond to the significantly higher level of need.
- ❑ As these systems become overloaded, they are unable to safely return children to their families or to find permanent homes for them. Children are therefore experiencing much longer stays in temporary settings.
- ❑ Concurrently, the number of foster families nationally has dropped, so that fewer than 50 percent of the children needing temporary care are now placed with foster families. As a result of this disparity, child welfare agencies in many urban communities have placed large numbers of children in group care or with relatives who have great difficulty caring for them. An infant coming into care in our largest cities has a good chance of being placed in group care and to be without a permanent family for more than four years.
- ❑ Finally, children of color are vastly over-represented in this group of disadvantaged children.

The duration and severity of the current crisis in child welfare make this an opportune time for states to challenge themselves to rethink the fundamental role of family foster care and to consider very basic changes.

The Foundation's interest in helping communities and public agencies confront this crisis is built upon the belief that smarter and more effective responses are available to prevent child maltreatment and to respond more effectively when there is abuse or neglect. Often families can be helped to safely care for their children in their own communities and in their own homes – if appropriate support, guidance, and help are provided to them early enough. However, there are emergency situations that require the separation of a child from his or her family. At such times, every effort should be made to have the child live with caring and capable relatives or with another family within the child's own community – rather than in a restrictive, remote, institutional setting. Family foster care should be the next best alternative to a child's own home or to kinship care.

National leaders in family foster care and child welfare have come to realize, however, that without major restructuring, the family foster care system in the United States is not in a position to meet the needs of children who must be separated from their families. One indicator of the deterioration of the system has been the steady decline in the pool of available foster families at the same time as the number of children coming into care has been increasing. Further, there has

been an alarming increase in the percentage of children in placement who have special and exceptional needs. If the family foster care system is not significantly reconstructed, the combination of these factors may result in more disrupted placements, longer lengths of stay, fewer successful family reunifications, and more damage done to children by the very system which the state has put in place to protect them.

A R E S P O N S E T O T H E C R I S I S : T H E F A M I L Y T O F A M I L Y I N I T I A T I V E

With the appropriate reforms in policy, in the use of resources, and in programs, family foster care can respond to the challenges of out-of-home placement and be a less expensive and more humane choice for children and youth than are institutions or other group settings. Family foster care reform, in and of itself, can yield important benefits for families and children – although such reform is only one part of a larger agenda designed to address the overall well-being of children and families currently in need of child protective services.

Family to Family was designed in 1992 in consultation with national experts in child welfare. In keeping with the Annie E. Casey Foundation's guiding principles, the framework for the Initiative is grounded in the belief that reforms in family foster care must be focused on a more family-centered approach that is: 1) tailored to the individual needs of children and their families, 2) rooted in the child's community or neighborhood, 3) sensitive to cultural differences, and 4) able to serve many of the children now placed in group homes and institutions.

The *Family to Family* Initiative has been an opportunity for states to reconceptualize, redesign, and reconstruct their foster care system to achieve the following new system-wide goals:

- To develop a network of family foster care that is more neighborhood-based, culturally sensitive, and located primarily in the communities where the children live;
- To assure that scarce family foster home resources are provided to all those children (and only to those children) who in fact must be removed from their homes;
- To reduce reliance on institutional or congregate care (in hospitals, psychiatric centers, correctional facilities, residential treatment programs, and group homes) by meeting the needs of many more of the children in those settings through family foster care;
- To increase the number and quality of foster families to meet projected needs;
- To reunite children with their families as soon as that can safely be accomplished, based on the family's and children's needs, not the system's time frames;
- To reduce the lengths of children's stay in out-of-home care; and
- To decrease the overall number of children coming into out-of-home care.

With these goals in mind, the Foundation selected and funded three states (Alabama, New Mexico, and Ohio) and five Georgia counties in August 1993, and two additional states (Maryland and Pennsylvania) in February 1994. In addition, Los Angeles County was awarded a planning grant in August 1996. States and counties funded through this Initiative were asked to develop family-centered, neighborhood-based family foster care service systems within one or more local areas. Communities targeted for the

initiative were to be those with a history of placing large numbers of children out of their homes (e.g., Cleveland, Philadelphia, Atlanta, Birmingham, Albuquerque, and Cincinnati). The sites would then become the first phase of implementation of the newly conceptualized family foster care system throughout the state.

The new system envisioned by *Family to Family* is designed to:

- ❑ better screen children being considered for removal from home, to determine what services might be provided to safely preserve the family and/or what the needs of the children are;
- ❑ be targeted to bring children in congregate or institutional care back to their neighborhoods;
- ❑ involve foster families as team members in family reunification efforts; and
- ❑ become a neighborhood resource for children and families and invest in the capacity of communities from which the foster care population comes.

The Foundation's role has been to assist states and communities with a portion of the costs involved in both planning and implementing innovations in their systems of services for children and families, and to make available technical assistance and consultation throughout the process. The Foundation also provided funds for development and for transitional costs that accelerate system change. The states, however, have been expected to maintain the dollar base of their own investment and sustain the changes they implement when Foundation funding comes to an end. The Foundation is also committed to accumulating and disseminating both lessons from states' experiences and information on the achievement of improved outcomes for children. The Foundation is therefore playing a major role in seeing that the results of the *Family to Family* Initiative are actively communicated to all the states and the Federal government.

The states selected to participate in the planning process are being funded to create major innovations in their family foster care system – to reconstruct rather than merely supplement current operations. Such changes are certain to have major effects on the broader systems of services for children, including other services within the mental health, mental retardation/developmental disabilities, education, and juvenile justice systems, as well as the rest of the child welfare system. In most states, the foster care system serves children who are also the responsibility of other program domains. In order for the initiative to be successful (to ensure, for example, that children are not inadvertently “bumped” from one system into another), representatives from each of these service systems were expected to be involved in planning and implementation at both the state and local level. These systems were expected to commit to the goals of the initiative, as well as redeploy resources (or priorities in the use of resources) and if necessary alter policies and practices within their own systems.

In summary, the *Family to Family* Initiative is founded on a few key value judgments: Reforms in family foster care must be directed to producing a service that is less disruptive to the lives of the people it affects, more community-based and culturally sensitive, more individualized to the needs of the child and family, more available as an alternative to institutional placement, and in general more family centered. Further, an enhanced family foster care system also can be consistent with an increased emphasis upon developing alternatives to out-of-home placement for children in the first place. Family foster care can be constructed to serve as a less restrictive setting for children that can speed reunification and assure that out-of-home placements which need to be made are not undertaken until all reasonable efforts to preserve families have been explored. Finally, as a result of the reform, family foster care services should also become a neighborhood resource for children and families, investing in the capacity of communities from which the foster care population comes.

CURRENT STATUS OF FAMILY TO FAMILY

At the outset of the initiative in 1992, the accepted wisdom among child welfare professionals was that a continuing decline in the numbers of foster families was inevitable; that large, centralized, public agencies could not effectively partner with neighborhoods; that disadvantaged communities could not produce good foster families in any numbers; and that substantial increases in congregate care were inevitable. *Family to Family* is now showing that good foster families can be recruited and supported in the communities from which children are coming into placement. Further, dramatic increases in the overall number of foster families are possible, with corresponding decreases in the numbers of children placed in institutions, as well as in the resources allocated to such placements. Initial evaluation results are now available from the Foundation. Perhaps most important, *Family to Family* is showing that child welfare agencies can effectively partner with disadvantaged communities to provide better care for children who have been abused or neglected. Child welfare practitioners and leaders – along with neighborhood residents and leaders – are beginning to develop models, tools, and specific examples (all built from experience) that can be passed on to other neighborhoods and agencies interested in such partnerships.

THE TOOLS OF FAMILY TO FAMILY

We believe that *Family to Family* is providing to the nation a successful model of a foster care system that is neighborhood-based, family-focused, and culturally appropriate. There is also evidence that an audience exists at the community level, at the state level, and at the federal level for the tools that have been developed to build such a model.

However, all of us involved in *Family to Family* quickly became aware that new paradigms, new policies, and new organizational structures were not enough to both make and sustain substantive change in the way society protects children and supports families. New ways of actually doing the work needed to be put in place in the real world. During 1997, therefore, the Foundation and our *Family to Family* grantees developed a set of tools which we believe will help others build a neighborhood-based family foster care system. In our minds, such tools are indispensable elements of real change in child welfare.

Tools developed or used in *Family to Family* include:

- Successful strategies to recruit, train, and retain foster families;
- A decisionmaking model for placement in child protection;
- New information system approaches and analytic tools;
- A self-evaluation model;
- Methods to build partnerships between public child welfare agencies and the communities they serve;
- New approaches to substance abuse treatment in a public child welfare setting;
- A model to enhance worker safety and build resilience among child protection staff;
- Communications planning in a public child protection environment, including how to respond to media crises;
- A model for partnership between public and private children service agencies;
- Strategies to support families when parents are in prison; and
- Proven models which move children home or to other permanent families in a timely manner.

The Annie E. Casey Foundation and its state and local *Family to Family* partners look forward to the opportunity to share their learnings with interested communities and agencies.

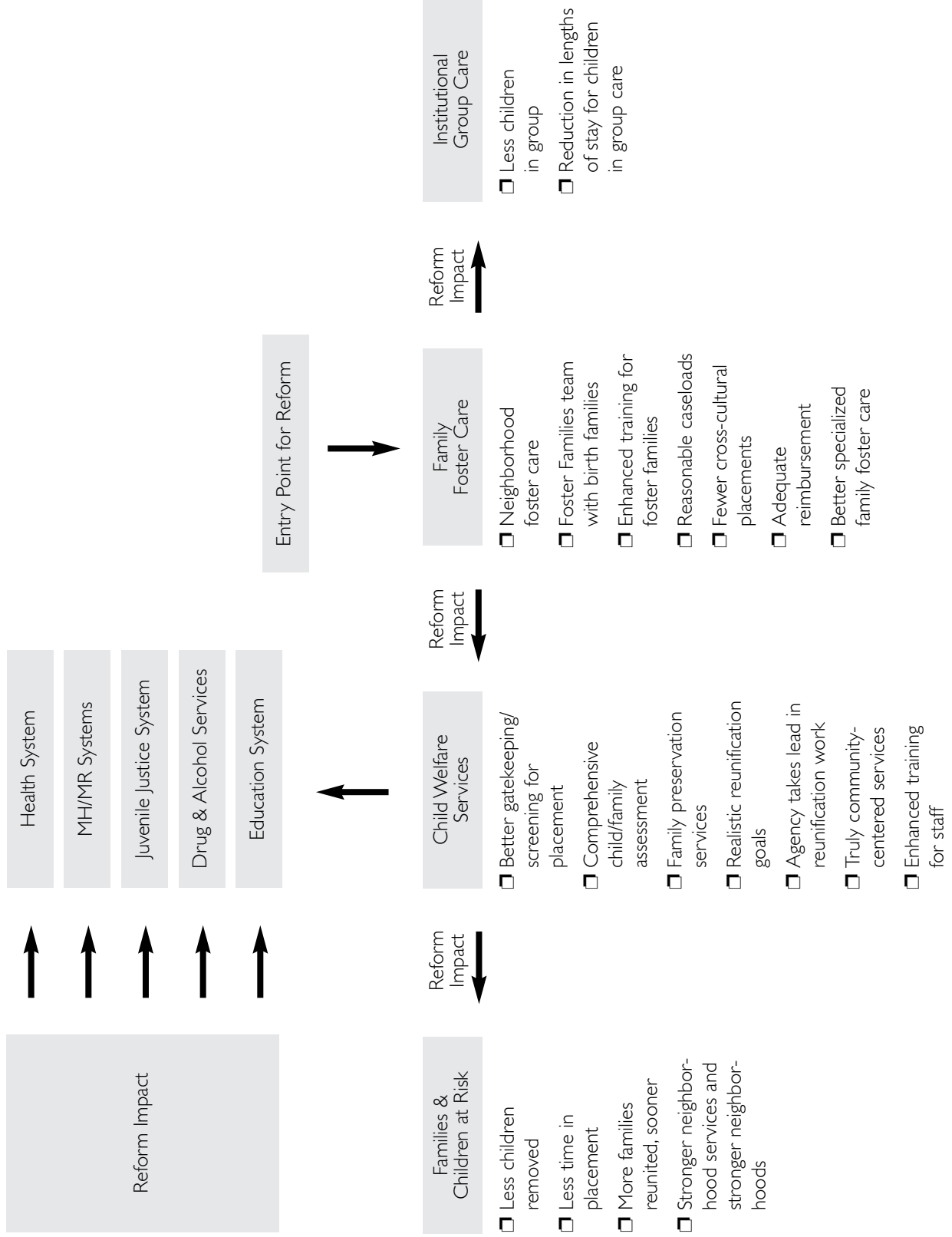
T H E O U T C O M E S O F F A M I L Y T O F A M I L Y

States participating in the *Family to Family* Initiative have committed themselves to achieving the following outcomes:

- A reduction in the number of children served in institutional and congregate care;
- A shift of resources from congregate and institutional care to family foster care and family-centered services across all child and family-serving systems;
- A decrease in the lengths of stay in out-of-home placement;
- An increase in the number of planned reunifications;
- A decrease in the number of unplanned re-entries into care;
- A decrease in the number of placement disruptions; and
- A reduction in the total number of children served away from their own families.

Finally, as a result of the reform, family foster care services should also become a neighborhood resource for children and families, investing in the capacity of communities where the children are currently coming into care.

THE FAMILY TO FAMILY REFORM DESIGN





The Annie E. Casey Foundation
701 St. Paul Street, Baltimore, MD 21202
410.547.6600 410.547.6624 fax www.aecf.org