



2019 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, families and communities. The Children and Family Fellowship® is the Annie E. Casey Foundation's signature program to develop this potential in leaders of public, nonprofit and philanthropic organizations.

Launched in 1993, the program has hosted 11 Fellowship classes and maintains a national network of 125 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 21-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 are able to measure the difference they are making for the well-being of the nation's children and families.



FIFTEEN ACCOMPLISHED, ASPIRING LEADERS.

We are delighted to introduce the 2019–21 class of the Casey Foundation’s Children and Family Fellowship. Like the Fellows who have preceded them, the 15 members of the current class are dynamic leaders from a wide variety of backgrounds. Their work spans the fields of education, child welfare, juvenile justice, workforce development, housing and community development, 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 brighter futures for the nation’s children and families, their communities and the systems that serve them. The Fellows work

to ensure that more youth experience success in school and in the workplace, more parents are economically self-sufficient and more families can achieve the American Dream.

For the first time, in addition to their specific individual objectives, this group of Fellows will contribute to a shared result: All youth and young adults ages 14–24 have the necessary connections to school, work and family to achieve equitable outcomes of success. They will learn and apply the competencies of Results Count™, the Foundation’s unique approach to leadership development, to chart indicators and strategies toward achieving that vision.

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

Leslie Boissiere, Vice President
External Affairs
The Annie E. Casey Foundation

Barbara Squires, Director
Leadership Development
The Annie E. Casey Foundation



GRACE BONILLA

As administrator of the New York City Human Resources Administration, a social services agency serving 3 million low-income New Yorkers, **GRACE BONILLA** oversees 14,000 employees and 12 major programs. An attorney by training, she brings a unique set of skills and perspectives to her position.

While her primary responsibility is to make major policy decisions, she knows that real change comes in the details.

“My goal has always been to work with the smartest people at the systems level while getting to know pockets of communities on the ground so I can challenge our thinking,” Bonilla says.

As a Fellow, she sees clear ways to better serve youth through existing career pathway and cash assistance programs.

“Administering assistance for a family’s basic needs has become so transactional and focused just on the head of household,” Bonilla points out. “This misses the opportunity to see the family holistically. For instance, if there are three kids at home, we need to provide scaffolding or reinforcement for them to stay in school and succeed.”



CHARLES BRADLEY

The product of a supportive family, **CHARLES BRADLEY** has dedicated his career to equipping families to provide the same love and stability to their own children. He became a social worker to focus on individual children and families. Now, as division director for the Mecklenburg County Department of Social Services in North Carolina, Bradley is implementing racial equity and inclusion strategies at scale.

“Teens need not just physical safety, but also emotional and psychological safety as they prepare to enter adulthood,” he explains. “They do better in permanent family settings. We’re working on kinship strategies to connect teens in custody to biological family, neighbors, coaches and teachers and other adults who they have a relationship with.”

Bradley has also implemented systems to complete child welfare investigations on a more timely basis and is working to offer training and support for caseworkers to maximize protective relationships for children engaged in the child welfare system.

He’s most excited to learn from and support colleagues from around the country who are doing the same work. “The greatest benefit of the Fellowship is the community,” Bradley says.



REGINA CANNON

REGINA CANNON is in the business of building a more equitable world for young people to grow and thrive. A former professor, mental health counselor and court administrator, Cannon is now the chief equity and impact officer at C4 Solutions in Needham, Massachusetts, where she works to embed racial equity principles in projects that address issues ranging from housing stability to mental health research and interventions.

According to Cannon, the results can be devastating when public service systems do not intentionally and consistently use equity as a guiding principle. Young people going through such systems, especially young people of color, are more likely to experience homelessness and have fewer educational and work opportunities. But, she says, “fully engaging those same young people in reimagining and redesigning more equitable systems is the first step toward real system transformation.”

Cannon also supports young people in becoming more civically engaged, including by helping youth who have been homeless register to vote and connecting them with community capacity-building and advocacy organizations.

“Equity is the work,” Cannon says. “And young people thriving is the result.”



ED CENTER

ED CENTER has committed his life to improving outcomes for young people, both as the father of adopted sons born into vulnerable conditions and as a tireless advocate for youth. As senior program officer for education at the Tipping Point Community in San Francisco, he is especially interested in raising college graduation rates among students of color.

“Under-resourced public schools are funneling students into remedial college classes with very low pass rates,” Center says. “When you place those same students in a regular freshman class along with a concurrent class that offers extra support, they thrive and do well.”

Students who enroll in four-year universities are more likely to graduate than those in two-year colleges, so Center is working to improve the quality of college advising at a set of high schools. He is also focused on changing financial aid systems with reforms such as enabling stops and starts along the education pathway and providing living expenses for working adults at community colleges.

“When I fight for equity and systems change, it’s because I remember that poverty is less about individual choices and more about policies designed to keep people poor,” he says.



KRISTEN HARPER

As a former senior policy adviser for the U.S. Department of Education, **KRISTEN HARPER** knows what it takes to move policy at the national level. Now director of policy development at Child Trends, she is using that experience to illuminate disparities in the ways school, health, child welfare and law enforcement systems interact with children of color with disabilities.

“We have to rethink how we interpret children’s behavior, particularly for male children of color and children with disabilities,” Harper says.

“The poor response we have to developmentally appropriate behavior is compounded by a lack of services and implicit bias — with long-term repercussions.”

As a teenager, Harper recognized implicit bias when her high school offered advanced-placement entrance exams only to students already thought to be high achieving, thus reinforcing long-held inequities.

“Unequal systems reproduce policies and narratives that reinforce inequity,” she says. “My goal is to lift up people of color with disabilities in data and research to highlight their stories and experiences.”



KARLA PLEITÉZ HOWELL

As the managing director of policy and programs at Advancement Project California, **KARLA PLEITÉZ HOWELL** oversees high-impact state and local initiatives.

She recently led in the development of the Student Equity Need Index, a ranking of high- and highest-need schools that includes indicators such as dropout and chronic absence rates, admissions rates to California’s public universities, community violence rates and asthma rates.

“We wanted to emphasize that it’s not individual deficits, like not being smart enough, that are holding students back,” Howell says. “It’s environmental conditions that would make it tough for anyone to succeed.”

Howell’s holistic understanding of racial disparities comes from personal and professional experience. Describing her teen years in Los Angeles, she recalls, “I had friends who joined gangs to receive protection as they walked through the neighborhood.”

Working in the Los Angeles County prosecutor’s office, those memories allowed her to see the humanity in young adults accused of crimes. “I saw so many lost people who never had opportunities when they were younger,” she says. “I carry that with me today.”



MARIO JOHNSON

MARIO JOHNSON walked into his early role as a program facilitator for foster youth daunted by how little he knew about the young people he served. Today, the experience of getting to know them fuels his deep passion for his work.

“Emotionally connecting with the children we encounter and their stories really helped me understand that they’re not just cases, but actual people experiencing trauma,” says Johnson, now bureau director of youth transition support services for the Mississippi Department of Child Protection Services.

Johnson seeks to shift the focus of child welfare and court systems from keeping children safe to the more complex goal of ensuring their well-being. This shift in perspective, he argues, might lead judges, caseworkers and even legislators to make different choices about a child’s placement or mental health programs.

“Our current data show when a child enters and leaves care,” he says. “But how many placements did they have in their first year? How many schools did they attend? Those things matter when we’re talking about a child’s well-being. We have to tell more individual stories.”



SARAH JONAS

SARAH JONAS is the executive director of the New York City Department of Education’s Office of Community Schools, overseeing a portfolio of more than 350 schools, including 258 community schools.

Jonas is proud that community schools have shown measurable progress in lowering rates of chronic absence and improving attendance and graduation rates, but she acknowledges that disparities persist.

“We know that the instruction students receive in the classroom is critical,” she says, “and that for young people to succeed in school they need their physical and mental health and social and emotional needs addressed. That’s why community schools engage the student, family, school and community in supporting the whole child.”

One of four Fellows from the education sector, Jonas is eager to dive into common issues. “I see all of the possibilities for cross-pollination and learning from each other,” she says. “We describe the community school strategy as an equity strategy. I want to put that claim to the test through the Fellowship and ensure that the strategy lives up to its promise.”



MUNEER KARCHER-RAMOS

As the first director of the new Office of Financial Empowerment for Saint Paul, Minnesota, **MUNEER KARCHER-RAMOS** leads a new approach to entrenched issues.

“Our work is really about financial health and community wealth, not fighting poverty,” Karcher-Ramos explains. “We’re looking beyond income at assets and liquid assets, net worth and banking relationships — using a different set of questions to get at how residents are doing.”

Karcher-Ramos’s team is bringing to light the many ways existing systems are stacked against residents with little savings. Their work has led to the implementation of new protections for renters and a deeper exploration of how residents are disproportionately affected by fines and fees from the city, county and courts.

Drawing from his past experience leading Saint Paul’s Promise Neighborhood initiative, Karcher-Ramos says that this political and economic moment requires leadership: “We have to diagnose and address issues at scale to drive systemic change that sets our communities up for good results.”



ALISON KEAR

As chief executive officer of Covenant House Alaska (CHA), **ALISON KEAR** directs comprehensive services to youth experiencing homelessness, abuse or trafficking.

In more than 20 years with CHA, Kear has transformed the nonprofit’s services through a variety of strategic public and private partnerships, including with local tribal councils. She recently led Anchorage’s successful application for a federal Youth Homelessness Demonstration Project grant, one of 10 awarded by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development.

In 2011, she led a successful \$25 million campaign to double the number of beds in CHA’s shelter while adding space for partners to provide mental health and substance abuse counseling, health care, job skills training and music and art programming. Young people helped to design the new space, and now they are staying longer, which is preparing them to move on with their lives in positive ways.

“The ‘secret sauce’ is our relationships with young people,” Kear says. “We have the privilege of walking alongside them as they work to become the best version of themselves.” Kear is eager to make a bigger difference through the Fellowship. “Every lesson learned can be applied to any Covenant House site,” she says.



KRISTINE SNYDER

KRISTINE SNYDER left home at 16 to confront life on her own. She was taken in by community members and supported through school and early employment, a fact she attributes to her racial and class privilege. She now works to remake the very power structures that buffered her but oppress others.

Snyder is the director of the Learn and Earn to Achieve Potential program at Project for Pride in Living in Minneapolis. Her goal is to improve career pathways for youth engaged in county systems, in part by redesigning the systems that keep them behind.

“We talk about ‘felon-friendly’ careers, but what if we just discussed careers?” she says. “Holding on to juvenile records keeps young people from unleashing their potential and building their own wealth.”

Snyder coordinates with other nonprofits, school districts and county leaders to support youth who have been disconnected from opportunities and help them enter family-sustaining careers of their choice. To drive this work, she also convenes partners to collect better data on career readiness. “We need earlier indicators and more nuanced data to truly align our education and workforce systems,” she says.



ERIKA VAN BUREN

ERIKA VAN BUREN grew up hearing her parents’ stories from life in the Jim Crow era, stories of constantly bending and adapting just to survive. Their experiences and her own interactions propelled her earliest research, which explored the relationship between ethnic identities and academic and social outcomes in early adolescence.

Today, Van Buren continues to add to the knowledge base around youth characteristics, experiences and outcomes. As vice president of evaluation and learning at First Place for Youth, an Oakland-based nonprofit that provides housing, education and employment services to young people emerging from foster care, her goal is to empower programmatic staff to make better decisions using data about the youth they serve.

“Data give us a way to engage young people differently in a conversation about their needs,” Van Buren explains. “They should be able to choose supports from a continuum of care that’s designed to meet them where they are.”

As one of two evaluators in the cohort, Van Buren sees a great learning opportunity ahead. “I want to expand my perspective to integrate a national programmatic and policy lens into my leadership strategy,” she says.



BHARTI WAHI

As executive director of the Children’s Defense Fund – Minnesota, **BHARTI WAHI** has both deep connections with families and a perch for policy advocacy at the state level. Her goal is to ensure that more children and young people live in economically stable households, but she knows that the common focus on income level alone masks entrenched issues of inequity and access.

“We don’t have a good definition for family economic stability,” Wahi says. “Is it your ability to buy diapers, have a working cell phone or get to a job 20 miles away? What does it look like for real people?”

Wahi’s goal is to remove racial, geographic and economic barriers to economic stability so families can thrive — and she sees giving policymakers more exposure to the stories of community members as essential to that work.

“The diversity of our diversity is unique,” Wahi says. “We have to bring to the table people with a range of backgrounds and experiences, so that those who hold power can see the differences — between Vietnamese and Hmong, African American and Native American — and develop policies that dismantle long-held disparities in how people are treated.”



ALICIA GUEVARA WARREN

Growing up in a close-knit family of migrant farm workers, **ALICIA GUEVARA WARREN** saw friends and loved ones struggle to gain a foothold. For some youth, brushes with the adult justice system had lifelong consequences; others were stymied by the choice between pursuing education and financially supporting their family.

The first in her generation to attend college, Warren has worked tirelessly to build better systems for all children to reach their potential. As the director of the Kinship Care Resource Center at Michigan State University, she coordinates a variety of activities across multiple systems and works with policymakers to better support children and youth in the care of relatives during times of transition.

“The data show that we are failing our most vulnerable kids, particularly those in foster and kinship care,” says Warren. “We must do better.”

Warren is looking forward to taking advantage of new federal funding to hire kinship care navigators as support for families. She was also recently elected to the local board of education — one more platform to realize her goal of creating economic security for young people.



IRIS ZUNIGA

When she was a community college student, **IRIS ZUNIGA** knew that the odds were against her to succeed. Statistically, only 3% of her peers would transfer to the University of California, Los Angeles. But she persevered, earning degrees from UCLA and California State University, Northridge. She has now dedicated her life to changing the odds for students like her.

For over a decade, Zuniga has provided leadership to Youth Policy Institute (YPI), where she serves as executive vice president, bridging the gap between providing meaningful direct services and advocating for systemic change. To address the challenge of overcoming poverty-related barriers, she has piloted a unique model to saturate communities with cradle-to-college-and-career support for the entire family. Because of Zuniga's efforts, YPI integrates academic and community support at 135 sites across Los Angeles.

“When working within communities, I’m always thinking about how to provide quality support for youth,” says Zuniga. “For me, it’s always been about filling gaps by aligning resources and systems.”

Zuniga is excited to learn from peers in her Fellowship class. She says, “I look forward to sharing strategies we’ve used and building my own results-based leadership skills.”

Staff/Faculty:

Barbara Squires, *Director, Leadership Development*

Raj Chawla, *Faculty*

Angela Hendrix Terry, *Faculty*

Bill Shepardson, *Faculty*

Marian Urquilla, *Guest Faculty*

Shaecole Leonard, *Program Assistant*

