

A publication sharing ideas and insights



THE DIRECT SERVICE AGENCY OF
THE ANNIE E. CASEY FOUNDATION

Voice

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A photograph of a diverse family of four—two adults and two children—gathered around a red book, looking at it together with interest and joy. The father is in the center, smiling, with a young girl on his left and a young boy on his right. The mother is on the far right, also smiling. They are outdoors, with green foliage in the background.

Families and Communities Building Stronger Foundations for Youth

*Douglas Nelson retires as
Casey Foundation President
and CEO*

*KIDS COUNT highlights
need to focus on early
reading proficiency*

*Congress expands
opportunities for relatives
in child welfare*

*National Foster Care
Month unites communities
in support of youth*



From the Desk of Raymond L. Torres

For 18 years, I had the honor and privilege of working alongside one of the great leaders in modern philanthropy: Douglas W. Nelson, the recently retired president of the Annie E. Casey Foundation (see page 2). One hallmark of his prodigious legacy is the annual KIDS COUNT Data Book and essay, which in 2010 focuses on the critical importance of learning to read in early grades (see page 12).

Doug was a steadfast champion of Casey Family Services, and his commitment to the transformative power of direct services has given shape and focus not only to our work, but also to the field of child welfare at large. And to Doug, the dedication of social workers connecting children in foster care with permanent, supportive families – and the stories of these children and families – have been the bedrock for broader changes at the Foundation.

Now Patrick McCarthy, the Foundation's new president and CEO (see page 5), is leading the Casey Foundation forward with a compatible vision and a renewed commitment to equity, best practice, and accountability in public systems that serve our most vulnerable children and their families. Patrick, who began his career as a psychiatric social worker, brings the passion of a devoted frontline worker as he calls on all of us to “change the world” for disadvantaged kids and families.

At Casey Family Services, we will continue to work vigorously in our communities to connect children with families, one at a time, child after child. Through the tireless work of our staff and the dedication of birth parents, kin caregivers, foster and adoptive families, and other caring and committed adults, we have learned that meaningful, lifelong connections provide the foundation for children to thrive and grow to become happy, healthy, and productive adults.

In this issue, we also note the passing of a dear friend and colleague, Rama Ramanathan (see page 6), whose contributions to Casey, his community, and society will be greatly missed.

In honor of National Foster Care Month, I am pleased to dedicate this issue to the courage, resilience, and accomplishments of foster children and youth everywhere, and to the compassion of the adults who care for them.

Raymond L. Torres
Vice President, The Annie E. Casey Foundation &
Executive Director, Casey Family Services

Patrick McCarthy, president and CEO of the Annie E. Casey Foundation, and Raymond Torres, vice president of the Foundation and executive director of Casey Family Services

Patrick McCarthy, presidente y CEO de la Annie E. Casey Foundation y Raymond Torres, vice presidente de la Fundación y director ejecutivo de Casey Family Services



Desde el Escritorio de Raymond L. Torres

Por 18 años, tuve el honor y el privilegio de trabajar al lado de uno de los grandes líderes en la filantropía moderna: Douglas W. Nelson, el presidente recientemente jubilado de la Fundación Annie E. Casey (véase en la página 2). Entre su legado más prodigioso se encuentra el anuario: KIDS COUNT libro de datos y ensayo, que en 2010 se centra en la importancia de aprender a leer en grados tempranos (véase en la página 12).

Doug fue un campeón fijo de Casey Family Services, y su compromiso al poder transformador de servicios directos ha dado forma y foco no sólo a nuestro trabajo, pero también al campo para el bienestar de niños. Para Doug, la dedicación de los trabajadores sociales y el cuidado permanente de conectar niños con familias – y las historias de estos niños y estas familias – ha sido la base para cambios en la Fundación.

Actualmente Patrick McCarthy, quien es el nuevo presidente y CEO de la fundación (véase en la página 5), está liderando y llevando hacia adelante la Fundación Casey con una visión y un compromiso renovado con la equidad, mejores prácticas, y la responsabilidad con los sistemas públicos que sirven a nuestros niños y familias más vulnerables. Patrick, quien comenzó su carrera como trabajador social psiquiátrico, trae la pasión de un trabajador de primera línea dedicado, como él pide a todos nosotros a “cambiar el mundo” para los niños y las familias desventajadas.

Aquí en Casey Family Services, continuaremos trabajando vigorosamente en nuestras comunidades para conectar niños con familias, uno a la vez, niño tras niño. A través del trabajo incansable de nuestros trabajadores y la dedicación de los padres biológicos, los familiares custodios, familias adoptivas y sustitutas, y otros adultos responsables y comprometidos, hemos aprendido que las conexiones significativas de vidas proveen la base para que los niños crezcan y se desarrollen hasta convertirse en adultos saludables, productivos y felices.

En este asunto, deseamos notificar la muerte de Rama Ramanathan (véase página 6), amigo y colega, quien en su vida, y con sus contribuciones a la Fundación Casey, su comunidad y a la sociedad, sera grandemente extrañado.

En honor al mes del Cuidado Sustituto Nacional (National Foster Care Month), me place dedicar esta publicación al coraje, poder de adaptación, y logros de los niños adoptivos y sustitutos dondequiera, y a la compasión de los adultos que los cuidan y se preocupan por ellos.

*Raymond L. Torres
Vice Presidente, La Fundación Annie E. Casey &
Director Ejecutivo, Casey Family Services*

DOUG NELSON PUT HIS LEADERSHIP ON THE LINE FOR KIDS



“COWARDICE ASKS THE QUESTION – IS IT SAFE?
EXPEDIENCY ASKS THE QUESTION – IS IT POLITIC?
VANITY ASKS THE QUESTION – IS IT POPULAR?
BUT CONSCIENCE ASKS THE QUESTION – IS IT RIGHT?
AND THERE COMES A TIME WHEN ONE MUST TAKE A POSITION
THAT IS NEITHER SAFE, NOR POLITIC, NOR POPULAR; BUT ONE
MUST TAKE IT BECAUSE IT IS RIGHT.”

– DR. MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR.

executive director of Casey Family Services. In the child welfare arena, analyzing data to determine how long kids were staying in care and how much money was being spent on high-end care galvanized efforts to reduce the numbers of children in congregate care and to keep them as close as possible to family and community, Torres notes.

Nelson also helped oversee a shift in Casey's direct services and grantmaking, from supporting the best possible long-term foster care for children who can't safely remain at home to working, from day one, to ensure that every child finds a loving, lifelong family. Nelson “has been able to show the meaning of permanence in its entirety, and that the importance of keeping families strong so kids don't have to go into care is as much a part of permanence as helping them reunite with family when safe and possible or finding forever families through adoption or guardianship,” says Lee Mullaney, Casey's interim director of communications and media relations.

In launching the Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative (the Initiative), Nelson defied the conventional wisdom that, if young people in foster care reached their late teens with no prospects of returning to family or finding a stable home, the best the system could do was prepare them to live independently.

Reflecting on the tenure of Douglas W. Nelson, who retired as president and chief executive officer of the Annie E. Casey Foundation in April, Sania Metzger, Casey's director of state child welfare policy, summoned this quote to describe the philosophical view and moral compass that governed Nelson's leadership.

Whether it was bringing all the parties together to resolve child welfare lawsuits or forming a network of organizations to support data-based advocacy for children in all 50 states, Nelson took calculated risks, made commitments, and devoted his personal time and attention to problems many considered unpopular or intractable. The result has been a legacy of interconnected, results-driven interventions to improve the

lives of vulnerable children and help their families and communities thrive.

“Doug Nelson enlarged the Casey Foundation's mission from a narrow service focus into a broad-based reform portfolio that has transformed the way this nation understands the needs of our most vulnerable children and families,” says Michael L. Eskew, chair of the Foundation's Board of Trustees.

Through Casey Family Services, initiatives such as Family to Family, and the annual *KIDS COUNT Data Book*, Nelson's insistence on using data to change practices ushered in “a new paradigm of thinking on a broader scale to promote system reform in a way that had not been discussed before,” says Raymond L. Torres, vice president of the Casey Foundation and

“DOUG NELSON ENLARGED THE CASEY FOUNDATION’S MISSION FROM A NARROW SERVICE FOCUS INTO A BROAD-BASED REFORM PORTFOLIO THAT HAS TRANSFORMED THE WAY THIS NATION UNDERSTANDS THE NEEDS OF OUR MOST VULNERABLE CHILDREN AND FAMILIES.”

– MICHAEL L. ESKEW, CHAIR OF THE FOUNDATION’S BOARD OF TRUSTEES

Taking his cue from UPS Founder Jim Casey, whose philanthropy was shaped by his observations that youth growing up without family support fare much worse than their peers, Nelson sought an investment “that would directly benefit this population that had grown up in foster care and had originally triggered Jim Casey’s interest,” notes Patrick McCarthy, who succeeded Nelson as Casey’s president and chief executive officer on April 4, 2010.

Besides providing matched savings accounts to help young people save for a car or a deposit on housing and offering support with college registration, access to job training, scholarships, and other resources, the Initiative equips young people to raise their own voices for foster care reform. Many state policy changes – as well as the federal Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008 – reflect Casey concepts like extending foster care support beyond age 18, keeping siblings together, and involving extended family more frequently in making decisions and providing permanence for children.

“Doug’s particular contribution has been in focusing attention on the missing piece – permanence,” notes McCarthy. Nelson championed the idea that, if the goal is helping these youth to be more economically successful, more connected to their communities, more likely to have stable housing, and less likely to drop out of

school or become pregnant at a young age, “the best path to success is a permanent family – and it’s never too late.”

Nelson’s work in developing and serving on the New York Special Child Welfare Advisory Panel, formed in 1998 to help stave off an impasse in the *Marisol v. Giuliani* lawsuit, ushered in sweeping reforms in the city’s child welfare system.

The dilemma of lawsuits that dragged on for years without establishing productive building blocks for reform “was a problem no one knew how to solve – until Doug Nelson had the idea for this panel that allowed all the parties to get the benefits of the lawsuit without all the drawbacks,” notes Steve Cohen, interim vice president of the Casey Foundation’s Center for Effective Family Services and Systems.

Nelson “put his leadership on the line by taking stands and working with the panel to make clear recommendations to New York City’s child welfare system,” notes John Mattingly, who ran the Family to Family Initiative at Casey, served on the panel with Nelson, and is now commissioner of New York City’s Administration for Children’s Services.

The panel’s approach helped shape the development of the Casey Strategic Consulting Group, an effort to help state

and local systems struggling to reform in the wake of child welfare tragedies or court orders. A similar reform effort in Maine had a dramatic impact on improving child welfare outcomes, notes Mark Millar, founding director of the Maine Division of Casey Family Services. That included a 34 percent reduction of children in out-of-home care, a 50 percent reduction in residential care, and a 30 percent increase in the number of kids placed in kinship foster care between 2004 and 2009. Today, the methods developed by the Casey Strategic Consulting Group have become important elements of the Foundation’s work to reform child welfare and juvenile justice systems.

The Juvenile Detention Alternatives Initiative, initially launched as a modest demonstration effort in 1992, now includes 110 sites in 27 states and the District of Columbia. It has won over disbelievers through results ranging from significantly lower detention rates and reduced juvenile crime in project sites to decreases in disparate treatment of minorities and broader support for juvenile justice reforms.

Nelson’s unyielding support “was always a high-risk endeavor,” but never more so than when the Foundation launched the program, notes Bart Lubow, Casey’s Juvenile Justice Strategy Group director. “In the early ‘90s, the country was on the warpath with early adolescence and had

“DOUG’S PARTICULAR CONTRIBUTION HAS BEEN IN FOCUSING ATTENTION ON THE MISSING PIECE – PERMANENCE... THE BEST PATH TO SUCCESS IS A PERMANENT FAMILY – AND IT’S NEVER TOO LATE.”

– PATRICK MCCARTHY, CASEY’S NEW PRESIDENT AND CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER

decided that a lot of our problems sprung from youth violence,” he reflects. “It would have been much safer to focus on prevention and early intervention alone, but Nelson embraced Dostoyevsky’s notion that the degree of the civilization of a society can be seen in its prisons. He was one of those unique leaders willing to take on the cause not just of disadvantaged kids, but of unpopular kids.”

“That Doug had the vision to not just continue tinkering away with little demonstration projects but to fundamentally reform the system, and sustain that support for over 15 years, is remarkable,” observes Barry Krisberg, former president of the National Council on Crime and Delinquency and now a senior fellow and lecturer at the University of California at Berkeley School of Law.

Nelson’s leadership in addressing racial disparities in both the juvenile justice and child welfare systems, and the comprehensive family economic success agenda he supported to combat poverty issues that are at the root of many family disruptions, have also been critical, notes Metzger.

“Doug has brought to the whole field his ability to see how the problems that affect all vulnerable families are interrelated,” adds Mullane. “He has helped us demonstrate how important it is to invest in services that are comprehensive and help the family as much as the child.”

Nelson’s high-profile support has attracted collaboration and co-investment in ground-



breaking efforts to transform disinvested neighborhoods so that families are better supported and children have safer and stronger communities in which to grow up. Casey sites such as Baltimore, Atlanta, the *Making Connections* communities, and Living Cities – a collaboration of 22 foundations and financial services companies that Nelson has helped steer – have made important strides in stimulating affordable housing, workforce development, and redevelopment efforts that benefit, rather than displace, residents.

“He recognizes that the people, families, youth, consumers, and advocates closest to the work are the best informants about the urgency of the policies needed,” says Metzger.

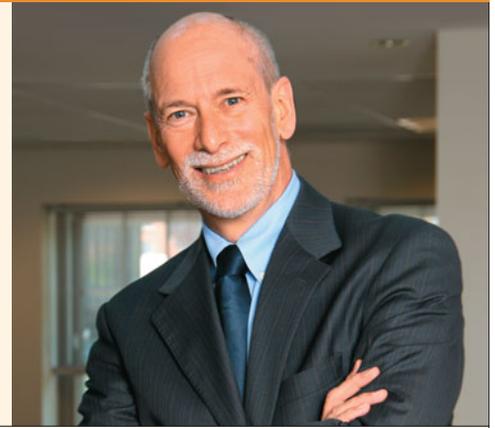
Nelson had the vision to better integrate the frontline practices, lessons, and perspec-

tives of Casey Family Services, the Foundation’s direct service agency, which once functioned largely on a separate track from the grantmaking side of the Foundation.

“Doug appreciates that as a national foundation, we are unique in having grantmaking and direct services, and that we have an opportunity to showcase best practices with the very same families we are trying to impact,” Torres says.

“My appreciation and gratitude for those of you on the front lines of our work knows no bounds,” Nelson stated in his retirement announcement. “You have not only changed the conversation about the services and supports needed by vulnerable children and families, but you have changed the priorities that will shape public policies for years to come.”

PATRICK MCCARTHY SUCCEEDS DOUG NELSON AS FOUNDATION PRESIDENT



Patrick T. McCarthy assumed the office of president and chief executive officer of the Annie E. Casey Foundation, effective April 4, 2010. McCarthy, who joined the Foundation in 1994, had been serving as senior vice president. He was responsible for aligning practice and system reform activities across the Foundation and overseeing efforts to better integrate the work of Casey Family Services, the Foundation's direct service agency, with the Foundation's grantmaking operations.

The Foundation Board of Trustees named McCarthy to succeed Douglas W. Nelson, who led the organization for 20 years (*see story, page 2*).

"Patrick McCarthy is a highly talented and proven leader who has dedicated his career to helping children and families through a myriad of professional and leadership roles," says Michael L. Eskew, chair of the Foundation's Board of Trustees.

Eskew says McCarthy's "strong understanding and appreciation of best practices in children and family services; the need for reform in the major child- and family-serving systems; and the basic dynamics of positive neighborhood change" made him the Board's top choice.

McCarthy says he plans to build on and expand the critical work Nelson led in promoting initiatives and policies based on evidence from field-tested practices, employing the Foundation's direct services operation as an important learning laboratory.

"Casey Family Services has a unique and critical role to play in demonstrating that every child, even those with tough challenges, can be connected to a lifelong

family. Increasingly, Casey Family Services is contributing to the evidence base on ways to improve child and family outcomes," says McCarthy. "Efforts to integrate the practices and lessons of Casey Family Services into the entire Foundation's work have proven invaluable."

"PATRICK MCCARTHY IS THE RIGHT PERSON TO ADVANCE THE CASEY FOUNDATION'S MISSION IN THE YEARS AHEAD. HE HAS THE PERFECT BALANCE OF KNOWLEDGE ABOUT OUR WORK, PLUS THE ABILITY TO BRING FORWARD HIS OWN EXPERTISE, VISION, AND IDEAS."

– DOUGLAS W. NELSON

"Patrick's background equips him to understand the needs of the children and families we serve and the realities of the work, and that brings added value to his vision and commitment to create better systems and stronger communities," says Raymond L. Torres, vice president of the Annie E. Casey Foundation and executive director of Casey Family Services.

Prior to joining Casey, McCarthy was senior program officer at the Center for Assessment and Policy Development in Bala Cynwyd, Pennsylvania, where he worked with foundations, states, and cities

on system planning and development of governance strategies. From 1985 to 1992, McCarthy held positions of increasing responsibility at the Department of Services for Children, Youth, and Their Families in Delaware, culminating in his appointment as director of the Division of Youth Rehabilitative Services.

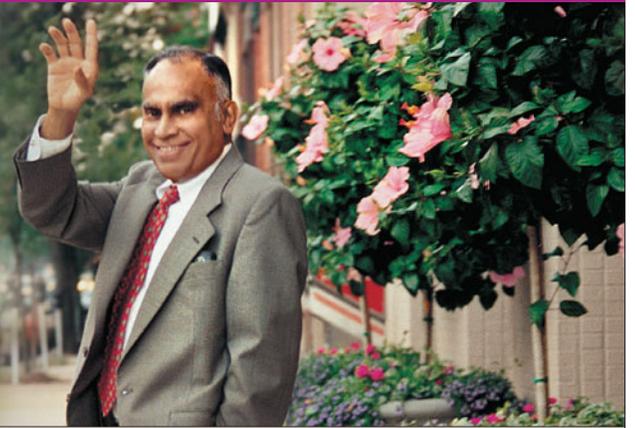
McCarthy began his career in the early 1970s as a psychiatric social worker at the Camden County Mental Health Center in New Jersey. He also has been an assistant professor at the University of Southern California Graduate School of Social Work and a lecturer at the Bryn Mawr College Graduate School of Social Work and Social Research, where he earned his doctorate and wrote a dissertation on decision-making models in child welfare. McCarthy also holds a master's degree in social work from the University of Pennsylvania.

"Patrick McCarthy is the right person to advance the Casey Foundation's mission in the years ahead. He has the perfect balance of knowledge about our work, plus the ability to bring forward his own expertise, vision, and ideas," says Douglas W. Nelson.

"Doug Nelson has set the standard for Casey's work," says McCarthy. "The Foundation is seen as one of the most thoughtful, informed, effective, and innovative advocates for improved outcomes for disadvantaged kids. I believe this platform gives us immense potential to build on our strengths, while exploring new opportunities."

The Casey Foundation, headquartered in Baltimore, Maryland, has grown from a staff of 40 social workers and six grant making professionals in 1990 to a workforce of more than 500 today.

FORMER CFO AND CASEY CHAMPION DIES AT AGE 74



Rajaram (Rama) Ramanathan, who served as chief financial officer of the Annie E. Casey Foundation for a decade and was a beloved friend, mentor, and spiritual counselor to many employees, died on February 2, 2010.

The Baltimore resident, who passed away of cancer at age 74, joined the Casey Foundation in 1991 and helped oversee its move from Greenwich, Connecticut, to Baltimore, Maryland, in 1994. As vice president and chief financial and operations officer, Ramanathan managed all activities related to accounting, finance, investments, legal issues, employee benefits, and computer operations. He retired from the Foundation in 2001.

“Rama – with the loyal assistance of his accounting team – built, virtually from scratch, the business side of the Annie E. Casey Foundation,” said Douglas W. Nelson, who retired recently as president and chief executive officer of the Foundation. “He is the man who made us an accountable, accurate, modern, timely, compliant, efficient, transparent, employee-supporting, ethical, and honorable organization.”

Staff credit Ramanathan’s leadership and integrity for his team’s stellar record of never missing a deadline for the Foundation’s voluminous tax filing or earning less than a perfect external audit. However, his generous spirit, warm personality, charm, and self-effacing wit were what endeared him to his colleagues most.

“Rama was one of the spiritual founders of the Annie E. Casey Foundation. This is a tremendous loss to us all professionally and

personally,” noted Raymond L. Torres, vice president of the Foundation and executive director of Casey Family Services.

“He had the highest regard for the work we do for children, youth, and families and felt honored to work for an organization that improved the lives of children. As the

“AND ALTHOUGH HE IS NO LONGER HERE, OUR MEMORIES OF HIS HABITS, VIRTUES, AND PARABLES WILL CONTINUE TO FLAVOR OUR WORK, NOURISH OUR LIVES, AND FEED OUR SOULS.”

– RALPH SMITH

CFO, he was a champion for us and our staff and made sure that we had the proper resources and support. He did everything in his power to make the environment comfortable and supportive for staff so that everyone could do the work they were hired to do,” reflected Torres, who said Ramanathan got to know his direct services colleagues on frequent visits to Casey Family Services and through his participation in a number of agency events.

Prior to joining the Casey Foundation, Ramanathan managed financial programs for the Rockefeller Foundation, both in India and in New York, for 27 years and served as comptroller for his final eight years there. He was born in Madras, India, and earned an undergraduate degree in political

science, philosophy, and psychology and a master’s degree in sociology and public administration, all from universities in India. In 1971, he and his wife Chandra moved to the United States, where Ramanathan earned a master’s in business administration in public accounting from Baruch College, City University of New York.

Besides Chandra, his wife of nearly 43 years, Ramanathan is survived by a son, Rajiv, age 35, who lives in Dallas, Texas, and by two brothers. In an article about Ramanathan’s passing in the *Baltimore Sun*, Rajiv recalled what Casey colleagues often said about his father. “He was called the soul of the foundation,” Rajiv said. “People took their issues and problems to him. He was a good listener, and had a kind ear and a kind heart.”

Ralph Smith, Casey’s executive vice president, fittingly ended his personal eulogy at Ramanathan’s funeral with a parable. It involved a porous rock placed in a pot that, over time, absorbs the various flavors of the spices, meats, fruits, and vegetables prepared in it.

“On occasions when there is nothing but water to cook, the porous rock and cook pot yield back the flavors and essence, and even nutrients, to create a nourishing broth,” Smith explained. “So it is with Rama ... We are the porous rocks and cook pots enriched by his stories and humor and rules. And although he is no longer here, our memories of his habits, virtues, and parables will continue to flavor our work, nourish our lives, and feed our souls.”

STARTLING RESEARCH AND SYMPOSIUM SHINE LIGHT ON OUTCOMES OF THOSE WHO AGE OUT



When the John H. Chafee Foster Care Independence Act of 1999 was signed, excitement and anticipation swelled within the child welfare community. The Chafee legislation would make it easier for youth leaving foster care to transition successfully into adulthood. But a decade later, little has changed for those who have “aged out,” and in some cases, the landscape has worsened, according to new research.

Nearly 30,000 youth now age out of foster care annually. This constitutes about 10 percent of all exits from foster care, a substantial increase from the 3 percent when Chafee was signed.

Despite 10 years of high-quality research and innovative practices, the outcomes for many of these young people continue to be poor. These youth are more likely than their peers to be unemployed and to have left school without a degree. Far too many are homeless, without health insurance, or in prison.

On April 7, 170 policymakers, advocates, and experts in child welfare and human services gathered in Washington, D.C., to examine the challenges lingering a decade after Chafee.

The symposium, “Improving Outcomes for Youth in Transition: A Vision for the Next Decade,” was sponsored by the Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative (the Initiative), a national foundation that helps youth leaving foster care transition successfully to adulthood, and the Center for the Study of Social Policy. The symposium featured experts who shared federal and state policy imperatives, as well as promising data and practices from Initiative sites.

“THE ALARMING BOTTOM LINE IS YOUNG PEOPLE LEAVE FOSTER CARE WITHOUT FAMILIES AND, UNPREPARED TO LIVE ON THEIR OWN, CONTINUE TO FACE MAJOR PROBLEMS INTO THEIR EARLY 20s.”

— GARY STANGLER

New findings from the Midwest Evaluation of the Adult Functioning of Former Foster Youth, presented by Mark Courtney of the University of Washington, showed that young adults who age out of foster care are faring poorly by ages 23 and 24. By age 24, only a tiny fraction of youth who left foster care had finished a two- or four-year college degree. Less than half were employed. Nearly 40 percent had been homeless or “couch-surfed.” Many received public assistance. About 16 percent of the young men were behind bars, and many young women were raising children alone.

“The alarming bottom line is young people leave foster care without families and, unprepared to live on their own, continue to face major problems into their early 20s,” says Gary Stangler, executive director of the Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative. “A decade after Congress passed the Chafee Foster Care Independence Act, these young people simply are not connected to supportive families and are not acquiring the necessary life skills to become productive adults. The grim findings from Courtney and others underscore the press-

ing need for federal and state policies that recognize what it will take to change these outcomes.”

At the symposium, experts explored how the concept of emerging adulthood has informed our understanding of how young people gradually achieve adulthood. When Chafee was signed, there was some question as to whether success was achieved by either finding youth a permanent family or moving them to independence. Today, experts agree that young people exiting foster care need both family and supportive relationships, as well as the skills that education, employment, and social and civic engagement can provide.

The Initiative offers concrete data that such a combination works. In collaboration with partners nationwide, the Initiative offers the Opportunity Passport, which promotes asset development skills through financial literacy training, matched savings accounts, and personal goal achievement. Each youth’s savings are matched up to \$1,000 per year for purchasing approved assets such as vehicles, housing, health care, and education expenses, and for small business start-up costs. To date, more than 3,000 young people aging out of foster care collectively have saved more than \$3.1 million with the help of Initiative partners at 11 sites nationwide.

“Through our work with communities, young people have told us clearly what they need to be successful,” says Leonard Burton, chief operating officer at the Initiative. “They point to permanent, supportive families and stable educations, opportunities to achieve economic success, and safe housing. The young people have given us marching orders. It is up to us to respond.”

FOSTERING CONNECTIONS EXPANDS ROLE OF RELATIVES IN PLACEMENTS



Many of us turn first to family when facing life's biggest challenges. But what if we were cut off from our families and communities? And what if family and friends didn't know we needed help, or that there was anything they could do?

For many years, children taken into state custody as a result of abuse or neglect in their immediate families have too often lost contact with relatives and supportive adults who could have come forward to help – had they only known. Conversely, regulations have stymied many family members willing to step in from getting support to meet the costs and special challenges of raising these children, who often bear the scars of neglect or trauma.

Efforts to involve family, from day one, in finding permanent connections for all children – supported by key provisions of the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008 – are gradually changing this landscape.

The Act seeks to involve family in the decisions, care, and treatment of children in the child welfare system and:

- Requires state child welfare agencies to provide notice, within 30 days of the removal of any child from the custody of the child's parents, to all adult grandparents and other relatives of the child, except in situations of family or domestic violence. This allows grandparents and other relatives to get involved early, sometimes helping to keep the child out of foster care.
- Requires state child welfare agencies to make reasonable efforts to keep siblings together in foster care, kinship, and adop-

tive homes and to place siblings taken into foster care together in the same home. If placing siblings together is contrary to a child's safety and well-being, states must make reasonable efforts to provide "frequent visitation" or other ongoing contact among brothers and sisters.

FOSTERING CONNECTIONS CREATES A CULTURE OF POSSIBILITY FOR FAMILIES WHO MAY HAVE THOUGHT THEIR HANDS WERE TIED BY REGULATIONS.

- Offers states federal funding to support kinship guardianship programs that help children leave foster care to live permanently with relatives when it is determined that neither reunification with their birth families nor adoption is an appropriate option.
- Clarifies that states can waive non-safety related licensing standards, on a case-by-case basis, for the homes of relatives caring for children. This provision is aimed at overcoming barriers extended family members often face in meeting certain requirements that had been applied across the board to all foster homes. It also requires the Department of Health and Human Services to report to Congress on states' use of waivers and to offer recommendations for ensuring that more relative foster family homes get licensed.

Fostering Connections "creates a culture of possibility for families who may have thought their hands were tied by regulations, opens up a broader network for relatives to be resources for children, expands the pool of those that could be resources," and reduces the potential for children to languish in out-of-home care, notes Sarah Greenblatt, founding director of the former Casey Center for Effective Child Welfare Practice, who is now with the Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative.

Finding Family

Intensive efforts to find extended family members and other supportive adults who can play a role in a child's life often have a swift and powerful payoff. "We engage them in conversations about the child and ask them if they want to be in the planning process" to help the child find a permanent family, notes Greenblatt. Even if relatives can't be involved, these conversations often spur commitments to initiate some form of contact with the child.

"We have seen a remarkable decrease in anxious, aggressive, or depressed behaviors and other troubling outcomes when children know that somebody in their circle of family or community cares," says Greenblatt.

"When we reach out to some of these family members who may have been lost or out of the picture, it has an almost immediate impact on that child's well-being and sense of hope and feeling settled," notes Elizabeth Black, executive director of the Office of Permanency for the Tennessee Department of Children's Services.

The state, which has received Casey Foundation support to revamp its child

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– SARAH GREENBLATT, FOUNDING DIRECTOR OF THE FORMER CASEY CENTER FOR EFFECTIVE CHILD WELFARE PRACTICE

welfare system in response to a class action lawsuit settled in 2001, supports several efforts aimed at engaging relatives in seeking permanent, loving families for children entering foster care. This includes funding “kinship coordinators” in selected counties to make sure children are not placed with unrelated persons unless every avenue to involve kin has been exhausted.

“If the coordinators find that case managers haven’t done a diligent enough search, they will get involved and make sure that happens, so that it’s an exception to the rule to place children with strangers,” notes Black.

Other state efforts include identifying the most successful practices in placing children with kin and making this a central goal in the recruitment and retention of foster families, as well as instituting a program called Finding Our Children Unconditional Support (FOCUS). This program engages a private agency in extensive “archeological digs” to locate extended family and other supportive connections and to enlist them into the child’s permanency planning team.

In one case Black cites, state and agency staff identified 13 connections, including relatives and family friends, for a girl with severe mental and behavioral issues living in a congregate care facility.

One agreed to attend a team meeting and four others began writing to the child, which dramatically improved her outlook. “It felt so good for her to reconnect, and in time this plants a seed for these contacts to do more than write a letter.”

It’s not unusual for these interactions to lead some children, often in care for extended periods, toward renewed contact

with parents who have turned their lives around, even if the parents’ rights had been terminated. Nikki Harris, permanency team leader for Tennessee’s Southeast Region, recalls how efforts to engage kin in permanency planning led one young man who had spent seven years in state care to reestablish an ongoing relationship with his mother. “She had really pulled herself together, was extremely stable, and is now very much in his life,” notes Harris. “The relationship they are building has made a big difference in his treatment. It has lifted his spirits, his motivation, and his expectations.”

In addition to tracking down contacts in case files and pursuing every lead suggested by a family or team member, workers are trained to glean information from the best source – kids themselves. Heather Butcher, a family advocate with Harmony, a non-profit adoption agency based in Maryville, Tennessee, often asks children the top five people they would call first if they had a cell phone, or who they’d like to see in the front row when they graduate from high school.

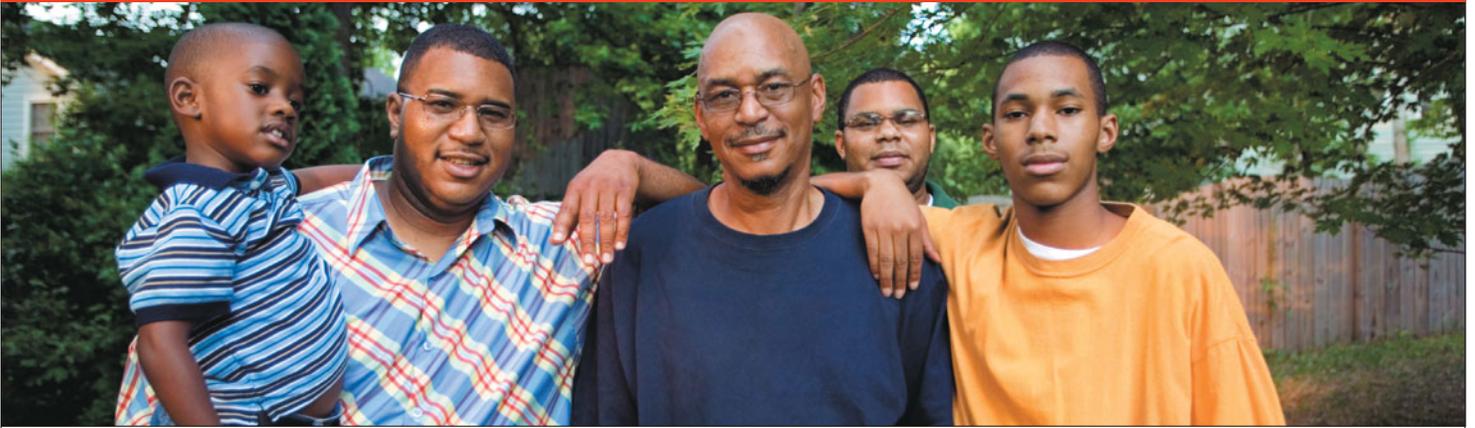
Building on Casey Support

Even before Fostering Connections, the Annie E. Casey Foundation and its direct service agency, Casey Family Services, increasingly channeled their financial and technical support toward helping states involve families in providing permanence for children. National permanency convenings and regional roundtables have provided a powerful forum to hear young people describe their experiences, challenges, and successes in the search for lifelong families. Sessions showcasing best practices also have sent participants home with concrete plans

for stepping up their family finding, guardianship, training, and other activities aimed at removing barriers that keep children from forging lasting family relationships. States often have followed up with their own system-wide convenings and training sessions to share and implement their new knowledge.

“A lot of things we do are building on the permanency support teams we developed as a result of the national convening I attended when I first started in 2007,” notes Patricia Martinez, director of the Rhode Island Division of Children, Youth and Families (DCYF). “When I came back from the convening with our team, which included our staff and Casey Family Services Rhode Island personnel, I told them that we owe it to the kids to come back with a clear action plan, which included our own Rhode Island convening for providers and frontline staff and offered an incredible experience to energize their daily practice with evidence-based programs and voices from youth and families.”

Rhode Island and Maine, both Casey Family Services sites, applied for and received Family Connections grants under Fostering Connections, which have helped bolster their efforts to engage family, improve permanency planning, and implement effective child welfare practices statewide. The Rhode Island grant enhances the state’s partnership with eight private agencies that are co-located in DCYF offices and encourages partners to join forces in family finding and staff training efforts. One particularly successful program is the “Grand Divas,” a circle of grandparent caregivers that helps relatives of other children navigate licensing and provides support to them.



The Maine grant supports a kinship navigator program, family finding, and family group decision making efforts. In partnership with Casey Family Services, for example, the state is identifying and providing intensive support to 28 children who have been in custody three years or longer and are at risk of aging out with no family connections. The state also is working with staff in two of its larger district offices to provide specialized training and resources to help kinship caregivers. Among other benefits, the grant will help Maine Kids-Kin, an organization that links relatives raising children to various resources, to expand its services to help families manage legal, mental health, and other issues. The grant also supports an evaluation by the University of Maine Center on Aging.

Maine, along with 36 other states and the District of Columbia, now will be able to use federal, rather than only state funds, to support existing subsidized guardianship programs, thanks to Fostering Connections.

“Program guidance has clarified, to the delight of advocates, states, and child welfare agencies, that funding available through Fostering Connections will apply not only prospectively, but will include relative guardians who met the requirements prior to Fostering Connections,” notes Sania Metzger, the Casey Foundation’s director of state child welfare policy.

Overcoming Barriers

The law also could have a significant impact in removing barriers to kinship care traditionally posed by licensing requirements by freeing up states to waive non-safety related requirements, easing the way for relative caregivers to receive benefits.

“SOMETIMES WHEN YOU CONTACT PEOPLE FROM A CHILD’S PAST, THE FIRST THING THEY SAY IS THAT THEY CAN’T TAKE THAT CHILD BACK, BUT CONTACT COMES IN ALL FORMS – LIKE SENDING A LETTER OR A CHRISTMAS CARD OR BEING PART OF A TEAM” THAT HELPS PLAN FOR A CHILD’S FUTURE.

– PAM WOLF

“The licensing provision can have a big impact, but in order for that to occur, there needs to be some very intentional coordination of ongoing training and staff development provided to supervisors and other stakeholders to clarify what this waiver means and how to access it more readily,” notes Metzger. “Child welfare agency leaders must signal the go-ahead to their staff that the prudent use of the non-safety license waiver can be in a child’s best interest, and that when it is, the waiver should be used.”

The “explicit message” Congress is sending by requiring states to report on the extent to which they are using these waivers offers the potential “to end unlicensed kinship care within 10 years,” reflects Rob Geen, director of policy, research, and communications for the Casey Foundation’s Center for Effective Family Services and Systems. Geen says states will have a hard time

justifying unlicensed kinship care, because the state can license kin who do not meet licensing criteria that a state determines are not related to safety. If kin cannot meet criteria that are related to safety, states should not place children in those homes. Geen also notes that, with the new federal dollars available for subsidized guardianship, “every state can save money or at least break even by extending guardianship payments.” This is why the Congressional Budget Office estimated that the federal government would save almost \$1 billion in the 10 years following passage of Fostering Connections as a result of federally-supported subsidized guardianships.

The Fostering Connections provision requiring relatives to be notified when a child faces placement does not dictate how states should do that, which worries some advocates. “What’s challenging is to develop a process to ensure that relatives receive proper notice, because the law leaves a lot of room for interpretation,” notes Metzger. “Hopefully that will be clarified down the road.”

Experts say it’s critical to ensure that intensive family finding efforts happen on “the front end,” to find connections that might prevent a child from entering care, as well as the “back end,” when youth risk aging out of the system without a support system into a downward spiral.

“Sometimes when you contact people from a child’s past, the first thing they say is that they can’t take that child back,” notes Pam Wolf, founder and chief executive officer of Harmony. “But contact comes in all forms – like sending a letter or a Christmas card or being part of a team” that helps plan for a child’s future. “We give them the full spectrum of ways they can be involved.”

2010 NATIONAL FOSTER CARE MONTH ACTIVITIES SHINE LIGHT ON OLDER YOUTH



Each May, the National Foster Care Month Partnership, a coalition of nearly 20 organizations, shines a light on the hardships endured by more than 400,000 children growing up in foster care, while also celebrating the parents, mentors, advocates, policymakers, and child welfare professionals who work to create better futures for youth in foster care.

The number of young people who age out of foster care has risen steadily – from 19,000 in 1999 to nearly 30,000 in 2008. This year, the Partnership focused on the needs of this population and the importance of ensuring that all children exit care to a permanent family.

The challenges experienced by older youth were brought front and center with a Foster Care Month Presidential Proclamation – the first in two decades – which articulated President Obama’s commitment to implementing the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act. At a briefing on Capitol Hill, Joshua DuBois, executive director of the federal Faith-based and Neighborhood Partnership Initiative and special advisor to the President, pledged to work with advocates to achieve an end to “long-term” foster care.

The May 12th briefing, co-hosted by the new Senate Caucus on Foster Care and the National Foster Care Coalition, was one of three events that turned Capitol Hill’s attention to the growing number of youth who must learn to navigate the adult world without family or adequate resources after exiting foster care. Senators Charles Grassley of Iowa and Mary Landrieu of Louisiana, co-founders of the Caucus, affirmed that addressing the needs of these young people would be a priority.

Pointing to the unanimous passage of the Fostering Connections Act, Grassley encouraged youth to continue their advocacy efforts, citing their participation and perspective as driving forces behind the law’s enactment. “You are part of the process of representative government,” he intoned. “There must be a dialogue between those elected and those who are served.”

Presenters noted that of the emancipated youth who were employed last year, their yearly median income was \$8,000. Forty-six percent were in debt; one-quarter became homeless; and at least one-third were “nowhere near ready for self-sufficiency.” In addition, serious recruitment for older youth in care is not initiated soon enough and is often curtailed too early, according to Rosemary Avery, a researcher from Cornell University, who suggested that preparation for relational living should be a priority for all youth in the system. She also recommended that the phrase “independent living” be stricken from the child welfare lexicon.

“Best Practices in Foster and Adoptive Parent Recruitment,” a May 13th briefing hosted by the Congressional Coalition on Adoption Institute brought together leaders of evidenced-based adoption programs to describe best practices for finding families for youth of all ages and recommended policy changes. The Dave Thomas Foundation on Adoption first issued grants to adoption agencies in six pilot cities in 2004; the program has expanded to every state. Of the 5,000 children adopted, more than half were 12 years of age or older. The goal is to serve 10,000 youth by the end of 2012.

Focus on the Family emphasized the importance of involving the community in its Wait No More campaign, which enlisted hundreds of churches to identify adoptive families for older youth. To date, of the 940 families who began the adoption process, 75 percent have continued or completed adopting youth from foster care.

A third briefing featured a video by Porch Productions depicting the lives of several youths aging out of foster care as the basis for a roundtable discussion with four alumni – two of whom were featured in the video. They shared forthright views of life in the system – moving from place to place, over-diagnosed with mental and emotional disorders, over-medicated, and labeled as “problem children” – as they addressed policymakers, advocates, and audience members.

The room grew silent as Senator Mary Landrieu stood at the podium to close the session. Moved by the young advocates’ stories, she expressed a determination to generate “radical solutions” to the country’s “broken” child welfare system. Citing the need to make earlier decisions about connecting foster youth to lifelong families, she called on all advocates to present their ideas and strategies. “We are spending billions a year [in child welfare] to fail our children. It’s a crime and a shame.”

In addition to events in Washington, D.C., Foster Care Month also featured celebrations nationwide, including recognition of youth mentors at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York and events in Los Angeles and Atlanta hosted by advocate, author, and Emmy-nominated actress Victoria Rowell (visit www.fostercaremonth.org).

KIDS COUNT REPORT HIGHLIGHTS CRITICAL NEED TO ENSURE CHILDREN READ AT GRADE-LEVEL BY END OF THIRD GRADE



At the start of fourth grade, a major shift occurs in most children's education. Instead of *learning to read*, children start *reading to learn* – using this vital skill to delve into subjects such as math and science, and to solve problems and think critically.

So being able to read proficiently by the end of third grade matters a lot.

Yet millions of American children – especially children from low-income families – don't reach this milestone, putting them and the nation at risk, according to a new *KIDS COUNT* Special Report by the Annie E. Casey Foundation.

“Grade-level reading by the end of third grade is a make-or-break moment for a large number of children from low-income families,” says Ralph Smith, Casey's executive vice president. “When we fail to prepare children to pivot from learning to read to reading to learn, we do them a great disservice that has implications for the rest of their lives.”

The report, “Early Warning! Why Reading by the End of Third Grade Matters,” cites several troubling results from the 2009 National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP) reading test given to children at the beginning of fourth grade:

- Eighty-three percent of children from low-income families – and 85 percent of those children who attend high-poverty schools – failed to reach the “proficient” achievement level, regardless of whether they attended school in a city, suburb, town, or rural area.

- Forty-nine percent of low-income fourth-grade test-takers – and 53 percent of those who attend high-poverty schools – didn't reach the “basic” level, which indicates only partial mastery.

- Disparities in reading achievement persist across racial and ethnic groups, with 89 percent of low-income black students scoring below proficient, compared to 76 percent of low-income white students. Among other low-income students, 87 percent of Hispanics, 85 percent of Native Americans, and 70 percent of Asian/Pacific Islanders scored below proficient.

“The numbers are catastrophic,” says Smith. These children are “more likely than not to be retained in grade, and to fail to graduate from high school.” These outcomes are linked to reduced earning potential for these children as adults, as well as reduced competitiveness and productivity for the nation.

The Casey report says the nation's high dropout rate – nearly 6.2 million people were high school dropouts in 2007 – can be linked to the millions of American children who reach fourth grade without learning to read proficiently, putting them on the dropout track.

“We want high school graduates who are qualified for college, career, service, and life,” says Smith. “What is becoming increasingly clear is the role of literacy and reading proficiency to all of the above – to school success and the opportunities available to young adults.”

The report argues that getting more young children, especially those from low-income families, to read proficiently is “no mission

impossible,” and that now is the right time to seize opportunities afforded by federal and state government educational resources and activities and take on this challenge.

The report makes four recommendations:

- Develop a coherent system of early care and education that aligns, integrates, and coordinates what happens from birth through third grade so children are prepared for the learning tasks of fourth grade and beyond.
- Encourage and enable parents, families, and caregivers to play their indispensable roles as co-producers of positive outcomes for their children.
- Prioritize, support, and invest in results-driven initiatives to transform low-performing schools into high-quality teaching and learning environments where all children, including those from low-income families and high-poverty neighborhoods, are present, engaged, and educated to high standards.
- Develop and deploy practical solutions, which can be replicated on a large scale, to address chronic absence from school and the slippage in learning gains over the summer – two big contributors to underachievement of children from low-income families. One in ten of the nation's kindergartners and first-graders miss 10 percent or more of the school year. Only 25 to 36 percent of children between ages 6 and 11 attend summer learning programs.

“GRADE-LEVEL READING BY THE END OF THIRD GRADE IS A MAKE-OR-BREAK MOMENT FOR A LARGE NUMBER OF CHILDREN FROM LOW-INCOME FAMILIES. WHEN WE FAIL TO PREPARE CHILDREN TO PIVOT FROM LEARNING TO READ TO READING TO LEARN, WE DO THEM A GREAT DISSERVICE THAT HAS IMPLICATIONS FOR THE REST OF THEIR LIVES.”

– RALPH SMITH, CASEY’S EXECUTIVE VICE PRESIDENT



A particular concern for Casey is the reading proficiency of children under state supervision, who often face family stresses, from poverty to parental depression to hunger, that can negatively affect their academic performance.

“Kids do better when their families are stable and worse when they’re not,” says Diane Kindler, director of clinical services for Casey Family Services. “Kids who have experienced trauma tend to be distracted in school, and may miss school or be at risk of missing school.”

Kindler also notes that many children who enter foster care end up changing schools midyear. “Schools use different curricula, and it takes awhile for children’s records to catch up with them so they may not be placed correctly.”

To address this dilemma, Casey social workers connect with a child’s school and help foster parents learn how to advocate for the kids, get to know the teachers, and be proactive, she says.

The Casey Foundation is addressing this issue through initiatives such as Family to Family, a family-centered, neighborhood-based system of foster care that promotes permanence. This work includes trying to keep children entering care in their home community – and, if possible, in their home school.

Also, Casey’s board has approved multi-year funding for a grade-level reading campaign that the Foundation hopes to conduct in

a dozen-plus states in collaboration with other national philanthropies and state-based funding coalitions.

And working with numerous partners, the Foundation is making third-grade reading achievement an increasingly key element of the work in its *Making Connections* communities and “civic sites” in Baltimore and Atlanta.

In eight *Making Connections* cities, a designated “focus school” is receiving customized technical assistance to help achieve grade-level reading by third grade by 2011 and to help assure that children are healthy and prepared to succeed in school. Three districts have opted to spread the grade-level reading strategy district-wide.

Challenges include helping teachers provide individualized interventions, improving schools’ use of data to track progress, and encouraging school staff to share important health information that may affect a child’s learning, says Gail Meister, executive director for learning and development at Foundations, Inc., a New Jersey nonprofit providing the technical assistance.

School districts in several cities also are receiving assistance in applying for federal stimulus funding available through the Investing in Innovation (i3) grant program to pursue a grade-level reading strategy. Assistance is coming from groups including Foundations, Inc., and the Center for the Study of Social Policy, a Washington, D.C., policy research group that receives Casey support.

Disparities in the academic performance of students of varying races, ethnicities, and socioeconomic backgrounds often begin at

birth, when children in vulnerable populations are born at low birth weight, prematurely, with congenital health problems, or affected by prenatal exposure to toxic substances. These factors increase their risk of neurodevelopmental and behavioral problems that interfere with learning and school success.

This “readiness gap” widens between birth and kindergarten as a result of differences in children’s resources and opportunities for development – physical, linguistic, cognitive, social, emotional, and behavioral. When children from low-income families enter kindergarten, they are typically 12-14 months below national norms for language and pre-reading skills.

Children in low-income families also have a higher incidence of health problems that interfere with learning and too often lack early interactions that foster linguistic development. Some don’t develop the social and emotional skills they need to do well in a structured environment like school.

Noting that children from low-income families are less likely than those from middle-income families to participate in high-quality early childhood education and pre-kindergarten programs that prepare children for school success, Casey’s recommendations start with the crucial call to develop a more systematic and coordinated approach to early care and education.

Failure by communities and systems to follow through, the report warns, will result in “an enormous and unacceptable loss of individual potential.”



GINA MIRANDA SAMUELS, UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO

Close-up

Gina Miranda Samuels, professor at the University of Chicago School of Social Work, is a leading expert on transracial adoption, interpretive research methods, and youth who age out of foster care. As a social worker, she worked with child protective services, juvenile probation, Afrocentric school-based tutoring programs, and group therapy with female youth. Since 2009, she has been a member of the Casey Family Services Board of Advisors.

VOICE: *What aspects of Casey Family Services' work are most interesting to you as a new board member?*

GINA MIRANDA SAMUELS: I think Casey is doing some exciting work. I see a commitment to using data, research, and events to inform how to improve policy and practice. It's nicely partnered with a broader mission to transform the field, which simultaneously requires conviction and re-imagination of the organization.

VOICE: *Clearly, permanence is of great importance to Casey Family Services. How would you describe the relational versus legal aspects of permanence?*

MIRANDA SAMUELS: Permanence is multifaceted. We often talk as though once we achieve legal permanence, all other aspects of being a family will happen. Legal permanence is important, but the *purpose* of permanence is for children to have a family. Even though a legal arrangement provides a critical structure, we sometimes neglect to consider how that legal commitment will develop into a distinct type of relationship that includes love, caring, and a sustained support network for the child.

My focus on relational permanence is a challenge to think broadly and to take the perspectives of young people seriously.

“LEGAL PERMANENCE IS IMPORTANT, BUT THE PURPOSE OF PERMANENCE IS FOR CHILDREN TO HAVE A FAMILY.”

While we are trying to achieve legality, we need to make sure that the children are open to bonding on a relational, psychological, or emotional level.

We also need to think more broadly about the roles adults can play. Young people may never return to their biological families, but that doesn't negate the potential to achieve some sense of continuity in the biological family relationships. A legal focus sometimes creates a blind spot about the diverse family relationships that kids have. It would be helpful to figure out how we can help children navigate those relationships and make healthy decisions about the roles family members will play in their lives.

VOICE: *How does the current system promote that kind of relationship building?*

MIRANDA SAMUELS: Currently, we do an uneven job of helping children stay in touch with biological family members and guiding foster parents to be open to those

relationships. I think most social workers and agency administrators see it as a priority, but it becomes complex in the context of very immediate issues such as safety and legal permanence.

If you talk with social workers, you'll find many who put in the work, but collectively we don't talk about normative ways kids and young adults can manage their feelings in relationship to the trauma they've experienced.

Given the push toward legal permanence, there's often very little energy devoted to things that may be seen as extra. They're not extra. They are a critical part of the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008. I'm excited by the legislation, but it's going to raise a lot of challenges.

VOICE: *What are the connections between research, practice, and policy?*

MIRANDA SAMUELS: I'm a social work scholar, and I ask questions related to issues I recognize from my social work practice. I talk with young people who are directly affected by policy and get cues from them about what's important. I conduct interviews without any agenda other than capturing what youth say and analyzing

“WHILE WE ARE TRYING TO ACHIEVE LEGALITY, WE NEED TO MAKE SURE THAT THE CHILDREN ARE OPEN TO BONDING ON A RELATIONAL, PSYCHOLOGICAL, OR EMOTIONAL LEVEL.”



it in the context of their perspectives, and how that relates to understanding the work of professionals and adults involved in the lives of young people.

Often, there's overlap and everyone agrees about a problem. Then there are times when the recipient of services and the recipient of policy offer starkly different perspectives. My research uncovers those perspectives so we can take their experience to heart if there's something more or different we can do. When they say, “This aspect of practice is missing the boat,” we need to take that seriously.

VOICE: When you were a practitioner, did you often ask those questions yourself? Is that what led you to move to more of a research role?

MIRANDA SAMUELS: Many things I saw as a practitioner inform my work today. I'm a child welfare scholar, I am transracially adopted, and I study issues of identity among adults who have been infants adopted by white couples. The issues of youth aging out of care were central to my work as a practitioner, as were issues in transracial foster care. I enjoy the overlap between both streams of my work and between some of my professional and personal experiences.

VOICE: What is your assessment of the research body and policy discussion regarding transracial adoption?

MIRANDA SAMUELS: Policy is conflicted. The Multi-Ethnic Placement Act says that we should be color blind toward kids who

are black, Latino, or Asian, and the Indian Child Welfare Act says we should be absolutely color conscious. So policy is moving in a bifurcated way based on certain communities of color.

We need to take seriously the role of race and culture and training. I don't think we should abolish transracial adoption, but pretending racism doesn't exist does not

in foster care. The issue is the preference for healthy infants. I think the Multi-Ethnic Placement Act was misinformed: There is not an abundance of healthy babies languishing in foster care, there are teenagers. We need to address barriers to people's assumptions about who older foster kids are and what it means to parent a child who is 10, 14, 16, or 18.

“WE NEED TO TAKE SERIOUSLY THE ROLE OF RACE AND CULTURE AND TRAINING. I DON'T THINK WE SHOULD ABOLISH TRANSRACIAL ADOPTION, BUT PRETENDING RACISM DOESN'T EXIST DOES NOT HELP TO AVOID EXPERIENCING RACIAL PREJUDICE. ”

help to avoid experiencing racial prejudice. There are a lot of different options for training and sensitizing someone who is adopting a child that does not share their cultural background. That's in the child's best interest.

Some recent policies are more geared to adults' rights to adopt rather than to what adult adoptees are saying. It's a recurring theme that, if we want to serve the best interests of children, we need to pay attention to the opinions of adults from similar backgrounds and reconsider our policies and practices.

VOICE: What is the relationship between disproportionality, which is a huge focus within the field, and transracial adoption?

MIRANDA SAMUELS: The Multi-Ethnic Placement Act does not have significant impact on the number of kids languishing

I don't think there's one magic bullet that will solve the problem of disparity and disproportionality. How we go about solving that problem needs to recognize all the barriers and issues that contribute to the problem.

VOICE: Will you continue to explore relational permanence and transracial adoption or are you considering other areas of research?

MIRANDA SAMUELS: I still have a lot to learn and explore about these issues. My work in transracial adoption is informing my work in aging out of foster care, and vice versa. I'm looking at the lifetime identity work created when children grow up separated from their racial, cultural, or familial origins.

MAKING COLLEGE A PLACE FOR FOSTER YOUTH TO SUCCEED



For millions of youth, educational success is a path to a rewarding career, self-sufficiency, and adulthood. It's a path that often eludes foster youth.

Unlike youth who grow up in families, young people in foster care experience changes in placements. Too often, these youth find themselves starting at a new school at the same time they are adjusting to a new foster family. In the transition, academic records can get lost, lessons and tests are missed, and many young people fall behind their peers academically. Only 63 percent of foster youth graduate high school or earn a GED by age 19.

For those who continue to college, success is even more elusive. According to one alumni study, only three percent of those from foster care have earned a bachelor's degree by age 25, compared to 24 percent of the general population.

Educational success is a two-part challenge. The child welfare and education systems need to provide youth with stability before they reach college, and access to academic, housing, social, and financial supports once on campus. Youth also need people they can turn to when college life becomes overwhelming.

Vanessa's Experience

Vanessa's childhood involved 20 foster care placements, and she changed schools more than 10 times by her senior year in high school. She struggled to master basic math principles, and initially had not considered college.

"I was originally going to cosmetology school, but my foster parents and high school counselor persuaded me that a four-year school would help me develop my leadership abilities," she says. "I was lucky. A lot of foster youth don't have parents who can help them apply to college."

After graduating from high school, Vanessa enrolled at St. Joseph College. In her first two years, she struggled to manage her

ADHD. She also had a child. When she received an incomplete grade that jeopardized her financial aid, she considered dropping out.

"People assume I'm lucky to have the state pay for my education," says Vanessa, who is among 400 Connecticut youth who remained in foster care past age 18 to receive financial support on the condition of meeting academic requirements. "State policies don't allow us to make mistakes," Vanessa continues. "It's a ridiculous standard to expect of any student, let alone students who are in foster care."

Vanessa's academic advisor convinced her social worker to let her stay in school, and she plans to graduate from college later this year.

Laura's Experience

Laura entered foster care shortly after emigrating from Colombia at age 10. She struggled at first, but thrived at Hill Regional Career High School. Even when Laura moved to a new placement 45 minutes away, her social worker made arrangements for Laura to remain at the school.

"I went to a small magnet school where people got to know me. The school nurse,

BY AGE 25, ONLY 3 PERCENT OF FOSTER YOUTH HAVE EARNED A BACHELOR'S DEGREE, COMPARED TO 24 PERCENT OF THE GENERAL POPULATION.

even the principal, pushed me to do well," says Laura.

She originally planned to become a nurse when she enrolled at Southern Connecticut State University (SCSU), but wasn't prepared for the demands of college life. She didn't have a foster home where she could go on weekends; she failed to file on time for financial aid; and she didn't seek help immediately when her coursework grew too challenging.

"I didn't know how to study, and I almost dropped out," Laura explains. "It would have been a mistake, because you need a bachelor's degree when you're looking for a job."

“ALL OUR STUDENTS BENEFIT WHEN WE CREATE A MORE DIVERSE STUDENT POPULATION, AND FOSTER YOUTH BRING LIFE EXPERIENCES THAT ENRICH OUR CAMPUS.”

— PETER TROIANO, ASSISTANT VICE PRESIDENT
AND DEAN OF STUDENT AFFAIRS, SCSU

Laura eventually found her way to the SCSU career center, where a counselor guided her toward her current major – public health.

The Promise of Fostering Connections

Despite the challenges Vanessa and Laura have faced, both young women feel they have benefited from Connecticut’s progressive education policies for foster youth. Connecticut is among 18 states who offer tuition waivers for foster youth to attend college or vocational school. The waivers can be used at any public or private institution in or out of state, and also cover room and board, tutoring, transportation, health care, and other eligible expenses.

Connecticut’s policies closely reflect the federal Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008, which gives states the option to continue receiving federal reimbursement for extending care to age 21 for youth enrolled in school, working, or involved in a program designed to remove barriers to work or education.

For children in kindergarten through 12th grade, Fostering Connections also aims to counter the negative effects of frequent school changes by requiring states to coordinate with local education agencies to help children remain in their school of origin.

Coordinating On-Campus Supports

Yet, progressive education policies address only half the challenge: Youth in care also need supports and people who can help

them navigate the transition from high school to college and adulthood.

“Connecticut offers foster youth a fantastic opportunity to continue their education, but too many kids drop out because they aren’t adequately prepared for college and don’t know where to seek help,” says David Johnston, a senior program associate with Casey Family Services who heads the Connecticut Postsecondary Education Committee. The Committee fosters collaboration between social workers and high school and postsecondary institution personnel who can help foster youth prepare for and succeed in college.

As part of the effort, Vanessa is working with a professor to launch a pilot program designed to help foster youth navigate the services and supports on the St. Joseph College campus.

At SCSU, a collaboration with the Connecticut Department of Children and Families now helps foster youth adjust to the academic and social challenges of college during a voluntary four-week summer program. Through the program, students develop relationships with staff who can offer guidance in navigating the array of programs and services available on the 11,000-student campus.

SCSU also is adapting its services to be more sensitive to the needs of foster youth, explains Peter Troiano, assistant vice president and dean of student affairs. Housing is now available to students year-round, and parent activities have been rebranded as family activities.

“All our students benefit when we create a more diverse student population, and foster youth bring life experiences that enrich our campus,” says Troiano, who hopes to create a peer mentoring program and a database of alumni interested in mentoring foster youth who are students.

Future Expectations

Reflecting on the transition from high school to college, Laura and Vanessa point to the need for social workers to be better informed about the college application process, and about scholarships and financial aid. They also agree that more colleges should develop programs that connect foster youth, as well as other disadvantaged youth, with the supports already available on many campuses.

For example, social workers could work with colleges to identify foster youth who are students and help youth link to academic advisors, housing, and other services, Laura suggests. “Foster youth need to go to class and study, but your social worker should be there to remind you to seek help if you’re struggling,” she says.

A recent decision by the Connecticut Department of Children and Families to tighten financial aid requirements for foster youth is what concerns Vanessa most. “If they’re going to invest in education, they need a flexible policy that allows foster youth to make typical college-kid mistakes and gives them time to adjust.”

YOUTH AND FAMILY PERSPECTIVES

FOSTERING YOUTH TO RETURN HOME



*by Nelson Hernandez and Yolanda Messon,
Foster Parents with Casey Family Services*

My wife and I have three birth children, Karilenia, age 27, Yonel, age 26, and Stephanie, age 18. As our three birth children moved out of the house, we were about to become empty nesters. We decided to become foster parents. Lucky for us, we live just around the block from Casey Family Services. We inquired about the agency and its program before becoming foster parents.

In joining Casey, we knew that a child in our care might be reunited with birth parents. Through our preservice training, we learned that Casey strives for a child or young person in foster care to have a lifelong connection to a family. That family may be the birth family, if it's safe. It can be the foster parents who adopt the child, or a relative or other caring adult, like a coach, teacher, or mentor in the child's life. Preservice training helped us to understand our role as a resource family and prepared us for the many possibilities we might face.

From the beginning, we knew we were going to be a resource family for Leon and Sunny, helping them to reconnect with their birth family. Casey introduced us to Leon in February 2008; his brother Sunny joined our family in October that same year. Before coming to live with us, Sunny

and Leon had lived with another foster family. It was important for us to give the boys consistency. When Leon came to live with us, he was tense, cried easily, and constantly asked for his mom, but those episodes became less frequent. Having Sunny join our family also helped Leon.

Casey assembled a team of people connected to the boys to help plan their move to a permanent family. The process was beneficial to my wife and me, as well as

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the birth family. In our first meeting with the boys' grandparents, they thanked us for taking care of their grandsons and asked us to be part of their lives after reunification. Knowing that made a difference in how we approached the teaming process. We would drive the boys to meet their parents every week and pick them up at the end of

the meeting. That routine was something that made the boys happy. Like the birth family, we wanted Leon and Sunny to be reunited and to do our part to ensure the team's success.

Sunny and Leon stayed in our home until spring 2009, when they rejoined their birth family. The reunification experience was successful because the teaming process helped us to understand how we could support the birth family and vice versa, and because all the people on the team wanted the best outcome for the boys. Today, my wife and I remain connected to Leon, Sunny, and their birth family, and we continue to support each other.

It takes patience, dedication, and an open mind to be a foster parent. I also think you have to be flexible, ready to offer a child love and security, and prepared to help build their confidence. You may not have these tools in the beginning, but if you come to foster care with an open heart and mind, I believe that you will gain these skills with training and support. Being a foster parent is among the most rewarding experiences of my life. I believe I have made a difference in the lives of Sunny and Leon, and I know it has made a difference for my family.

The Impact of the Economic Crisis on Youth Transitioning from Foster Care

View from Washington



by Kathi Crowe, Executive Director, National Foster Care Coalition

There is great speculation among the child welfare community and policymakers regarding the impact of the economic crisis on children and families. Much of that speculation centers on whether the number of children entering foster care corresponds to the number of families who are unemployed or homeless. Others speculate that the stress the economic crisis has caused families also has led to an increased incidence of child abuse or neglect.

The Washington Post reported that at Child-help USA, a child abuse prevention organization that operates a national hotline, calls reporting physical abuse had risen about 10 percent in the final weeks of 2008. John Reid, executive director of the Arizona-based organization reported, "We're seeing parents facing unemployment, foreclosure, losing their automobiles, and that increase in stress can lead to drug and alcohol abuse, and that's directly linked to child abuse." Although anecdotal information and personal stories are plentiful, data that directly connect the economic crisis and the number of children entering foster care is not available, making it difficult to move the conversation beyond conjecture. Research that examines the impact of the economic crisis on the county's most vulnerable citizens is greatly needed.

The specific impact the economic crisis is having on older youth who are transitioning from foster care to adulthood also deserves our attention. Although we would

hope that all children and youth in foster care reunify with their birth families or connect with a permanent, loving family, a large number of youth continue to "age out" of foster care and enter adulthood without the benefit of family.

The transition from foster care to adulthood always has been difficult. Research has documented that youth who exit foster care at age 18 have an increased incidence of homelessness, unemployment, early parenthood, and incarceration, as well as reduced rates of employment and education. Major legislation, such as the John H. Chafee Foster Care Independence Act of 1999 and the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008, both have made major advances toward preventing negative outcomes and assisting young people in making a successful transition. However, these efforts cannot achieve success in an economy where the effects of unemployment and housing instability are far reaching.

The nation's loss of more than 6.4 million jobs between 2007 and late 2009 coincided with a 12 percent drop in home values and a dramatic increase in foreclosures. Young adults transitioning from foster care often have limited job skills and education and are challenged to secure jobs at a livable wage even in a stable economy.

Leaders in some states are challenged to implement provisions of Fostering Connections that would extend foster care to youth up to age 21 due to a perceived increase in costs. It is disheartening to wit-

ness states failing to care for young people for whom they have assumed legal responsibility. Young people in foster care deserve no less support and opportunity than we afford children living with their families.

The New York Times recently reported that since the beginning of the year, the New York City Administration for Children's Services has been providing letters to young people about to exit the foster care system, certifying that they are likely eligible for public assistance. While this effort is intended to ease the process of applying for such aid, many child welfare advocates still worry that a growing number of youth exiting the system will end up homeless.

At the same time that child welfare agencies are writing letters for foster youth hoping to ease the process of applying for public assistance, the country is witnessing college graduates as a whole returning to their parents' homes in record numbers. Also, thousands of young adults are entering graduate school while they wait for the job market to improve.

This phenomenon dramatically illustrates the inequity and sharp contrast in the advantages of children who reach adulthood and leave home from permanent families versus those who age out of foster care. In spite of efforts by Congress and the child welfare advocacy community, as well as research on the outcomes for youth who exit care at age 18, we continue to witness young people who are terminated from foster care at an arbitrary age, regardless of their maturity and ability to live independently. Surely we can do better.

Visit the National Foster Care Coalition online at www.nationalfostercare.org.

ALUMNI PERSPECTIVE

WHO CARES FOR YOUNG PEOPLE WHEN FOSTER CARE ENDS



by Nathan Monell, Chief Executive Officer, Foster Care Alumni of America

“I aged out of foster care with no official, legal connections to anyone. I knew a lot of people, but now that they didn’t get checks to care for or about me anymore, I quit going to them,” wrote one contributor to *FLUX*, our alumni-authored handbook for life after foster care. “I didn’t reach out to them because I could not handle it if they turned me away... I became obsessed with the idea that, if I died, there would be nobody to make sure I had a casket and a place to be buried. It doesn’t get much lonelier than that.”

This author’s experience reflects the way our systems fail youth who have aged out of care. The reality of the situation hit me when I was talking with a potential funder. I explained the dual mission of Foster Care Alumni of America – to connect the alumni community and to utilize alumni expertise to improve foster care for those who are still in the system.

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– FOSTER CARE ALUMNA

We were talking about how critical it was to connect the 12 million adults who have experienced foster care with family, supports, and resources. Her response was jarring. “If you think we care about 60-year-olds who were in foster care, you are mistaken.”

I was stunned by her callousness but later thought through the truth of what she was saying. Who does care about a 50-year-old, a 30-year-old, or a 22-year-old from care? While it may have been easy for her to recognize that her organization did not focus on serving adults, it is less clear when child welfare systems should quit being concerned about the children the government has raised.

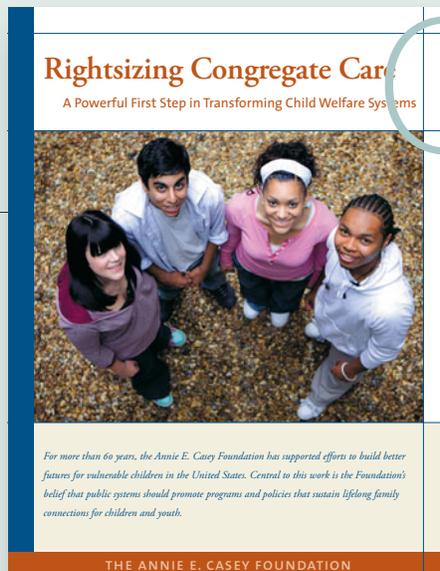
While we are all working to better serve transitioning youth, we know that once youth reach the state’s transition age, they no longer have the attention of the child welfare system. I would be glad to be proven wrong, but I am not aware of more than two government, foundation, or private organizations that support young people who have aged out of care after age 25.

We all know that the work of raising a healthy adult is not finished at age 25. Who receives word when one of our youth serving in the military ends up wounded in a Veteran Affairs hospital? Who holds the hand of the mother having her first baby? Who guarantees that employment and training are still available once an alumna chooses a career path? Who welcomes home and rehabilitates the alumna who entered jail as a teenager?

It is time for the situation to change. If we want to achieve better outcomes for all children from care, we need to demand that services be made available to former foster youth.

Join the alumni conversation at www.fostercarealumni.org.

Resource Corner



that only people from foster care can share about navigating family relationships, building support networks, and parenting.

To order FLUX, visit www.fostercarealumni.org.

Promoting Permanency

This 14-minute video from Casey Family Programs helps raise awareness about the importance of permanence for all youth who have experienced the foster care system, especially those with complex mental health and behavioral needs. Accompanied by a study guide, the video features the stories of three families who were successfully reunited through the Child Protective Services Reintegration Pilot Project.

To order the video, visit www.casey.org.

Rightsizing Congregate Care: A Powerful First Step in Transforming Child Welfare Systems

This report illustrates how the Annie E. Casey Foundation collaborated with New York City, Louisiana, Maine, and Virginia to identify five levers of change, reduce the use of congregate care, and improve other performance indicators. The report also includes data on key improvements in each jurisdiction.

To download, visit www.aecf.org and click on "Publications/Multimedia."

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The Annie E. Casey Foundation is a private charitable organization established in 1948 by UPS founder Jim Casey and his siblings in honor of their mother. The Foundation is dedicated to helping build better futures for disadvantaged children in the United States.

Started in 1976, Casey Family Services offers permanence-focused services throughout New England and Baltimore, Maryland. Offerings include foster care and adoption, family reunification, family preservation, family advocacy and support, family resource centers, and ongoing support to families who have legally committed to a child from care. Casey Family Services is part of the Casey Foundation's Center for Effective Family Services and Systems.

The mission of Casey Family Services is to improve the lives of at-risk children and strengthen families and communities by providing high-quality, cost-effective services that advance both positive practice and sound public policy.

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Extending the Conversation

Please feel free to contact us with your story ideas, requests for additional information on topics covered, and updated subscription information.

The editor can be reached by sending an email to info@caseyfamilyservices.org.

Pursuit of the Dream: Building Credit for Life

Produced by the Annie E. Casey Foundation, this 20-minute documentary tells the stories of low-income families struggling to establish good credit or to overcome the past financial decisions that left them with low scores. Created with advocates, community- and faith-based leaders, service providers, and policymakers in mind, each DVD includes an English and Spanish version, as well as a discussion guide.

To view, visit www.aecf.org and click on "Publications/Multimedia."

FLUX: Life after Foster Care

Published by Foster Care Alumni of America, *FLUX: Life after Foster Care* shares the stories of more than 100 alumni from foster care. The book was written to support young people in the emotional transition from foster care to adulthood. While there are many books aimed at supporting youth in transition from aging out of the system, *FLUX* brings the real-life expertise



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