

The Casey Center for Effective Child Welfare Practice – Learning While Doing **By Sarah B. Greenblatt, Director**

Casey's Evolving Focus on Technical Assistance. The Casey Center for Effective Child Welfare Practice was launched in 2001 to coordinate technical assistance aimed at improving the quality of child welfare practice nationwide. A key objective is to engage our own practitioners as consultants to link public and private child welfare agencies with information about Casey's (as well as other organizations') effective program models and practice strategies. Casey Family Services is the direct service arm of the Annie E. Casey Foundation, and for over 27 years has worked *to improve the lives of at-risk children and to strengthen families and communities by providing high quality, cost-effective services that advance both positive practice and sound public policy.*

The Focus of Casey's Technical Assistance. In an effort to make a difference in the lives of more families and children than those served by our array of child welfare and family support programs, each Casey Family Services Division provides some level of technical assistance and policy advocacy *to help people, organizations and systems to change.* Casey practitioners have often involved Casey youth and families in technical activities that advance best practices and sound public policies through information sharing, training initiatives, case and program consultation and advocacy at the local, state and national levels.

Building on the experiences of Casey's staff, youth and families in all eight of our divisions, The Casey Center provides individualized technical assistance with public and private agencies within the states we serve and across the country. Our technical assistance activities can build new awareness about the needs of vulnerable children and families; enhance strengths-based and family-strengthening philosophies and attitudes; deepen knowledge and understanding of effective child welfare practices and policies; build new skills in working respectfully with children and families; and strengthen program, policy and practice capacities over time.

Post-Adoption Services: The Casey Center's First Technical Assistance Priority Area. The first technical assistance priority area for The Casey Center has involved advancing quality post-adoption services and supports – an arena of child welfare practice which is increasingly receiving significant national attention. In 1991, Casey Family Services began providing comprehensive post-adoption services in its Bridgeport Division. Quickly, five additional divisions (Hartford, Vermont, New Hampshire, Maine and Rhode Island) began to address the urgent need for an array of services to support and sustain an increasing number of families coming together through adoption. In 1995 Casey Family Services held a regional Post-Adoption Services Conference in New England, and then in December 2000 convened a highly successful national conference with state teams of over 500 public/private agency, court-involved and adoptive family representatives which advanced a national understanding of the increasing need for funding for a comprehensive array of post-adoption services.

In response to the practice, research and public policy agenda which emerged from the national conference, The Casey Center has been coordinating technical assistance to strengthen comprehensive post-adoption funding and service options within New England and across the country. Working with adoptive families, the National Association of State Adoption Program Managers and other national organizations, the Casey Center has developed two publications due in the fall 2003 – one on *financing post-adoption services* and the other on *promising practices in adoption-competent mental health services.*

A Technical Assistance Example: Adoption-Competency Training in Tennessee. Another technical assistance effort which emerged from Casey's National Post-Adoption Services Conference involved a request in the summer of 2001 from the state of Tennessee to assist in developing a strategic plan for statewide post-adoption services. Once the plan was developed in early 2002, Tennessee requested that the Casey Center assist in planning and developing statewide adoption-competency training for department adoption staff and community mental health providers – strengthening the abilities of these professionals to help adopted children and their families make a more positive adjustment to the life-long process of adoption. Tennessee, like other states across the country, has experienced a dramatic increase in the number families coming together through adoption – from under 200 adoptions a year in the mid-1990's to close to 1000 adoptions in each of the past two state fiscal years.

In the first year of the training project, Casey practitioners and adoptive parents from our Maine Division facilitated seven one-day training sessions over a two month period for close to 500 people across the state of Tennessee – providing an overview of key adoption issues and implications for clinical practice with adoptive families. The next round of adoption-competency training took place during the months of May-July, 2003 when Casey practitioners from four divisions (Maine, Bridgeport, Vermont and New Hampshire) collaborated to provide four in-depth two-day mini-conferences across the state, focusing on more advanced clinical theory and skills that support adoptive families. Networking opportunities at each mini-conference guided public/private child welfare staff and community mental health practitioners to plan together how they might use existing resources to meet the needs of adoptive families in each region of the state. This unique technical assistance project allowed Casey staff to learn more about another state's adoption policy and practice experiences as well as more about our own post-adoption service programs and experiences.

Technical Assistance: Opportunities Waiting to Happen in Rhode Island. Over the past several years, Casey's Rhode Island post-adoption services staff have been supporting the growth of a newly-formed adoptive family advocacy group, Adoptive Families in Action (AFIA), which provides information about resources and supports needed by adoptive families. AFIA is an exciting vehicle for adoptive families to get involved in helping individual families as well as child welfare systems to make changes in the type of services and supports available to adoptive families over time. AFIA also offers adoptive families an opportunity to participate in educational, advocacy and legislative activities – making sure that the voice of adoptive families is heard. AFIA provides an example of how adoptive families can become involved in collaborative technical assistance and policy work – building on their own experiences to make a difference for vulnerable children and families. AFIA members are 'learning as they are doing' what it takes to be an effective voice for adoption.

Summary. Technical assistance within Casey Family Services is guided by a mix of respectful and inclusive qualities that enhance practice change and systems reform. We are dedicated to working in collaboration with public and private agencies as well as adoptive families, for we believe that more can be accomplished together than any one of us can accomplish alone. We have also found that the learning through our technical assistance is reciprocal – we learn as much from others' experiences as we hope we are able to share through our practice experiences. For more information about technical assistance opportunities in Rhode Island contact Betsy Singer at Casey Family Services (401-781-3669); or for national opportunities, contact Sarah Greenblatt at The Casey Center (sgreenblatt@caseyfamilyservices.org).