

Taking Stock of What Foster Care Has Taught Us

By Joy Duva and Lee Mullane (*Fostering Families Today*, 3/1/01)
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"My foster daughter came to me at age 13. My friends thought I was crazy to take on a teenager. I was not crazy at all," recalls Holly Wilson, Casey foster parent in Vermont. "Being a foster mom has made me more flexible, able to listen more carefully, be more patient and compassionate, have fun again and relive some of my own life as a teenager. Since I had no children of my own, I had to overcome my fear, learn everything, and find the confidence I needed to be a good parent. Luckily I had excellent support from my foster care agency."

More than 25 years of service to foster families and 10 years of work with adoptive families have made it abundantly clear to those of us at Casey Family Services (the operational arm of the Annie E. Casey Foundation) that a stable, strong and nurturing family is the key to a child's healthy development. We also know that supportive communities are just as critical to the social development of children who will become tomorrow's parents. Unfortunately, too many of our children and families, in fact a rising number, are going without the help they need to remain strong. When families fall apart, children pay the highest cost, and society is not far behind.

Each year more children enter the public foster care system. The national total now hovers near 600,000, an almost 20 percent rise since 1995 despite concerted and wellintentioned efforts to preserve our most vulnerable families and to move those foster children who cannot be reunited with birth parents into stable adoptive homes as quickly as possible. According to the most recent estimates, about 122,000 foster children are eligible for adoption today.

Without a doubt, the movement to place greater numbers of children languishing in foster care into adoptive homes is right in spirit and direction, as is placement with kin (also on the rise), or reunification with birth parents when possible. But any of these options represents a winding and sometimes difficult, lifelong process of adjustment, acceptance, attachment and growth.

The spike in interest among the media and the public around adoption and foster care issues is heartening. At the same time, we think it is crucial that equal time be given to the stark reality of the struggle so many families endure, and to the accompanying rise in the numbers of severely troubled children entering foster care. Today's fragile families may face any or all of the problems of substance abuse, domestic violence, medically challenged children, sexual abuse, and incarceration of one or more family members. When families fall apart and their children move into foster homes, the children cannot and do not leave their trauma, nightmares and distrust behind.

For the comparatively small number of foster families and kinship foster families now serving the nation's out-of-home-kids (about 147,000 families for nearly 600,000 children), managing children with severe emotional and psychological issues is no small task.

These families are in clear need of an array of services and supports to help them accomplish an often daunting task. Fortunately, many overburdened state systems are turning to the private sector for assistance. The partnerships and collaborations that are forming, in the best cases, result in improved practice and policies that are at least in part based on the input of birth and foster families as well as the professionals who serve them.

The long-term foster care model developed by Casey Family Services offers a solution to some of the common barriers facing state systems. For instance, state providers often have difficulty providing sufficient training and support to recruit and retain foster parents of the highest caliber. As a result, foster families end up with more children than they can handle or with children whose problems are not ones the foster families can handle well.

Casey Family Services provides extensive training and support as well as financial reimbursements, and limits the number of children in a home. Over the last five years in particular, Casey Family Services has entered into state collaborations and partnerships in each of its divisions.

In Rhode Island, Casey Family Services is working with the state Department of Children, Youth and Families to move children between the ages of three and nine out of emergency shelters and into stable foster homes. Because of extreme circumstances, the shelter's children have been removed from homes and are awaiting placement in foster homes or reunification with their parents. Many have very challenging behaviors, making stable placements difficult at best. As a result, an alarming number have remained in the shelter for months stretching into years. The impact on already traumatized children can be profound.

"The ideal is not to perpetuate a system that is not in the best interest of very needy children, but rather to work with the community center to identify a network of therapeutic foster homes in the neighborhood to offer an alternative to the current shelter system," says Jim Gannaway, Rhode Island Division Director.

By calling upon its roster of well-trained and well-supported foster families familiar with treatment-level children, Casey Family Services was able to place all the children within six months. Two years later, with the benefit of a stable family environment and consistent school placement, the children are making progress toward developmental and academic goals.

"The addition of Casey's clinical and diagnostic services, case advocacy and consultation to residential staff has already made a difference," said Fran Murphy,

Director of the Washington Park Community Center. "Children are now receiving quality services important to their case plan much quicker, delivered by very good clinicians who are always available to our staff and children."

As the project progresses, data is being collected to measure the impact of Casey's involvement with the shelter. This data will also be used in the development of a proposal to create a foster family-based program for young children with challenging therapeutic needs as an alternative to shelter care.

"We are trying to change the system. In the meantime, we have a lot to offer these kids. We can help them while they are in the system," says Jim Gannaway.

The significance of this program and others like it lies in the results: Children previously deemed too difficult for placement in families are now faring well. Such outcomes are not magic; nor are they the exception. When "therapeutic teams" are formed with families playing an equal part with therapists, physicians and social workers; when "wrap-around services" are provided with consistency and constancy; and when foster care is child-centered first, the prospects for good outcomes for children become comparatively very good. The principles work as well for very young children in shelters as they do for older children who have endured as many as 20 or 30 unsuccessful foster care placements in the past.

Over the years, Casey Family Services has come to specialize in children and youth who are older and who exhibit a range of challenging behaviors. Through a "levels of care" approach that provides a continuum of services and supports to the child throughout his or her development, we are able to provide long-term stable placements for children. When and if they experience a particularly dangerous or difficult episode, they may be cared for by a more specialized family and/or be referred to a treatment facility, and as soon as possible be returned to the original foster family.

As more Casey children are being adopted by their foster families, and as more foster children in the state system are moving into adoptive homes, Casey Family Services has expanded its Post-Adoption Services Program to meet the rising demand for assistance from families in crisis. The program was started in 1991 largely in response to needs expressed by Casey foster families who had adopted their foster children.

Until very recently, families adopting children from foster care were often on their own following the legalization of the adoption. State funds were not allocated for continued services and supports. From the beginning, however, Casey has recognized that supports and services should continue. The Casey model is comprehensive and includes:

- Information and referral
- Counseling

- Support groups for children and adults
- Advocacy
- Training and education
- Community outreach/awareness

In December, Casey Family Services hosted the first national conference on Post-Adoption Services. The more than 500 participants from child welfare, mental health, justice, education and other disciplines, echoed a call to ease the strain that state and private agencies alike are feeling in trying to find appropriate ways to respond to the needs of adoptive families. A majority reported that services in their states were inadequate, and that funding and training were principal obstacles.

In response, Casey Family Services officials used the conference as a platform to announce the imminent launch of the Casey Center for Effective Child Welfare Practice. The center will be a conduit through which to share and learn the most effective approaches to Post-Adoption Services and a wide range of other programs and services, including transitioning youth from foster care to independence and treatment foster care. Already Casey has completed a comprehensive toolkit on its Post-Adoption Services model, which it is making available upon request at no cost.

Through the center, and through each of the Casey divisions, collaboration with state and private agencies will continue. In Maine, for example, since April 1999 Casey's Maine Division, the Maine Department of Human Services and the University of Southern Maine have been working together as part of a federally funded Child Welfare Demonstration project. The federal resources supporting this five-year project come from funds usually dedicated to providing services to children in foster care. Maine is the only state chosen to use these resources to serve adoptive families.

There are three parts to the five-year pilot: training for child welfare and communitybased service providers as well as school; free group services by the Casey Maine staff and a monthly brown-bag luncheon meeting for therapists and other providers interested in adoption; and post-adoption services to families with special needs children.

The Maine Adoption Guides Project is innovative in a number of ways. Post-adoption services traditionally are provided in times of crisis, but the project is based on the philosophy that through a strong long-term relationship, social workers can help parents cope with issues before they grow into crises. In addition, the research gathered over the life of the project will provide invaluable data to explain the impact of comprehensive support services, especially in the case of special needs children.

Partnership with state systems throughout New England is a hallmark of Casey's work. At a recent Casey-hosted forum of the New England Association of Child

Welfare Administrators and Directors, innovative approaches to providing ongoing supports to foster youth aging out of the system were explored. The forum served as a venue to unveil the results of Casey's first Foster Care Alumni Study, one of the few of its kind. The study, conducted with the assistance of the University of North Carolina, demonstrated through the high success rate of foster care alumni the effectiveness of stable placements and continuing relationships, services and supports.

Extending collaboration beyond the borders of New England, Vermont Casey Family Services staff began discussions with community agencies in Indianapolis last fall that have led to the creation of a comprehensive technical assistance package for use in sharing strategies around family group decision making. Through an emerging peer-to-peer consultation model that melds what has worked so well in Vermont among Casey foster, adoptive and other fragile families, the Vermont Casey Family Services staff plans to expand its consultation with the Neighborhood Alliance for Child Safety (NACS) and others in Indianapolis.

The Casey Center for Effective Child Welfare Practice will expand this work. In its beginning phase of operation, when the focus will be on Post-Adoption Services, the Center will:

- Increase awareness of the needs of vulnerable children and families
- Provide technical assistance to other agencies interested in replicating Casey's programs
- Promote discussion and debate of public policy issues affecting children and families
- Promote discussion of research and evaluation findings and their implications for child welfare practice.

Whether we are legislators or child welfare administrators, judges or attorneys, practitioners, policy-makers, educators or child advocates, we are all faced with the challenge to find new ways to strengthen and support the most vulnerable among our nation's families. It is one of our society's most important tasks of the new century.