

A Yearning for Normalcy and Permanency

The number of children in foster care has nearly doubled in the last 20 years. There is a growing recognition that many of these children can remain safely at home and avoid the trauma of separation from their home and community, if given sufficient intervention and support. Most children who are in foster care are there because of abuse or neglect and are removed from their families to ensure their own safety and well-being.

Casey Family Programs has a goal of safely decreasing by 50% by 2020 the almost half a million children in foster care in the U.S. They sponsored the National Governors Association Policy Academy and selected six states to participate: Arkansas, Florida, Ohio, Oregon, Pennsylvania, and South Carolina. The National Academy helps states to devise strategies to improve long-term outcomes for vulnerable children, thereby reducing the number of children in foster care, shortening the length of stay, and reducing returns to foster care.

Florida's success has made it a model for other states. When Florida Governor Charlie Crist began his administration in 2007, he made overhaul of the foster care one of his priorities. He directed George Sheldon, new Secretary of the Florida Department of Children and Families, to improve the safety and welfare of children in the system. They listened to foster youth with the goal of strengthening families and safely reducing foster care by 50% by 2012.

Recent research echoed what foster children told officials. MIT's Joseph Doyle, Jr. tracked the cases of 15,000 abused and neglected children in Illinois from 1990 to 2002, some of whom stayed with their families and others who were placed in foster care. His study was not on children who were at the highest or lowest risk for abuse or neglect, but those who were in the "gray area" where the decision to keep or remove them was a judgment call. His conclusion: children in foster care did worse overall on significant outcomes in their lives than children who grew up with their parents and siblings. Among his statistical findings:

- 44% of children in foster care were arrested, a rate three times higher than for children who stayed with their families;
- 56% of girls in foster care become teen moms, almost twice the rate as girls who stayed with their families;
- 33% of children who remained with their families held a job at least three months, while 20% of those who were in foster care held a job that long.

In December 2006, before Governor Crist took office, Florida had 29,255 children in foster care. This was the result of large numbers of children being placed into group foster homes, insufficient numbers of foster families to take children, and high caseloads that made it difficult for case managers to give individual attention to each foster child. His discussions with foster children taught Secretary Sheldon that removing a child ought to be the last thing and that it was important to focus efforts into strengthening families and keeping families unified.

Florida obtained a federal waiver so that funding follows the child instead of the placement of the child. This allows Florida to provide social services to children who stay at home as well as to their families. Less restrictive home environments – whether remaining at home with parents and

siblings, living with relatives, or being adopted – helps children do better and is less traumatic. Community-based care agencies know best what services, resources and alliances are available in their particular areas to ensure that children’s needs are met, from initial placement that is appropriate for the child’s health, education, and well-being; individualized services; and children’s need for safety and permanency. A family-centered approach aims to develop in parents the skills and outlook they need to safely keep their children at home and safe, whenever this is possible. Funding was shifted to prevention services to keep children safely with their families and train workers to be well versed in and capable of applying these principles. Biological families’ anxieties were assuaged as case workers assured them that their goal was to help them develop positive parenting skills to create a safe home environment.

Florida also worked on building quality foster and biological families. New foster parents are connected with more experienced families to help them deal with foster children’s emotions and behaviors, tap resources, and use those services. Biological families are now viewed as partners as they acquire the parenting skills they need to regain custody of their children. Partnerships with those who cared about children were established, such with the Boy Scouts who provide the facility for sibling camps that help children maintain a sense of stability by keeping family ties. Online systems enable case managers to do their paperwork in the field, cutting time in the office and giving them more time with families. Substance abuse and mental health treatment, domestic violence prevention and services, and economic assistance are also provided to prevent or treat the underlying causes of abuse and neglect.

All children need a sense of belonging, unconditional love, and understanding. Given the traumatic and unstable circumstances that foster care children undergo, they crave these even more so. Recognizing this, Florida stepped up its adoption efforts, convinced that there are enough loving, caring families willing to open their homes and hearts for each foster child to find a forever family. Family finders make extensive searches for family members that foster children do not know of but who are willing to adopt that child. Florida is the national leader in fully converting to electronic records to reduce the time to transfer children to placement with out-of-state relatives. Its “Explore Adoption” public awareness campaign to find “forever” families for foster children allows Floridians to view profiles of children available for adoption online and in “Heart Gallery” displays throughout the state. Adoption counselors from community-based care and judges do the day-to-day work of connecting children with adoptive parents and moving the adoptions through the courts. Finally, accountability has improved. The Department admitted and addressed mistakes, and with progress made, brought credibility to Florida’s efforts to help children and families.

What were the results of Florida’s overhaul and family-centered approach? Almost 10,000 fewer children were placed in foster care, a 33% decrease, from 2006 to 2009. That allowed 9,819 boys and girls to remain safely with their parents and siblings and keep their ties to their teachers and friends, rather than being uprooted. Record numbers of foster children were adopted for two consecutive years, earning Florida recognition from the federal government.

Hawaii has about 5200 children in foster care. It is imperative that we learn from the successes of other states on how to improve the safety and well-being of children. This will benefit families and our communities.