



Agenda

Promote Permanent Families, Reform Foster Care

Hart Senate Office Building, Room 902 • Washington, D.C.

March 12, 2007

- 10:00 a.m. **Introduction** — Joe Kroll, Executive Director, North American Council on Adoptable Children
- 10:10 a.m. **The Importance of Federal Child Welfare Reform** — Former Congressman William Frenzel, Co-Chair, Pew Commission on Children in Foster Care
- 10:20 a.m. **Moderator** — Kelly Cates, mother who reunified with her three daughters who were in foster care; Board Member, North American Council on Adoptable Children
- 10:30 a.m. **Panelists**
- ◆ Michael Drake, former foster youth: **“Losing My Brothers and Sister to Foster Care”**
 - ◆ Pam Bolke, adoptive mother: **“Adopting Foster Children with Special Needs”**
 - ◆ Stephanie Smith, former foster youth: **“Reuniting with My Mother, Rebuilding Our Lives”**
 - ◆ Lisa Wilson, former foster youth: **“Every Youth Needs a Family”**
 - ◆ Rob Johnson, former foster youth: **“Guardianship was the Right Choice for My Family”**
- 11:20 a.m. **Panelists’ Stories and Pew Commission Recommendations** — William Thorne, Judge, Utah Court of Appeals; Member, Pew Commission
- 11:35 a.m. **Questions and Answers**
- 11:55 a.m. **Concluding Comments** — Deanna Carlson Stacy, Executive Director, Congressional Coalition on Adoption Institute
- Noon **Adjourn**



Project Partners

Brought to you by the North American Council on Adoptable Children and the Congressional Coalition on Adoption Institute, with a grant from The Pew Charitable Trusts, **“Promote Permanent Families, Reform Foster Care”** is designed to inform the public about how the federal financing recommendations of the Pew Commission on Children in Foster Care could help children and families across the United States.

During this forum, individuals most affected by the child welfare system share personal experiences to illustrate the system’s strengths and challenges. Panelists demonstrate the importance of permanent families, the need for services to keep families together, and the importance of post-placement support.

The Partners

Since its founding in 1974 by adoptive parents, the **North American Council on Adoptable Children** (www.nacac.org) has been dedicated to the belief that every child deserves a permanent, nurturing, and culturally sensitive family. NACAC promotes and supports permanence for children and youth in foster care in the U.S. and Canada through education, support, parent capacity building, and advocacy.



NACAC publishes materials, conducts training, advocates, and provides assistance related to adoption support, parent group development, adoption subsidy, child welfare system reform, and more. NACAC also holds the most comprehensive adoption conference in North America. In Minnesota, NACAC provides peer support to adoptive families.

The **Congressional Coalition on Adoption Institute** (www.ccaainstitute.org) is a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization dedicated to raising awareness about the tens of thousands of orphans and foster children in the United States and the millions of orphans around the world in need of permanent, safe, and loving homes through adoption; and to eliminating the barriers that hinder these children from realizing their basic right of a family.



The Congressional Coalition on Adoption (CCA) was created in 1985 as a bicameral, bipartisan caucus of members of Congress dedicated to improving adoption policy and practice, and to focusing public attention on the advantages of adoption. In 2001, the CCA’s active co-chairs created the Congressional Coalition on Adoption Institute (CCAI) to more effectively raise Congressional and public awareness about the issue of adoption. Senator Larry Craig, Senator Mary Landrieu, Representative Jim Oberstar, and Representative Ginny Brown-Waite currently serve as both the co-chairs of the CCA and the Congressional directors of CCAI.

To that end, CCAI serves as an informational and educational resource to policymakers as they seek to draft positive adoption, foster care, and other adoption-related legislation and to meet their constituents’ needs. By organizing Congressional briefings, leadership training programs, and educational trips, CCAI educates members of Congress and their staff about current domestic and international adoption-related matters.



Child Welfare Financing Facts

- ◆ **Federal spending to place children in foster care far surpasses spending to keep families together, and the gap has only grown wider.**
- ◆ In the United States, only 13 percent of federal child welfare dollars can be spent to keep children with their families. **Approximately \$644.3 million dollars out of a total of \$4.9 billion child welfare dollars are flexible and aimed at keeping families together.**
- ◆ Over the last decade, the more flexible pool of federal dollars (Title IV-B) aimed at keeping families together has remained consistently low, while the funding targeted only for children who have entered foster care has grown.
- ◆ **The Title IV-B authorization is \$325 million for Subpart I and \$545 million for Subpart II, but appropriations are only \$286.7 and \$454 million respectively.**
- ◆ **Federal spending on child welfare remained fairly stable between 2002 and 2004, while state spending increased 6 percent and local spending increased 10 percent.**
- ◆ In 2004, states spent a total of at least \$23.3 billion dollars on child welfare services. Of that amount, \$11.7 billion were federal funds, \$9.1 billion were state funds, and \$2.5 billion were local funds.
- ◆ **More than 19,250 foster children cannot return home and are living safely with relatives.** Many do not have the option of subsidized guardianship to help them leave foster care to a permanent family.
- ◆ **Although 38 states and the District of Columbia have subsidized guardianship programs, some are operating under time limited waivers, many are funded with TANF dollars that are not secure from year to year, and most are not supporting children at a level that fully meets their needs.**
- ◆ States are obligated to provide protection to every abused or neglected child regardless of income, but the federal government will only reimburse states for a portion of this work if the child is considered poor under outdated AFDC eligibility requirements, under which fewer and fewer children qualify. **About 5,000 children each year are projected to lose federal support for their care due to this outdated income-eligibility requirement.**
- ◆ In 1998, 53 percent of foster children were eligible for federal support, but by 2005, the percentage had dropped to 46 percent—or 35,000 fewer Title IV-E eligible children. **This decrease translates into about a \$1.9 billion reduction in federal support to the states.**
- ◆ Approximately 6,500 Native American children are in foster care across the United States, most under the jurisdiction of tribal courts. **Native American tribes that administer their own child welfare systems, however, are not eligible for Title IV-E funds unless they have a cooperative agreement with the states.**
- ◆ Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) and Social Services Block Grant (SSBG) spending for child welfare services decreased between 2002 and 2004 in 40 states. **These funding streams are not dedicated or guaranteed for child welfare services.**
- ◆ Medicaid and SSBG are two sources of funding that have been available to support children, but both continue to lose their value for serving children in the child welfare system. **In Medicaid, targeted case management services have been severely limited in recent years and authorizations for SSBG have fallen from \$2.5 billion in 1995 to \$1.7 billion today.**



Financing Recommendations of the Pew Commission on Children in Foster Care

The national, nonpartisan Pew Commission on Children in Foster Care sought to improve outcomes for foster children—particularly to move children to safe, permanent, nurturing families, and prevent unnecessary placements in care. The Commission identified the need to reform a federal financing structure that encourages an over-reliance on placement of children in foster care. Released in May 2004, the Commission's financing reforms would:

- ◆ Maintain the federal safety net for foster care and adoption, while providing new options and incentives for states to seek safe, permanent families for children.
- ◆ Give states greater flexibility in how they can use federal funds.
- ◆ Strengthen accountability for outcomes for children.
- ◆ Provide resources and incentives to states to build the full continuum of services for abused and neglected children, from prevention to post-permanency.
- ◆ Encourage states to test and evaluate new approaches to help children in foster care, children at risk of entering care, and children who are leaving foster care.
- ◆ Offer financial incentives to build the capacity of the child welfare workforce.

Below, we outline the Commission's financing recommendations, explain challenges to be overcome, and highlight how a few states used similar reforms to improve outcomes for children and youth.

Preserve federal foster care maintenance and adoption assistance as entitlements and expand them to all children, regardless of their birth families' income and including Indian children and children in the U.S. territories.

Currently, the federal government shares in a portion of the cost of foster care for every child whose family income is below the 1996 Aid to Families with Dependent Children income standards. In contrast, states are obligated to provide protection to *every* abused or neglected child, regardless of family income.

Adoption assistance, like foster care protection, is an important support for children with special needs. Public subsidies help strength-

en these new families and enable many foster parents to adopt children already in their care by ensuring that they do not lose support as they transition to adoption. Like foster care payments, federal subsidies are available only to income-eligible children.

Unfortunately, a funding system that ties foster care and adoption assistance to outdated income guidelines has resulted in a system in which far fewer children are eligible for Title IV-E federal support. From 1999 to 2003, the average monthly number of foster children receiving IV-E maintenance payments dropped from 53.5 percent to 46 percent. In some states, the drop is dramatic. **As a result, states and localities must share a greater burden for foster care and adoption. In some states, this has severely limited the amount of funding that can go to prevention—or in some cases, has caused cuts in already limited adoption support.**

In Illinois between 1999 and 2001, the percent of children receiving federal funded adoption assistance decreased from 89 percent to 75.5 percent.

In New York, between 1998 and 2004, the percent of children receiving federal foster care assistance decreased from 74 percent to 60 percent.

State *and* federal assistance should be required to ensure protection and support in foster care and after adoption for every abused and neglected child—not just every poor child.

Provide federal guardianship assistance to all children who leave foster care to live with a permanent legal guardian when they cannot return home or be adopted.

Nationally, about 19,250 children live with relative foster parents with no hope of safely returning home or being adopted. And each year thousands of youth age out of care with no legal parents. **Many of these children would benefit from subsidized guardianship, which has proven to boost permanency rates, particularly for older children and children of color.** Currently, there is no permanent federal funding for guardianship; therefore it is unavailable to many of the children who need it most. Without guardianship, foster children living with relatives are stuck in



Financing Recommendations (continued)

limbo—unable to sleep over at a friend’s house or get routine medical care without a worker’s permission.

As with adoption assistance, guardianship assistance helps families meet the special needs of children who have been abused or neglected. Children in stable foster placements with relatives and other caregivers would benefit from greater federal support for guardianship, allowing them to leave care, eliminate costly caseworker visits, and reduce unnecessary court oversight.

Help states build a range of services that keep children from entering care, enable them to leave care safely, and support permanency by (1) creating a flexible, indexed Safe Children, Strong Families Grant from the current Title IV-B and the administration and training components of Title IV-E, and (2) allowing states to “reinvest” federal and state foster care funds into other child welfare services if they safely reduce their use of foster care.

The vast majority of federal child welfare funding can only be used once children have been removed from their birth families. States have limited ability to invest in efforts to preserve families

because only a small percentage of federal funds may be used for prevention. As a result, there are too many children in care who might have been able to stay at home safely or leave placement sooner if states had been able to use more federal dollars for prevention, treatment, and post-permanency services. States should be granted such flexibility.

Flexibility alone, however, is not enough to enable

states to build a continuum of services to meet the needs of children who are abused or neglected. Additional federal funding is needed if states are to invest in proven practices to achieve better child outcomes.

A flexible funding agreement created by a Washington state child and family services regional authority and Pierce County blended federal and state child welfare funds and Medicaid dollars so that the money would follow the needs of the child. Older children received emergency mental health and family reunification services immediately.

Encourage innovation by expanding and simplifying the waiver process and providing incentives to states that (1) make and maintain improvements in their child welfare workforce, and (2) increase all forms of safe permanency.

The only avenue for flexible funding will soon cease to exist. On March 31, 2006, the federal government ended the child welfare waiver program, which gave states flexible use of federal child welfare funds. Since 1996, 18 states used waivers to implement more than two dozen innovative programs. Innovation and flexibility should be encouraged, and successful waiver programs (such as subsidized guardianship) should be replicated.

Illinois’ subsidized guardianship waiver notably improved permanency outcomes for foster children. Indiana and Oregon successfully used their flexible funding waivers for services that reduced the use of foster care and returned more children home to their birth families.

The federal government now provides states with incentives to achieve permanency only through adoption. Incentives for reunification and guardianship—also good permanency outcomes for children—would provide states with funds to reinvest in success and innovation. Incentives to improve the conditions of frontline workers, also critical to the success of children and families, would encourage states to make investments in their workforce.

Strengthen the current Child and Family Services Review process to increase states’ accountability for improving outcomes for children.

Currently, the federal Child and Family Services Reviews (CFSRs) are the principal tool for assessing how well states and localities meet the goals of safety, permanency, and well-being for foster children. The Pew Commission recommends that CFSRs use longitudinal data to produce more complete, accurate assessments of states’ progress. The reviews should also more accurately assess child well-being by reporting on children’s health and education status. A review system such as this would better guide child welfare reform.



Key U.S. Foster Care & Adoption Facts

What Contributes to Child Maltreatment?

- ◆ A recent survey of child welfare administrators found that substance abuse and poverty are the most critical problems facing families investigated for child maltreatment. In some areas, substance abuse is an issue for one-third to two-thirds of the families involved with the child welfare system.
- ◆ Meth use and abuse is especially hitting rural child welfare systems, where drug assessment and treatment services are scarce. In a recent national survey of local law enforcement and child welfare officials, 40 percent of social workers said that foster caseloads were rising due to meth abuse by parents.

Who Is in Foster Care in the U.S.?

- ◆ On September 30, 2005, 513,000 children were in foster care. During fiscal year (FY) 2005, 311,000 children entered care.
- ◆ Children of color are overrepresented in care. African American children constitute 15 percent of U.S. children, but 32 percent of foster children. Native American children are 1 percent of the child population, but 2 percent of foster children. Latino children are overrepresented in many large urban areas.
- ◆ Most foster children are cared for in families. About 74 percent of foster children are in foster family homes. Roughly 18 percent are in institutions or group care, 4 percent are on trial visits home, 1 percent are in independent living programs, and 2 percent are considered runaways.
- ◆ Relatives are a critically important resource for children in foster care. In FY 2005, 24 percent of foster children were cared for by relatives, up from 18 percent in 1986.

How Long Do They Stay?

- ◆ On average, children spend more than two years—28.6 months in foster care. As of September 2005, 25 percent of foster children had spent more than three years in care.
- ◆ More than 40 percent of foster children experience three or more placements.
- ◆ 114,000 children were waiting to be adopted on September 30, 2005. The average age of children waiting for adoption was 8.6 years. A disproportionate share of the children waiting to be adopted are children of color.

How Are Older Children Affected?

- ◆ Many older children have little hope of finding a permanent family. About 20 percent of foster children eight and older have a case plan of long-term foster care or emancipation, meaning that no one expects them to find a family.
- ◆ Approximately half of the youth who come into contact with the child welfare system need mental health services. One study found that older children who experienced long delays in permanent placement were likely to have substantial disabilities, such as learning problems.
- ◆ Too many older foster children are in group care. At the end of FY 2000, 38 percent of 13- to 17-year-olds lived in congregate care, surpassing the percentage living with foster families.
- ◆ More older children need adoptive families than ever before. The proportion of 9- to 17-year-olds in the pool of waiting children has increased from 38 percent in FY 1998 to 47 percent in FY 2005.

Where Do Children Go When They Leave?

- ◆ The majority of children leaving care go back to their birth families. In FY 2005, 54 percent of foster children exiting care returned to their birth families. The percentage of children returning home, however, dropped from 62 percent in 1998.
- ◆ More than 51,000 children were adopted in FY 2005, a dramatic increase since 1996 when only 28,000 children were adopted. By 2002, 31 states had doubled the number of adoptions from foster care since the late 1990s.
- ◆ Kinship adoptions rose from 15 to 25 percent of all adoptions from foster care between FY 1998 and 2005. This has been especially beneficial to African American children who found permanent families with relatives.
- ◆ In FY 2005, 12,881 children achieved permanence through guardianship. In part because subsidized guardianship is not universally available, only 4 percent of children exiting care in 2005 were placed with guardian caregivers.
- ◆ Sadly, in FY 2005 more than 24,000 foster children aged out of care with no permanent, legal connection to a family. Studies show that these young people have limited education and poor



The Speakers

Michael Drake, West Virginia

A young man who experienced more than 16 placements in foster care, including many in group care, and never found a permanent family



In 1998, 12-year-old Michael Drake knew that he and his sister Katasha, 8, and brothers, Randy, 10 and Beau, 6, needed help when the state determined that they couldn't safely stay with their mother.

First sent to a shelter, Michael and his siblings were then placed together in a foster family. After a short time, the foster parents retired and the children went to another shelter. Michael repeatedly told workers he wanted to find his extended family and, when that didn't happen, he became distraught, and ran away and acted out.

Michael reflects, “In my opinion, foster care destroyed our whole sense of family in the end. We can’t sit down together and feel like we are siblings.”

“They wanted to do a psychological evaluation on me due to the fact that I had been running away and showing behavior that they deemed was abnormal,” explains Michael. “So I was placed in a mental health facility in Ohio. In the three months that I was there, they said that I really didn't have any mental health issues—maybe a little narcissism—but basically, they said I was a pretty good guy.”

When Michael returned to West Virginia, he and his siblings were placed together with a foster family. Michael explains, “About a week later our mother gave up her rights to me and my siblings. We stayed with that foster family for about a year, which was the most permanent placement I had in foster care.”

“At 14, I was placed in a shelter and then into respite care because the foster family said I was fighting too much with my brothers and sisters,” recalls Michael. Between age 14 and 18, Michael moved more than 13 times, bouncing between shelters, other group care facilities, and foster families.

In this period of time, Michael did not live with his brothers and sister and rarely got to spend time with them. Whenever he could talk with them, Michael reminded his siblings that they were a family for each other.

At 15, Michael was moved to a group care facility. Although he missed his family, he made friends, excelled in academics, played baseball, and looked forward to taking his girlfriend to homecoming.

He even found a family who was willing to adopt him. Then a judge ruled that Michael was doing so well that he no longer needed group care, and Michael was placed with a family he didn't know 100 miles away. From there he moved to another group home.

At 18, Michael aged out of foster care with no permanent family, as did his brother Randy. Katasha, now 18, was adopted while Beau remains in foster care. Michael reflects, “In my opinion, foster care destroyed our whole sense of family in the end. We can't sit down together and feel like we are siblings. It becomes more like, ‘Oh, I know that person’ but it's not like, ‘Oh, he's my brother.’”

Now 21, Michael is attending West Virginia State University with the help of a Chafee scholarship for youth who age out of care, and would love to go on to law school. Thinking about his experiences in foster care, Michael wishes the state had done more to help his mom keep the family together: “If the state had invested the same money they spent putting us in all those placements into weekly visits with our mother and had given her skill lessons, it might not have escalated to us needing to go into permanent foster care.”

If that hadn't worked, Michael wanted to get in touch with his aunt and uncle. “From childhood, I remember that my Aunt Cassie she took us to church, and that she was a very good person. She and Uncle Mike owned their own business,” explains Michael. “In fact when I was young, I had a heart problem and I lived with her for over a year. She probably would have taken us in.”

Michael's story illustrates how the current IV-E funding structure allows youth to be easily placed in group care and foster care while disincentives exist to find relatives and place children with grandmothers, grandfathers, aunts, and other kin. On average from 2001 to 2003, only 4.1 percent of West Virginia's foster children lived with relatives compared to 23.5 percent over all in the U.S. Some localities have reduced the use of out-of-home placement and have reinvested saved foster care dollars into expanded outreach to relatives so that children may live with people they know. **If the federal child welfare funding system were made more flexible, and if states were allowed to put more efforts into finding relative placement resources, children could attain more stability and permanence with loved ones.**

Not all young people leaving foster care without a family are as resilient as Michael. Each year more than 20,000 youth emancipate from foster care without legal family connections. Many have limited education and employment prospects. Too many leave care and end up homeless, incarcerated, and physically or mentally ill. And a large number wish they had been adopted or had another permanent family. **The Pew Commission recommends realigning child welfare funding more closely with the goals of achieving safety, stability, and permanency for foster youth.**

Pam Bolke, Louisiana

Adoptive parent of foster children with special needs



In 1998, Pam Bolke and her husband Tom were drawn to a little girl that the local newspaper said needed a family. They knew they wanted to welcome two-and-a-half-year-old Danielle into their family. Soon after, Danielle's little sister Kelsey joined them. Both of the girls had endured significant abuse. Danielle used to wake up screaming at night, and the only way Pam could help her was to sleep on the floor next to the bed. "Danielle used to beg me to 'put Band-aids on the windows to keep the bad guys out,'" recalls Pam.

Three years later, Pam saw a news report about three-month-old twins who had been abused and neglected. Pam recognized the birth parents as Danielle and Kelsey's and called to offer to keep the siblings together. The twins, JT and Jennifer, had both endured severe injuries. JT, who has spina bifida and hydrocephalus, was badly burned. Jennifer's skull was cracked and she had multiple broken bones. Next Pam learned the children had another sister, two-year-old Leah, whom she readily took into her family too. Today, Pam and Tom have adopted all five siblings.

All of the children have special needs, some significant. By the time Danielle was four, Pam knew she was particularly troubled. "She was doing things like biting the upholstery leather out of my van, growling at me, destroying furniture, and trying to hang herself with a clothes hanger in the closet," explains Pam.

"Kelsey is doing very well," says Pam. "She has ADHD, but she is beautiful and bright." With Leah, Pam remembers, "She walked in the door and I was her mama. She never looked back—she looked forward. She is nearly seven now and suffers horribly from post-traumatic stress syndrome."

The twins are also thriving. Pam celebrates how well JT has healed: "All of his burn marks are gone. Now he is walking with no crutches and he rides a bicycle. He does a lot of things they said he would never do."

Unfortunately, Pam worries about Danielle's mental health. When Pam began to receive numerous calls a month to pick up her daughter from school due to behavior issues, she had to do something. She recently found a special school in a hospital setting that is working better. "I drive 30 miles to get her on the bus, but I know the staff is trained to deal with behavior-disordered children. This year I only got four calls to pick her up," explains Pam. Danielle has been on a waiting list for mental health services for more than six years.

Last month Danielle's behavior became more serious and she threatened to hit Pam in the head with a hammer. Pam grew worried for her own safety and the well-being of the other children. Danielle was admitted to a psychiatric hospital and was diagnosed

bipolar-manic and psychotic. "Danielle's therapist asked me to participate in some of the therapy sessions," says Pam. "I drive 10 hours round trip from Shreveport to Baton Rouge to participate in the sessions."

Pam's commitment to her children is obvious.

Pam says, "Children like Danielle were not born like this. They were robbed of their childhood at a very early age, and we all need to advocate for them. I don't give up."

"I am willing to do whatever it takes to care for my children," says Pam. "But I know now I can't do it alone." Although Pam receives a monthly adoption subsidy for Danielle, it is not nearly enough to cover her expenses. Pam could also use a trained personal care attendant (PCA) to help out a few hours each week when Danielle loses control of her emotions. Pam's family could also use in-home therapy, family therapy, and short-term respite care. Unfortunately, due to lack of funds, many of these services are not currently available through Louisiana's adoption assistance program.

Pam's commitment to her children is obvious. Pam says, "Children like Danielle were not born like this. They were robbed of their childhood at a very early age, and we all need to advocate for them. I don't give up. I have a strong cluster of support and there is no *can't* in our vocabulary!"

Pam's story reminds us that older children, especially those with mental health needs like Danielle, need a permanent, loving family in which they can feel safe. Yet families and children need services and support so that adoption can last a lifetime. Additional post-adoption services—including special mental health treatment, respite care, PCA services, etc—should be available to families with extraordinary needs through more flexible funding options, as recommended by the Pew Commission.

In the long-run, adoption—even well-supported adoption—saves money. A recent study demonstrates that the 50,000 children adopted each year save the government from \$1 to \$6 billion, when compared to keeping those children in long-term foster care. **To promote adoption, support children with special needs, and save foster care costs, the Pew Commission recommends that all children with special needs adopted from foster care—like Danielle—receive federally supported adoption assistance.** Currently only those children whose birth parents meet outdated eligibility standards are ensured federal adoption assistance.

Stephanie Lopez Smith, Washington

A young woman who was reunited with her mother who received drug treatment and other extensive services



“I love my mom and I am proud of her!” exclaims Stephanie Smith. “She’s a good person. Even though I knew she was making the wrong choices when I was younger, I didn’t want her gone from my life forever.”

Stephanie’s mom, Brenda Lopez, got into legal trouble in July 1998. She was struggling with her drug addiction when child protective services placed 11-year-old Stephanie with her paternal grandparents and Stephanie’s four-year-old brother Danny in foster care. “I cried myself to sleep every night wanting my brother to be with me,” says Stephanie. “I didn’t know where he was or if he was comfortable.” Stephanie’s grandparents quickly become licensed foster parents and within two months Danny joined them.

“Once we were with my grandma, I was happy. I didn’t have to take care of Danny every day after school—my grandma took care of him. I was allowed to be a kid. I knew that we were safe there,” says Stephanie.

“Life was hard for me before I went to my grandpa’s,” recalls Stephanie. “It was hard not knowing if I was safe, walking the streets at midnight because my mom was worried somebody was after her, having to look after my little brother because my mom was on house arrest, trying to find something to eat.”

Adds Stephanie, “By the time I was 15 years old, I had attended 13 different schools. We were constantly moving, I wasn’t able to make friends and missed half my schooling.”

While the children were in foster care, Brenda took full advantage of the extensive services available to her. She participated in in-patient and out-patient drug treatment, self-esteem classes, anger management, parenting and nutrition classes, AA meetings, Bible study, daily shelter meetings, and group and individual counseling.

Even while Brenda worked hard to turn her life around, Stephanie felt betrayed because of what her mother had put her through. “I wouldn’t speak to her,” explains Stephanie. “I wouldn’t see her, return her phone calls, or read her letters.” After a little while, Danny was allowed to move in with Brenda but Stephanie was still not ready. “The first time I saw or talked to my mom was on Christmas Eve,” explains Stephanie. “It was a good visit. I could see that my brother was happy, doing well, and going to school. My mom seemed healthier. I could see it in her eyes.”

Stephanie could see that her mom was getting the help she needed. “I could see that having someone to talk to was really helping. She had to follow rules, get a job, help out around the house, and have structure in her life. That was really awesome for my mom,” adds Stephanie.

When Brenda moved into a transitional housing program, Stephanie believed for the first time that she was going to make it. “My mom had to pay her own bills, attend meetings with all of the other residents, talk to the people who ran the building, and stay clean and sober. I spent the night there a couple of times and actually I felt good and safe and comfortable. I was proud of her,” says Stephanie.

Once Stephanie was reunited with her mom and brother, her life got better. “I became more outgoing. I was more comfortable with myself, and my grades improved. I was in plays and musicals at church. Now I had lots of friends!”

“When I was almost 13, I moved back in with my mom into an apartment,” Stephanie recalls. “She took me with her to decide if we wanted the apartment and that really made me feel good. She worked every day and came home on time and made dinner for us.”

Once Stephanie was reunited with her mom and brother, her life got better. “I became more outgoing, I was more comfortable with myself, and my grades improved. I was in plays and musicals at church. Now I had lots of friends! My friends were always around. I went to dances for the first time. I was having fun,” adds Stephanie.

Stephanie says, “If I could wish for anything it would be that our family could have gotten help sooner. I don’t know what life would have been like if I had stayed in foster care or been adopted, but I know if I didn’t have my family around me—my mom, my brother, my grandparents, and my cousins—I would be devastated. My family means everything to me.”

Stephanie’s mother was well-served by a range of services that enabled her to reunify with her children—drug treatment, housing assistance, and monitoring and support delivered by caring staff. **But too few drug-addicted parents and their children across the U.S. have such an opportunity.** In Washington State in recent years family reunification has declined, in part due to more high-risk cases involving parental substance abuse. Nationally, only 10 percent of child welfare agencies report that they can find drug treatment programs for clients who need it within 30 days. Almost no drug-addicted parents can access substance abuse treatment programs with a mother-child residential component, and few are able to participate in comprehensive programs that address issues of parenting and housing along with substance abuse. **The Pew Commission recommends that states be able to choose to reinvest federal and state foster care dollars into other child welfare services, such as drug treatment, if they safely reduce the use of foster care.**

Lisa Wilson, Montana

A young woman who aged out of foster care with no legal family



Married with two children, 25-year-old Lisa aged out of foster care when she was 18. “I am the oldest of 11 siblings and when I was born, neither one of my parents had a drinking or drug problem. After having five children, I think my mom started drinking to relieve stress. My dad started using drugs, and by 1992, he was using and selling meth.”

“Both of my parents were good parents when they were clean and sober, and when my dad was straight, he was the best dad. Whenever my mom was pregnant, she stayed sober. Both of them tried many times to quit for good, but it didn’t last,” adds Lisa.

Lisa’s parents began to fight every weekend. “We started moving around a lot,” adds Lisa. “Sometimes mom would pack us up whenever we were living and we would go to a shelter after dad beat her. Later we would all get back together and things would be okay for a few weeks. I thought this was normal, but by junior high, I realized it wasn’t normal.”

Lisa’s seven brothers and sisters were sent to four different foster families. “I felt like my heart had been ripped out of me when they took us all away,” says Lisa.

In 1995, the Department of Public Health and Human Services (DPHHS) became involved. Lisa’s seven brothers and sisters were sent to four different foster families. “I felt like my heart had been ripped out of me when they took us all away,” says Lisa.

Lisa’s mom was court ordered into drug treatment. Lisa recalls, “My mom willingly complied with her case plan. She went to treatment, participated in a parenting class, attended AA, and knew she would have to get a job. My mom was going to do whatever they told her to do to get her kids back.”

Lisa’s dad attended parenting class too. “He was in the class with all the other moms because there weren’t services for dads. It was weird for him because he was the only dad in the group,” adds Lisa. “One of [his workers] recently told me my dad contributed important insights and added lot to the group. After my dad took that parenting class, he never hit my mom again.”

“The workers were assigned to my mom and basically were against my dad. He was the bad guy in their eyes. They thought getting rid of my dad would be the best thing for my mom, but she was 14 when she had me and she had never parented without my dad. Now

DPHHS expected her to stay sober, attend all her meetings, work full time, and raise eight children—all by herself,” explains Lisa. Lisa believes her parents could have succeeded if they had received coordinated family services to help her father too.

The children eventually returned to their parents for a time. “When we were reunited, everything was different and shocking. I didn’t know how live in this new family. There were no supportive services for me or my siblings. Everything in our family had changed and we didn’t know how to handle it,” adds Lisa.

Lisa’s dad continued to struggle with drug dependency issues and relapsed periodically. Eventually the court ordered him to stay away from his family. When Lisa’s mom made some poor choices, the children placed in foster care briefly and then returned to her. “The day we were reunited again my dad was so happy that his family was together that he paid for all of us to go to the fair,” remembers Lisa. “We were seen with our dad and that was it, DPHHS decided to terminate parental rights.”

The children were separated into different foster homes, and Lisa eventually aged out of foster care. Lisa’s mother still grieves the loss of her children, and her father, now drug free, takes full responsibility for his family’s devastating losses.

Currently four of Lisa’s brothers live with her. When they have painful memories of their earlier childhood, Lisa tries to talk to them and help them heal. Lisa also dedicates her work life to helping vulnerable families at the In-Care Network, a nonprofit organization that provides services to American Indian youth and families.

As she parents her own children, Lisa is reminded of what she missed as a child. “I think about my life now with my husband and children and about what it would be like if we ran into problems and needed help, and what it would be like if my husband didn’t receive equal services to mine or if the solution for our family was that we had to separate—I would be devastated.”

Foster youth like Lisa and her 10 brothers and sisters need permanent families—not childhoods spent bouncing from one home to another—and child welfare funding should provide options that meet their unique needs. [The Pew Commission recommends federal funding incentives for states that achieve permanency for children and youth—whether through reunification, adoption, or guardianship.](#)

Lisa also reminds us that—in states like Montana and around the U.S.—many Native American birth, adoptive, and guardianship families like hers need culturally competent, family-inclusive support to meet their children’s needs. Unfortunately, the current federal funding system limits tribes’ ability to provide the necessary support. Although tribes have responsibility for tribal children in foster care, they do not have direct access to federal child welfare funding. Tribes must contract with the state to receive support for families like Lisa’s. [The Pew Commission recommends that tribes receive direct Title IV-E funding, along with technical assistance, so that they have the resources needed to meet their responsibility to children in care.](#)

Rob Johnson, Illinois

A youth who was able to leave foster care to live with his aunt through subsidized guardianship



In 1994, Rob Johnson's mother Jaunice slipped into a deep depression triggered by trauma from her childhood. "I was only six years old and too young to notice the changes in my mom," recalls Rob. While Jaunice received mental health services, her children's godparents became licensed foster parents and took Rob and his older sisters Debra and Chrissy to live with them in Indiana.

"Strangers came in, packed our bags, my older sister grabbed me, and we went into this guy's car and drove away to Indiana.... It wasn't a good feeling to know you've been taken away from your mom," explains Rob. "I didn't know what happened to my mom or why we had to leave."

Rob adds, "To take a child away from his family is one of the most heartbreaking things you can do to him. Then to put him back with his family is one of the greatest things you can give him."

Jaunice became concerned when she became more and more cut off from her children. She sensed they weren't able to speak freely to her on the phone, so she asked one of her friends to go see them. During this visit, Chrissy revealed details about the foster family's overly strict rules and physical punishments.

Jaunice did not believe she would be granted custody of the children, so she asked her sister Carol to step in. In 1997, Carol became the children's foster parent in Chicago. Rob remembers, "When I walked in I was really happy to be there. I felt like I was home.... I was really happy to be back somewhere where I felt they actually cared about us. My aunt has one son who is like my brother. He had always wanted brothers and sisters, and so it worked out really well for all of us."

"Six months later, my mom moved into the housing complex across the street. She had 24-hour unsupervised visitation, so I went over there every day," adds Rob.

Not long after, Carol was granted one of the first subsidized guardianships in Illinois, and the children were able to leave foster care permanently. "When my sisters heard about my aunt becoming our guardian," Rob recalls, "the first question they asked was if our mom would lose her parental rights under that agreement. Like my sisters, I wouldn't have wanted any arrangement that meant my mom would have had to lose her parental rights to us."

Rob knows his aunt could never have cared for him and his sisters without support. "My aunt already had a child. No one can just raise other children without money to support raising them. I know the subsidy really helped out," adds Rob.

Finding safety, stability, and love had a really positive impact on Rob. In Indiana, he was labeled a slow learner and his first teachers in Chicago were worried that he might not have the ability to graduate from eighth grade on time. "Not only did I graduate from grammar school on time, my grades improved." For high school, Rob got a scholarship to Loyola Academy." Explains Rob, "Once I got into Loyola, I just really started progressing and I moved completely up. Then I wound up getting a full academic scholarship to Drake University in Iowa—one of the two top business universities in the state."

The Johnsons are all thriving. Rob is now a freshman at Drake, Debra is a sophomore at St. Louis University, and Chrissy works as the extended care director at a charter school in Chicago. Jaunice, who has been able to successfully manage her mental health, lives a productive life, and is joyful to be included in the lives of her children. "My children are everything to me," says Jaunice. "When they moved back to Chicago, I made sure I was available to go to every game, every track meet, everything. I wanted to be there for them."

Summing up what it means to have been able to live with his aunt and remain close to his mother, Rob adds, "To take a child away from his family is one of the most heartbreaking things you can do to him. Then to put him back with his family is one of the greatest things you can give him."

Robert was able to live permanently with his aunt due to Illinois' participation in a federal child welfare waiver, which allows the state to use child welfare funds flexibly to subsidize guardianships for children and youth, particularly those living with relatives. **Only a limited number of states have received permission to use child welfare funds for subsidized guardianship, and the authority to use them is no longer available to additional states.** Without it, Robert would have aged out of foster care without a legal relationship to his aunt, or been forced to permanently sever his mother's rights in order to be adopted.

Although living with his mother was not an option during his adolescence, terminating her rights would have caused unnecessary family conflict and potentially denied him the positive relationship he now enjoys with her as he enters into adulthood. Youth such as Robert deserve a place to call home when they can't live with their own families or do not want to be adopted. In the last nine years since Illinois implemented its guardianship program, 9,596 children have left foster care to legal, supported guardianships. **States need a federal partnership to help all youth leave foster care and find permanent homes with loving families.**