LESSONS FROM THE FIELD

STRIVING FOR TRANSFORMATIVE CHANGE AT THE STUART FOUNDATION

> The Stuart Foundation's Child Welfare Program provides a compelling example of what can be accomplished by a foundation that has clear goals, coherent, well-implemented strategies, and relevant performance indicators. This case study describes how Stuart implements its strategy to achieve its goal to improve life outcomes for foster youth.

At age 24, Lyssa Trujillo knows all too well what it is like to live amid uncertainty. She was 18 years old when she aged out of the foster care system and found herself living on her own.

During the first five months, she moved three times. Struggling to pay bills, at one point she balanced two part-time jobs with college classes. "That was really, really stressful," she says. "From 18 to 21, life was really tough."

But all of that changed when she established a lifelong connection with an aunt and uncle.

These days, Trujillo has confidence that she will have a roof over her head and people she can turn to for the kind of guidance most young adults need. "I feel so light. I love my life," she says. "I am able to focus on future dreams. Before, I was living from semester to semester, unable to plan ahead. Now I'm in this safe place where I can try to figure out where I want to go and who I want to be in life."

A decade ago, establishing permanent connections for older foster youth like Trujillo was not thought to be possible. The work of many, and the leadership of the Stuart Foundation, has helped to change that.

Of the 70,000 children in California's foster care system, more than 5,000 age out each year. These youth are not leaving foster care to rejoin their birth family or because they have been adopted or found a legal guardian: They are released from the system simply because they have reached their eighteenth birthday. The very people who most need support are expected to transition into adulthood far earlier and more abruptly than most young adults with families – who, research shows, often receive financial assistance from their parents (not to mention the emotional support that most young people can count on) well into their twenties.[1]

Many foster youth exiting the system have, quite literally, nowhere to go and no one to whom they can turn. As a result, they often face a bleak future filled with financial and emotional struggles. Research on these young adults shows that between one and four years after exiting foster care:

• Approximately one-fourth had lived on the streets or in shelters at some point.

• Approximately half were not employed.

• Nearly half had problems getting medical care most or all of the time.

[1]Schoeni, Robert, and Karen Ross. "Material Assistance Received from Families during the Transition to Adulthood." *On the Frontier of Adulthood: Theory, Research, and Public Policy,* eds. Richard Settersten, Jr., Frank Furstenberg, Jr., and Rubén Rumbaut. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004.

The Stuart Foundation's Child Welfare Program has an overarching goal for all foster youth to be self-sustaining, responsible, and contributing members of their communities and society. Although this case study spotlights its work with youth aging out of foster care, the Program also provides an integrated set of supports that begin from the time a child is removed from his or her home and continues into young adulthood.

By investing significant financial and staff resources in a broad range of initiatives, the Foundation aims to accelerate reform of the child welfare systems in California and Washington. In addition to the two highlighted in this case study, the Child Welfare Program's current initiatives include the following:

Safe Starts. Ensures that infants and toddlers in foster care receive the supports they need to develop healthy brains and to create secure attachments to caring adults.

California Connected by 25. Creates a comprehensive array of services and supports to improve outcomes for youth aging out of foster care.

Co-Investment Partnership. Ensures a coordinated approach to the investments needed to substantially improve the child welfare outcomes of safety, permanency, and well-being in California.

Family to Family. Improves outcomes for children, families, and communities impacted by the child welfare system through a comprehensive set of reform strategies.

Ready to Succeed. Improves the educational outcomes and opportunities for foster children in California from preschool through high school.

"These initiatives provide a whole range of supports, from mental health to education to fostering community connections," says Stuart President Christy Pichel. "The success of each one depends on the work of the others."

For more details about Stuart's work, visit www.stuartfoundation.org.

• Few had entered college and more than a third had not completed high school.

• Close to one-third were receiving some form of public assistance.

• More than 40 percent had been pregnant or fathered a child.

• Approximately one-fourth had spent some time in jail.

With about $300 million in assets and grantmaking of about $15 million per year in two program areas, Stuart has been a leader in the effort to change those outcomes.

Defining Clear Goals

The goal of the Stuart Foundation's Child Welfare Program is to expand opportunities and improve life outcomes for children and youth in the foster care system.

When the Foundation began its work in child welfare, relatively few foundations focused on foster youth – either in California or nationally. The philanthropic support for foster youth tended to focus on their time in the system and on programs to prepare them to be on their own at age 18 (as required by law). Despite all of these obviously crucial efforts, evidence showed that the brutal statistics about life outcomes for former foster youth had not improved.

When California began redesigning its child welfare policies in the late 1990s, the director of Stuart's Child Welfare Program at that time was a member of the re-design team, devoting two days each month over the course of two years.

"Out of that work came the Foundation's focus on giving foster children what we want for our own children: permanency, safety, strong connections with adults, and a good education," says Stuart President Christy Pichel.

Implementing Coherent Strategies

In its work to improve outcomes for foster youth, the Program employs strategies that include creating permanent lifelong connections and educational opportunities for this population. "The Foundation's Child Welfare Program aims to help every child in foster care make a lifelong connection to a caring, committed adult," says Pichel. "And because the Foundation also recognizes that educational opportunities are critical if foster youth are to successfully transition to adulthood, it also supports programs that give these youth the assistance that most young people need to graduate college."

Both strategies were shaped and informed by research that included review of data on existing outcomes and

"THE FOUNDATION'S CHILD WELFARE PROGRAM AIMS TO HELP EVERY CHILD IN FOSTER CARE MAKE A LIFELONG CONNECTION TO A CARING, COMMITTED ADULT."

input from grantees and others closer to ground level in the effort to help foster youth – including former foster youth themselves, with whom the Foundation regularly consults.

The strategies are shaped by Foundation staff's belief in the logic that permanency and education will lead to better life outcomes for foster youth. The linchpins of these strategies are the Foundation's support of the California Permanency for Youth Project (CPYP), for which the Foundation provided initial, multiyear funding, and its support of College Pathways.

- CPYP aims to ensure every foster child has a lifelong permanent connection to a loving, caring adult. These connections are often with distant or previously estranged relatives, social workers, or other responsible adults to whom the young person feels close. While these connections may result in legal adoption or guardianship, that outcome isn't a prerequisite. The program strives to find its participants at least one adult who can provide unconditional commitment.

- College Pathways supports former foster youth on college campuses, helping them navigate the college environment in ways that a parent or guardian would, and connects these students with services that meet their special needs.

The Child Welfare Program's CPYP and College Pathways initiatives exemplify how Stuart approaches its strategies.

- Both were launched as small pilot projects and were expanded after achieving some success.

- While expanding these initiatives, the Foundation assessed what was – and was not – working and then refined efforts to increase its effectiveness.

- Expanding these initiatives also involved creating systemwide changes to embed the work into common practice and make it sustainable.

- The Foundation deliberately involved the child welfare system's users and supporters in conversations about the work.

Stuart also invests in data that help the field as a whole and inform policymakers. Drawing on those data, it provides technical assistance, training, and support for peer-learning opportunities.

Stuart's leaders believe that its approach will result in long-lasting, sustainable change that raises the bar from ensuring survival to helping children and families flourish and thrive. "We are not working on things in an incremental way," says Teri Kook, director of Stuart's Child Welfare Program, "but are engaging in transformative work so that we are making a real difference in the lives of both children and their families."

Focusing on Permanent Connections for Older Foster Youth

Getting Started

As the Child Welfare Director for San Francisco County during the mid-1990s, Pat Reynolds-Harris would ask youth aging out of foster care about their needs and whether the agency was doing a good job of meeting them. "I heard them say how much they missed certain relationships and that they felt alone," she recalls. "For example, they would be very upset if their social worker was changed and they weren't notified."

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When Reynolds-Harris returned to Stuart in 1998, (she was also Stuart's Child Welfare Program Officer from 1989–1993), she made the connection between what she had been hearing from foster youth and the idea of creating permanent connections. "It just kept needling me that they don't have parents, don't have support," she says. "That's a big deal, and we had just assumed that permanency can't work after children get older."

At that time, the conventional wisdom was that once children reach the age of 11 they would remain in foster care until their eighteenth birthday. "Sadly, the longer a child lingers in foster care, the less likely the child is to be adopted or to find a permanent family," one internal Stuart Foundation document reports. "Until recent reform efforts began changing these patterns, previous research found that after a foster child reached the age of eight, the likelihood for adoption was practically zero."

Given a funding ratio that allowed one social worker for every 54 children in long-term foster care, it is not surprising that little time was spent on making lifelong connections. Instead, social workers were devoting most of their limited time to resolving immediate crises.

In 2000, Reynolds-Harris set out to test the conventional wisdom. First, the Child Welfare Program funded research by outside consultants to learn what others had been able to accomplish when seeking permanency for teenagers. "We did find people around the country, not a lot, but a few that were doing some innovative and successful work, and it was very, very inspiring," Reynolds-Harris says.

Changing the Mind-Set

The next step was to bring the people having success with this work together with child welfare colleagues in California and Washington. There were some skeptics. "Some people couldn't understand why I was having this meeting on youth permanency," says Reynolds-Harris. "But lots of them did get an 'aha' there that not only do teenagers need

a permanent connection to someone who will support them, but that it can be accomplished." Pichel concurs, "That meeting helped change people's frame of mind about what could be done."

Teri Kook, chief of child welfare for Stanislaus County at the time, was also at that meeting. "I was one of those people," she admits. "I was sitting in that audience thinking, 'They probably don't have anything new to teach me.' But hearing young people talk about being able to find families at 17, 20, and 24, and what a difference that made, created a level of dissonance that forces people to embrace new services and practices."

Kook left the meeting with practical information about how to implement a new approach. "I was sitting at the table with somebody who was using a strand of mental health dollars to fund some permanency work," she recalls. "And I was able to go back and talk to my mental health chief, and we were able to launch something a few months later."

The Child Welfare Program has since made the sharing of best practices a regular part of its work. "It has become an intentional component that we put in every initiative," says Kook, who joined Stuart as a program officer in 2003. "We try to create or lift up that level of dissonance and also have tools at hand to give people something to do when they return to work on Monday. If you are trying to develop widespread use of new practices without significant public investment at an early stage, that peer-to-peer learning is crucial."

Establishing the California Permanency for Youth Project

The Foundation eventually made a multi-year, operating support grant to establish the California Permanency for Youth Project. Reynolds-Harris left Stuart to become CPYP's founding director. Launched in four counties, the program was expanded to 20 counties in 2005 after the evidence showed that the approach was successfully increasing the number of permanent connections for older foster youth.

That first convening also resulted in the formation of a task force of judges, lawyers, youth advocates, and social workers and administrators from private and public agencies. The task force fostered partnerships between public and private agencies and pushed for legislation to support this approach. This work resulted in legislation that requires social workers to ask about lifelong connections and reference those conversations in court reports.

"And so it became the law," says Kook. "It became something that judges reviewed, part of the culture, and a work requirement for social workers in the state."

Stuart requires CPYP to assess its work rigorously. For example, CPYP reports how often its trainers meet with people in county permanency-placement units to review whether they are using Internet search technology to help children connect with family members – and to ensure that the unit has a policy that allows a social worker to become an adoptive parent if the child says that is the person with whom he or she is closest.

"They do a self-assessment at the beginning, midway through, and then at the end of the grant to look at how they have helped move systemic barriers that could be getting in the way of the worker and child-level outcomes," says Kook.

CPYP's strategic plan lists three measures of success that align with Stuart's approach:

1. Youth permanency: The percentage of CPYP youth served in the target counties who are achieving permanent connections.

2. Child welfare agency culture change: Evidence of the extent to which the philosophy, mind-set, participation, and practice have changed in the project counties as a result of involvement with the project.

3. Public awareness: Overall awareness and commitment to permanency for older youth as evidenced by legislative initiatives, local funding, hits on the CPYP Web site, information requests, and media stories.

"In many of our initiatives, and with CPYP, we review child-level outcomes, but also organizational-level change and then system-level change," says Kook.

"SCHOLARSHIPS ARE OFTEN WHAT PEOPLE THINK OF FIRST WHEN THEY THINK ABOUT SUPPORTING CHILDREN GOING OFF TO COLLEGE. IN FACT, FOSTER YOUTH NEED A LOT MORE THAN THAT TO BE SUCCESSFUL. THERE'S A WHOLE SET OF NEEDS THAT A PARENT WOULD NORMALLY PROVIDE, SUCH AS A PLACE TO GO DURING HOLIDAYS AND SOMEONE TO CALL WITH PROBLEMS. FOSTER YOUTH OFTEN HAVE NONE OF THOSE SUPPORTS."

Creating Educational Opportunities for Foster Youth

Without a responsible adult to help them with applications, financial aid, and other processes, former foster youth find that applying, entering, and staying in college presents an enormous challenge. "Parents teach their kids how to navigate through these kinds of systems," says Pichel. "Often, navigating through the system has been a negative experience for foster youth."
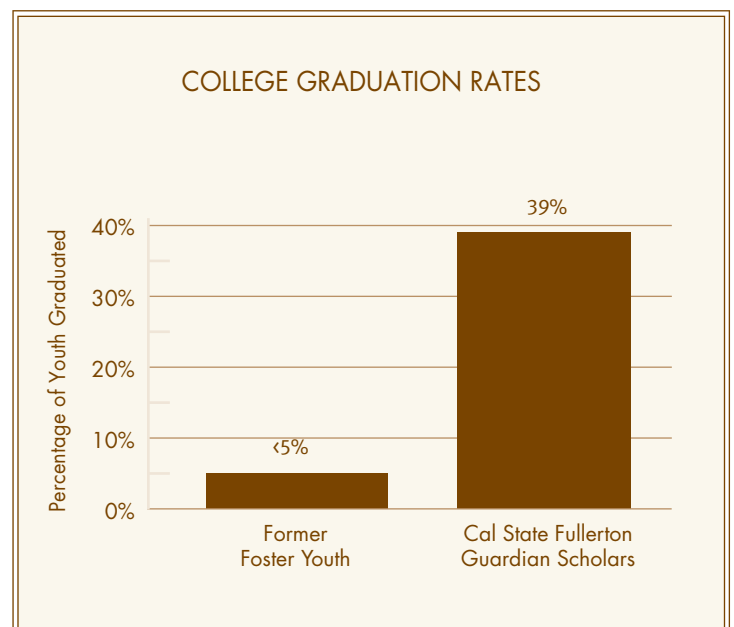
College Pathways provides former foster youth with year-round housing, financial aid, extra advising, and assistance with transitions to employment. The program also builds an on-campus community for former foster youth. "Scholarships are often what people think of first when they think about supporting children going off to

college," Pichel says. "In fact, foster youth need a lot more than that to be successful. There's a whole set of needs that a parent would normally provide, such as a place to go during holidays and someone to call with problems. Foster youth often have none of those supports."

At California State, Fullerton, where the program has been in place the longest, the graduation rate for these students is 39 percent compared to fewer than 5 percent for foster youth nationally.[2]

As it did with CPYP, Stuart tested the idea for College Pathways in a pilot program, making a grant to the first site in 1999. Since then, the Foundation has helped expand it to 31 California campuses, where it also goes by names like Guardian or Renaissance Scholars.

Sean Guthrie, who entered the foster care system at age six, is a recent graduate of California State, Fullerton. He went to a presentation about Guardian Scholars while in high school. At the time, he says, "I was not motivated to better myself at all. I was going to graduate high school and just work full-time. I didn't think that I needed

COLLEGE GRADUATION RATES

	Former Foster Youth	Cal State Fullerton Guardian Scholars
Percentage of Youth Graduated	<5%	39%

an education. I didn't care about my future because I wasn't taught to care about myself because of the foster care system." A conversation with the Director of Guardian Scholars following the presentation convinced him to at least apply.

Once he entered college, everything changed. "Through the Guardian Scholars, I was able to realize that there's so much more potential than just working. By the time I graduated, I wasn't just a person who wanted a job," he says. "I wanted more education. I wanted to empower others. I wanted to advocate. I wanted to be so much more than that one-note person."

Guthrie now plans to earn a master's in social work and become a college professor. In the meantime, he works for the Community Services Program, a nonprofit agency serving Orange County youth who are involved – or are at risk of involvement – with the juvenile justice system.

Partnering with California State University

More recently, Stuart has gone beyond funding programs on individual campuses to take a more holistic approach that it hopes will create systemic and sustainable change.

In June 2008, it launched the California College Pathways Project, a partnership between the John Burton Foundation (a Stuart Grantee) and the California

State University's (CSU) Office of the Chancellor. The Project pulls all the individual College Pathways programs under one umbrella.

The Project's goal is "to increase the number of foster youth in California who enter higher education and achieve an academic outcome by expanding access to campus support programs, such as the Guardian Scholars Program, the Renaissance Scholars Program, and other successful approaches to supporting former foster youth on campus."

The Project pursues its goal through information-sharing, policy analysis and development, coalition building, and technical assistance.

According to Amy Lemley of the John Burton Foundation, who co-leads the Project, "Stuart really understands that if it wants its work in child welfare to make a lasting impact, it has to partner with public institutions that are going to be doing this work long after it is done. They have to get that commitment: they have to move that system to embrace this issue. And then, they need to get that institution to commit its own resources, and that is incredibly challenging in our financial climate."

For example, the Project is now working to create for-credit classes that provide needed support for foster youth. "In the budget-cut environment, the first thing to be cut is student services," says Lemley. "Instruction is much further down the list."

By working at the administrative level, the Project hopes to benefit many more students. "We are in the place," Lemley says, "where every foster youth who arrives on a public campus in California is going to be positioned to access special resources and benefits that are available to them because the information has been integrated into the campus support system."

Creating Irresistible Information

Stuart's Child Welfare Program also invests in the development of good data. In 1995, researchers at the University of California at Berkeley identified the lack of solid data about the movement of children in the system over time and their use of multiple services as a central barrier to improving the California child welfare system. Their proposed solution, funded by Stuart, was to develop a children's data archive that would link foster care, child abuse, juvenile justice, welfare, and vital statistics data.

Stuart aligned the indicators tracked through the database with federal and state mandates. "That database became so irresistible that the state built it into its system and now pays three-quarters of the cost," says Kook. All 58 California counties now use this data source, and they are held accountable to the indicators it tracks.

Stuart uses it to create accountability for its grantees. "If a county or a nonprofit wants to participate in a grant for a program, we ask them to do a self-assessment," says Pichel. "We ask them to go to the database and tell us what indicators they plan to move."

These data have been the cornerstone of Stuart's efforts to improve outcomes for youth aging out of foster care. "We couldn't have the success that we are having without a set of indicators that everyone agrees are the right ones

for young people," says Pichel. "Dozens of indicators, like whether they are returning to their homes after foster care and adoption rates, can show whether things are getting better or worse for children."

While most states receive federal money to track child welfare data, Stuart's support has enabled researchers at Berkeley to create a public Web site, which tracks specific information for each county, is updated quarterly, and can answer users' specific queries.

"What we've done is make the data available and accessible to everyone," says Barbara Needell, research specialist at the Center for Social Services Research at Berkeley. "Before, people would have to call the state or have their county analysts pull down complicated tables one at a time. Now, you actually build the query on the fly when you go in there, and it slices and dices the data however you want." The information can then be downloaded into an Excel spreadsheet.

Enabling Information Sharing

The Web site's transparency also fosters best-practice sharing and collaboration between counties. "It's all up there about who is doing what and what the results are," says Needell. "If one county sees that another county with a similar population is doing much better in an area where they are struggling, they can talk to people in that county and find out what they are doing differently."

For example, new federal rules about placing children with family caregivers made immediate placement with relatives more difficult because of required record checks. Some counties figured out ways to comply with these rules in an accelerated way – and the faster placements showed up in the data. The counties that were struggling with the new rules reached out to the counties that had found solutions. "That's a real example of the way people can learn from each other about how to solve a new problem with the sys-

tem brought on by a change in regulations," says Needell.

Bob Friend, the current director of CPYP, downloads data from the Web site regularly for presentations he gives to county staff. The information helps him craft a compelling story. "Part of what you're trying to do in the education process is help people identify that they have a problem," he says. "One of the ways we do that is to show them the data."

EVALUATION OF THE CALIFORNIA PERMANENCY FOR YOUTH PROJECT

Percentage of Youth In Program

Youth with a permanent connection to a caring adult 76%

Youth without a lifelong connection 24%
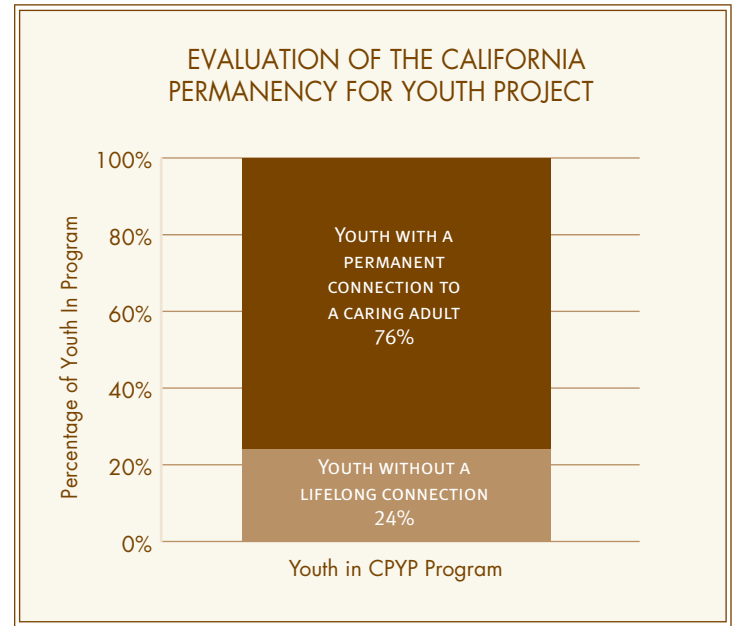
Youth in CPYP Program

Using Relevant Performance Indicators

The Stuart Foundation tracks progress against its goals by measuring the outcomes achieved by the programs it funds and by checking in with constituents. "We periodically do evaluations so we can see changes happening in the counties when they've implemented some of the programs we've funded," says Pichel.

One evaluation shows that 76 percent of youth participating in CPYP develop a lifelong connection to a caring adult as a result of the program.

"One of the biggest contributions that the youth permanency project made was really defining and being able to start collecting data on 'lifelong connections,'" says Kook. "And that came from carefully listening to the young people, who said, 'We're getting pushed into legal permanence, whether it's a guardianship or an adoption, that we're not ready for. What's meaningful to us is somebody saying I will be there for the rest of your life.' And whether they go to court and do that or not is a lot less important than the relational permanency."

There currently is no way to track long-term outcomes for foster youth once they leave the system. "A lot of this is trying to figure out what are the interim benchmarks that show someone is on a different path than one that will take them to jail," says Kook. "If they are homeless on their eighteenth birthday, and they don't have somebody who has made a lifelong commitment to them, then the likelihood of jail is higher. So we have created some proxies."

The Child Welfare Program also uses data from its grantees to evaluate progress. "There are very clear, measurable, numerical, accountable goals that often will be different site by site," says Kook. Grantee Sonja Lenz-Rashid, co-founder of the Guardian Scholars Program at San Francisco State University, cites the following list of indicators she uses when reporting to the Foundation. "We track retention, graduation, GPA, completion of remedial process or remediation, units completed, housing, stable housing, permanent stable housing, and completion of an English exam that students take in their junior year."

The Foundation also ensures it hears from its grantees, using CEP's Grantee Perception Report® (GPR) on a regular basis. On its most recent GPR, the Child Welfare program was rated above the 75th percentile for its impact on grantees' fields.

Revisiting the Logic

By constantly mining the data it collects from outside evaluations and grantees, Stuart can revisit its logic and hone its approach. For example, while the numbers were quite positive for College Pathways programs on four-year campuses, they were less so for community colleges. "The data that we're seeing out of the community colleges and from our ongoing discussions with folks in the field have made it clear that the model isn't as effective at the community college-level for a couple of reasons," says Kook.

Challenges for community colleges included the lack of housing and lower levels of preparation on the part of students. "So, in 2009, we've done two major grants – one at a specific site, the other that will work across 12 community colleges – to improve what's being offered and to figure out what is the new model or additional model that can be adapted for this situation," Kook says.

The majority of foster youth attend community colleges, so it is important to get this right, she says. Even so, she believes that developing the model on four-year campuses first was a good strategy. "It created enthusiasm because we were able to have sustained success at the four-year colleges where there were good supports," says Kook. "Even if that's not where the greatest need is, it is where we could build the most momentum and then start peeling the onion backward."

According to Pichel, this methodical approach to solving complicated problems has worked well. "We've seen in our Child Welfare Program that having a really clear strategy, using clear data that allow us to adjust our strategy as we go along, and staying focused on that strategy has helped us be successful."

Creating a National Movement

Indeed, Stuart's success has not been limited to its geographic focus on California and Washington. The Child Welfare Program's efforts to create permanent connections for foster youth have taken hold nationally. According to Pichel, the small initial gathering that launched CPYP grew a year later to include 200 people from across the country, who continued to share their ideas about creating lifelong connections for older children.

A few years ago, CPYP's leaders sought to sustain its approach to youth permanency on a national level. The Casey Foundations stepped up and broadened this work and they host a regular conference that attracts practitioners nationwide. "The 2007 conference had participants from every state in the nation," says Kook.

"The way this movement has grown demonstrates what can happen when enough people change their mind," says Pichel.

Judith A. Ross is senior research writer for CEP.

About the Center for Effective Philanthropy

The Center for Effective Philanthropy (CEP) is a nonprofit organization focused on the development of comparative data to enable higher-performing funders. CEP's mission is to provide data and create insight so philanthropic funders can better define, assess, and improve their effectiveness and impact.

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» *Improving the Grantee Experience at the David and Lucile Packard Foundation* (January 2008) describes how leaders at Packard identified and translated the elements of quality interactions and clear communications with grantees into specific criteria. The case study explores how they developed and implemented these criteria as a way to strengthen the Foundation's relationships with its grantees.

» *Aiming for Excellence at The Wallace Foundation* (June 2008) describes how leaders at Wallace have responded to results of the Grantee Perception Report® (GPR), which the Foundation has repeated multiple times. The case study highlights a foundation working to improve its performance in response to comparative assessment data, illustrating the need for continuous feedback loops to inform decision making.

» *Becoming Strategic: the Evolution of the Flinn Foundation* (March 2009) illustrates the benefits of taking a strategic approach to maximize a foundation's impact. It describes how Flinn's leaders narrowed the Foundation's focus and assessed its performance.

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