

FOSTER CARE AND DISCONNECTED YOUTH

A Way Forward
for New York

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The Children's Aid Society

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FOSTER CARE AND DISCONNECTED YOUTH: A Way Forward for New York

By Diane Mastin, Sania Metzger and Jane Golden

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The Children's Aid Society is an independent, not-for-profit organization established to serve the children of New York City. Our mission is to help children in poverty to succeed and thrive. We do this by providing comprehensive supports to children and their families in targeted high-needs New York City neighborhoods. Founded in 1853, it is one of the nation's largest and most innovative non-sectarian agencies, serving New York's neediest children. Services are provided in community schools, neighborhood centers, health clinics and camps. For additional information, visit www.childrensaidsociety.org.

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Executive Summary

On December 1, 2011, the Community Service Society of New York and The Children’s Aid Society convened over 200 local and national experts, policymakers, service providers, and advocates to discuss the issues faced by older youth in foster care and strategies to prevent and address their disconnection from anchor social institutions like school, work, and family. This report highlights and further develops the issues raised at the forum, recommends policy directions, and discusses successful program models that address the many challenges facing aging-out youth who become disconnected.

For many young people, the transition from teen to independent adult is a gradual process that extends into their mid- to late 20s, with financial and emotional support from family. Most youth make it, but a significant number don’t—and so they become disconnected. Youth who age-out of foster care have the hardest time getting on their feet, and without family to rely on, the odds of success are against them.¹ But

investments in the futures of these young people can result in significant benefits to them and to society.

Evidence suggests that after aging out of foster care, these young adults have particularly poor chances of becoming successful adults. Between the ages of 16 and 24, many have been homeless more than once. Many have experienced trauma and show signs of depression, behavior problems, and/or emotional difficulties. They are more likely than their peers to get pregnant or become parents. Those who are LGBTQ are often targets of discrimination. All are less likely to reach educational milestones, less likely to be employed, and more likely to rely on public benefit programs.

Much can be done to prevent the hardships that aging out of foster care often brings, so that all are “connected by 25”—meaning they have achieved their educational objectives, established connections to employment, and have strong family relationships and stable housing, with the goal that every young person in foster care will develop and reach his or her full potential.² These youth can be helped with effective programs that take a comprehensive approach, using a strategic combination of services, job training, and employment, along with alternative education options and skills training.³ Such programs exist, but there are not enough of them, and they lack funding, even though they demonstrate success and represent significant savings over the long-term.

In this paper, we recommend the following policy reform initiatives to help these youth throughout their transition to adulthood:

Systems Reforms

Implement family assessment response (FAR) across New York State to reduce removals and placements into foster care. New York City and all counties in New York should fully embrace FAR and commit to offering a FAR response option for child abuse and neglect allegations as allowed by law.

Address children’s social-emotional health as a core element of child welfare practice by aligning New York’s programs and practices with the recommendations outlined by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Administration for Children and Families, which encourages states to focus on child well-being outcomes.

Develop a cross-systems collaboration to coordinate the out-of-school time, career exploration, educational, and employment opportunities for youth ages 14 to 25. The cross-systems effort of the Young Men’s Initiative shows promise in addressing the challenges faced by young black and Latino men. A similar initiative is needed for youth aging out of care to bring attention to the challenges they face and make system changes that will improve their life outcomes.

Core Services

Provide adequate educational supports for youth in foster care to ensure students are at or above grade level. In addition, the education system in New York must work collaboratively with the child welfare system on behalf of youth in foster care to effectively implement the educational stability requirements of the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoption Act (P.L. 110–351).

Provide career development and employment opportunities for youth in care ages 14 and older to identify and connect their academic strengths and interests to the world of work and to help them understand the educational levels needed to acquire the jobs they desire as adults. They need part-time and summer jobs to help them gain important experience and job skills and to explore areas of interest, as well as coaching and mentoring to support these efforts. Budget cuts have dramatically limited these opportunities.

Funding

Increase funding for and utilization of preventive and community-based services so that New York continues to reduce placements into more costly foster care. The programs mentioned

in this report are inadequately funded; they must be sustainably funded and brought to scale.

Fund Kinship Guardianship Assistance Programs (KinGAP) as a permanency option so that youth can exit foster care, continue living with their relative foster family, and receive needed financial assistance for living expenses. While the New York City fiscal year 2013 budget provided funding for KinGAP within the foster care block grant, KinGAP should be funded just like other permanency options, with a shared cost between the State and localities.

Provide full tuition aid to SUNY/CUNY for youth in foster care and those who have aged-out so that all of these youth who want a post-secondary education have the opportunity to obtain one. The state and local social service districts should ensure that youth in care are fully aware of the opportunities available to them and encourage youth to take advantage of vocational training as well as two- and four-year college opportunities. In addition, youth in foster care should be considered as part of the “dependent” category for the Tuition Assistance Program (TAP).

Support youth aging-out of foster care with financial assets so that they can start adult life with a financial cushion in the form of an asset account, with funds accumulated over the years from their own earnings plus matched funding. Further, youth who have received Social Security benefits should not have these funds confiscated by the state to reimburse the cost of being in care; these funds should be set aside and given to the youth when they leave foster care. To do otherwise puts them at an additional disadvantage above the one they face because they’ve been in the foster care system.

Outcomes for Former Foster Youth Compared with Youth in General ^{4, 5}

Outcome Measures	Former Foster Youth Age 26⁶	Adolescent Health Survey, Ages 25–26	Difficulties Experienced	Strategies to Prevent Disconnection or to Re-connect
Does not Have High School Diploma or GED	19.9%	6.1%	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Frequent moves leading to changes in school and absenteeism – Low literacy levels – Lack of education supports – Less connection to school – More likely to drop out of school 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Early identification of supports needed for grade-level performance – Implement education stability portions of Fostering Connections Act – Provide multiple pathways such as the Next Generation Center and The Academy
Completion of a: Two-year degree Four-year degree	4.4% 2.5%	9.8% 23.5%	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Lack of success in school – Limited knowledge of opportunities – Little financial support – No emotional support 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Provide full financial support to attend post-secondary school – Consider youth in foster care as dependent for TAP assistance
Currently Employed	48.3%	79.9%	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Lack of work experience and skills – Lack of education – Lack of soft skills needed to obtain a job 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Provide youth with summer and part-time employment opportunities such as the GAP program – Provision of job coaches and assistance during the job search
Average Yearly Earnings from Employment	\$13,989	\$32,312		
Experiencing Economic Hardships	45.1%	18.4%	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Limited income leading to difficulty paying bills – Inability to find affordable housing – Lack of financial literacy and money management skills 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Support youth aging-out with financial assets – Link aging-out youth in care with safe, secure affordable housing – Increase federal and state investments into affordable housing – Provide multiple options for attaining education and job skills, while earning an income
Currently Homeless	1.3% 31% reported being homeless or couch-surfing over the past two years	N/A		
Has Health Insurance	58.7% (of which 47.6% is Medicaid or medical assistance)	78% (of which 9.4% is Medicaid or medical assistance)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Lack of employment with benefits – Higher rates of chronic health conditions, developmental delays 	
Ever Been Pregnant Living with at Least One Child (mothers)	79.2% 71.7%	55% 40.7%	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Less likely to receive prenatal care – Less likely to continue education – Difficulty in finding housing – Lack of subsidized child care – Punishing child support policies 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Support fathers' engagement with their children – Connect fathers to employment opportunities – Put in place effective child support policies
PTSD	Over 60% exposed to at least one traumatic event	N/A	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Higher rates of mental health needs and substance abuse problems – Trauma symptoms overlap with mental health symptoms 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Assess and treat trauma symptoms before diagnosing a mental illness – Set capitation rate for youth in foster care to meet their needs
Ever Incarcerated	57%	13%	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Population of both foster care and justice systems are disproportionately black and Latino 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Build and rebuild families – Increase use of preventive and community-based services – Fund KinGAP like adoption

Introduction

On December 1, 2011, more than 200 national and local experts, policymakers, service providers, and advocates gathered to discuss the issues faced by older youth in foster care and strategies to prevent and address their disconnection. The event was hosted by The Children's Aid Society and the Community Service Society of New York, and was co-sponsored by the Citizens Committee for Children, the Child Welfare Organizing Project, the Committee for Hispanic Children and Families, and the Schuyler Center for Analysis and Advocacy. Support was provided by the Annie E. Casey Foundation.

The forum's general goals were to identify and highlight:

- ≠ Capacity-building opportunities to re-build or build family and personal connections
- ≠ Pathways to economic self-sufficiency and career advancement
- ≠ Critical safety net supports (e.g., housing, legal representation, etc.)

Featured speakers included Commissioner Gladys Carrión of the New York State Office of Children and Family Services (OCFS); New York City Deputy Mayor Linda Gibbs; New York City Administration for Children's Services (ACS) Commissioner Ronald Richter; New York City Department of Education Deputy Chancellor Dorita Gibson; and New York State Senator Velmanette Montgomery. Speakers providing a national perspective were Illinois Department of Human Services' Layla Suleiman Gonzalez; Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative's Sarah Greenblatt; Children's Defense Fund's MaryLee Allen; Annie E. Casey Foundation's Brenda Donald; Chapin Hall's Amy Dworsky; and the National Center for Housing and Child Welfare's Ruth White. Jarel Melendez and Teresa Marrero, both of whom were in the child welfare system, related some of their personal experiences to the attendees to help them better understand the impact of foster care on young people.

This paper expands on the issues raised in the forum and highlights successful programs that address the barriers facing aging-out youth who become disconnected. It also offers policy recommendations for improving outcomes.

Overview of Disconnection

The Transition to Adulthood

The transition from teen to independent adult is a gradual process that often extends into the mid- to late 20s. Eighteen is no longer considered adulthood and most young people don't finish their education, obtain employment, and live on their own until they are at least 21. Fifty years ago, 18-year-olds could get a job and settle down.⁷ But that is no longer the case. Today, most continue to receive much needed financial and emotional support from their families well into their 20s.

All youth need connections to family, education, community, and the workplace in order to complete the process of emerging adulthood.^{8,9} Most youth make it, but a signifi-

cant number don't and become disconnected. Foster youth, who age-out of care without family to rely on, face particular challenges.¹⁰

Disconnected youth are 16- to 24-year-olds who are out of school and unemployed. Nationally, an estimated 13 to 30 percent of those ages 16 to 24, or 5 to 10 million young people, are at high risk, disconnected, or vulnerable. Long-term disconnection is associated with living in poverty and receipt of welfare, low-level parent education, living in a single or no parent household, having a child before age 18, dropping out of high school, or any combination of these factors. This is costly to society: studies estimate that because they are so much less likely to have a job and thus pay no taxes, each disconnected youth represents an average burden to the taxpayer of \$13,900 per year. In addition, they require more services and public benefits, and those additional social costs amount to \$37,450 per year (in 2011 dollars).¹¹ These patterns continue after they reach age 25. Starting at 16, the taxpayer burden for each disconnected youth amounts to \$258,240 and the social costs total \$755,900.¹²

The aggregate costs to taxpayers and society are enormous. In 2011, it was estimated that disconnected youth cost \$93 billion in lost tax revenue and social services costs. The lifetime cost of the 6.7 million individuals defined as disconnected youth in 2011 is projected to reach \$1.6 trillion in taxpayer burden and \$4.7 trillion in social costs.¹³

Like all youth, most of the disconnected start out with ambitious goals and the confidence that they will achieve them. They want to reconnect with school, get a job, and contribute to their communities, but they lack the skills, education, and work experience to get them there.¹⁴ The high school graduation rate of disconnected youth nationally is 18 percent lower than the rest of the population, and by age 28, only 1 percent will have earned a two-year or four-year college degree, which severely limits their prospects.¹⁵ Few have jobs or work experience, and those who do earn far less than their peers.¹⁶

The Intense Challenges

Youth who age-out of the foster care system and become disconnected have special challenges. Whereas the journey from adolescence to living on one’s own for most young people is gradual, for those leaving foster care the transition can be abrupt; they are cut loose overnight without resources and without having acquired the necessary skills to live on their own. It is often a sink or swim proposition. Sadly, most sink.

The support they received in foster care ends before they are ready to become independent adults and succeed on their own. As a result, youth who age-out of foster care are more likely to be homeless, unemployed, have an unplanned pregnancy, get into trouble with the law, and use drugs or abuse alcohol. They lack access even to basic health care services. They are also less likely to have a high school diploma, earn enough to support themselves, or participate in post-secondary training.¹⁷

Investments in the future of these young people can mean significant cost reductions to society. With sufficient and appropriate support and intervention, needs can be met and a return on investment realized.¹⁸ In New York, reforms in both child welfare and juvenile justice have prompted shifts in practice that have resulted in fewer residential placements and greater emphasis on community and home-based services, as well as family strengthening and engagement. But more is needed to support these older youth so they can succeed in life.

New York’s Disconnected Youth

Sixteen percent, or 316,000, of New York State’s 18- to 24-year-olds are not attending school, not working, and have no degree beyond high school.¹⁹ Eight percent, or 94,000, of 16- to 19-year-olds are not in high school and not working; of those, 34 percent are non-Hispanic white, 29 percent are black, 32 percent are Hispanic or Latino, and 5 percent are Asian/Pacific Islander. Sixty-one percent are youth of color.²⁰ In New York City, an estimated 173,000

young people ages 17 to 24—one in five—are neither in school nor employed.²¹

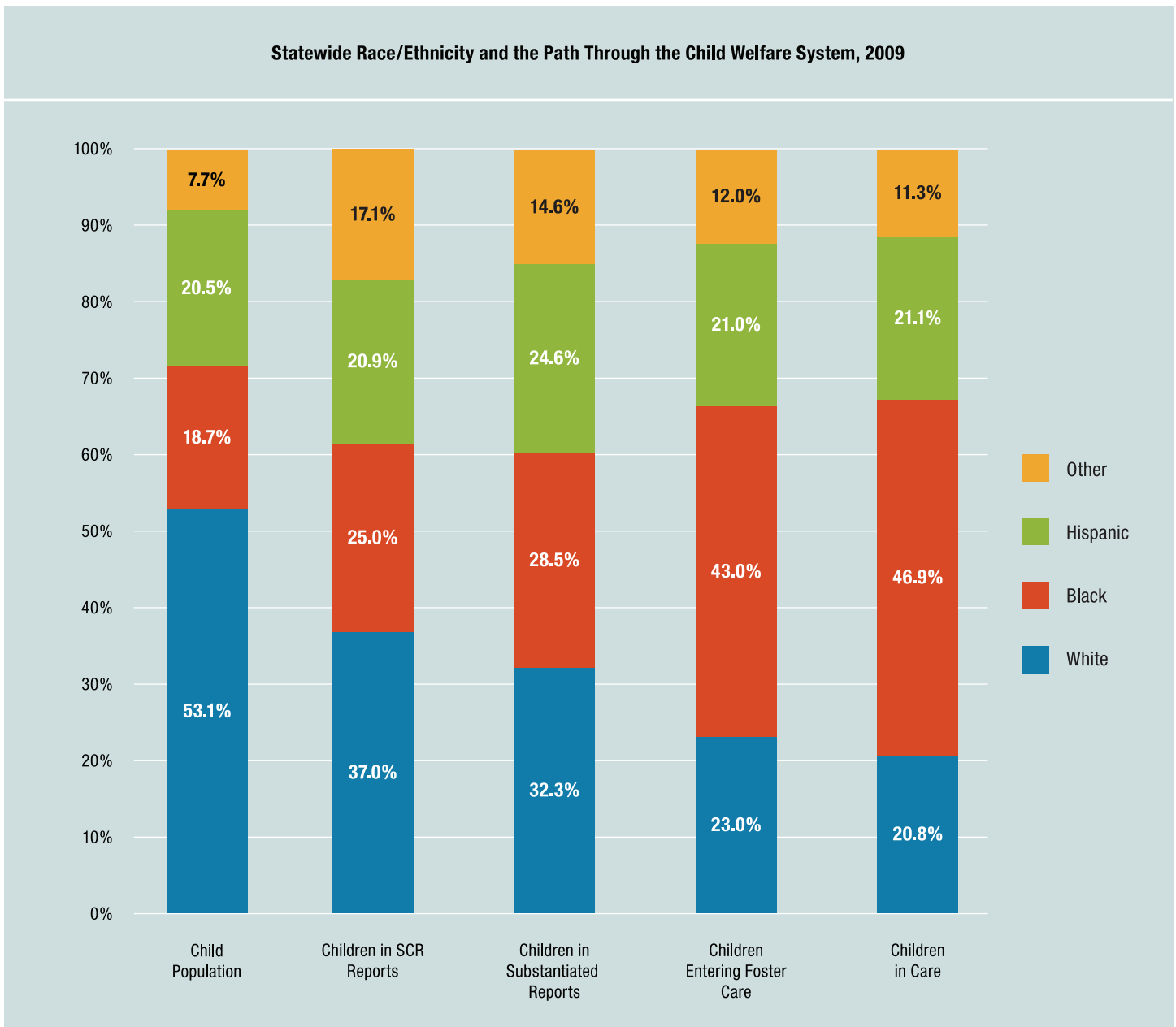
A Picture of Foster Care in New York in 2010		
	New York State	New York City
Number of SCR Reports Accepted	167,968	58,235
Number of Indicated Reports	51,290	23,417
Family Assessment Response	6,529	NA
Admissions into Foster Care	12,125	6,877
Discharges from Foster Care	13,649	7,839
In Care Population	23,182	14,790
In Care, by Age:		
< 2	2,438	1,570
2–5	4,988	3,415
6–9	3,638	2,552
10–13	3,304	2,106
14–17	6,083	3,260
18 +	2,731	1,887
In Care, by Race/Ethnicity:		
White	4,645	546
Black	11,306	8,119
Latino	4,829	4,058
Asian	155	109
Native American	84	16
Unknown	2,163	1,942

Source: NYS Office of Children and Family Services 2010 Monitoring and Analysis Profiles with Selected Trend Data: 2006–2010

Over the past decade, both the state and city have seen significant drops in the number of children in foster care. This is due to the shift in practice by child welfare agencies from foster care placement to the provision of preventive and community-based services that keep families together. Across New York, the number of youth in foster care continues to decline even in the face of increasing numbers of reports to the State Central Register (SCR). In February 2011, New York City had 14,732 children in care; by February 2012, this number had dropped to 13,957.²² But despite these encouraging numbers, the largest group of children

in care are older youth; they stay in care longer and are more likely to age-out. Unfortunately, too many of the older youth in care will not reunite with their custodial parent or be adopted: 14.9 percent of the 14- to 17-year-olds and 71.4 percent of those ages 18 and over.²³ Eleven percent of the youth who left foster care in 2009 aged-out of care.²⁴

The chart below depicts the racial characteristics of children who enter the child welfare system and progress through foster care. At each stage in the process, the proportion of black children increases, while the proportion of white children declines.



Source: New York State Citizen Review Panels for Child Protective Services 2010 Annual Report and Recommendations

Specific Challenges Faced by Youth in Foster Care and Those Who Age-Out of Foster Care

“Historically, the mission of the child welfare agency has been to protect children from harm, not to ameliorate conditions of poverty. However, poverty and child neglect are intricately intertwined. The child welfare system has focused its intervention not on addressing poverty issues, but rather on services such as parenting education and counseling services. The role of poverty in child neglect cases has been largely ignored.”²⁵

Jarel's Story: Policy Implications and Lessons Learned From a 360-Degree Journey

At 26, Jarel Melendez is an engaging, smart, and successful young man. A college graduate, he is employed full-time and attends graduate school. But his journey to adulthood was anything but smooth. His story inspired everyone at the forum.

Jarel was placed in foster care at the age of 5 when his parents became caught up in the crack epidemic of the early 90s and could not care for him. He and his brother were placed with their grandmother, who took good care of them. Jarel didn't know he was in foster care, and until he was 10, he didn't even know what foster care was. That year, he was taken from his grandmother's home and placed into a stranger's home, and no one told him why.

Jarel's removal was unnecessary. He was living with a loving grandmother who, with some support services in place, could have continued raising him. Jarel's personal and yet, in many ways, representative experience as a youth in foster care compels policy reforms that:

Increase foster parent and caseworker accountability for youth in foster care. Jarel's new foster mother hardly lived up to her responsibilities. She demanded that he leave the house every day at 8:30 a.m. and not return until 10 p.m. and gave him only \$2.25 per week to provide for himself. Numerous caseworkers came and went during the time he was in foster care, and not one of them knew him as a person. They did not act when they learned of the conditions he endured in his foster home and they were, at times, less than professional.

Promote involvement in order to identify and resolve challenges faced by youth in foster care. Jarel cannot recall one adult in the foster care system who ever bothered to ask him what he wanted. He learned two things when he was in care: that he was powerless in the face of the system and that nobody listens to children. He came to the understanding that he was on his own.

Facilitate youth-friendly access to counseling and mental health services. At one time, Jarel felt hopeless and was suicidal. Fearing he would never make it back home again, he felt betrayed by everyone and could no longer cope with what he called a "crazy nightmare." He also faced discrimination and bias when he disclosed his sexual orientation to others. Counseling and/or mental health services could have made his path easier.

Offer a range of support services to kin caregivers raising children and youth. Jarel's grandmother wanted to keep caring for Jarel. With some added preventive services, she probably would have. None were provided.

After Jarel spent seven years in a foster home and had 10 different caseworkers who didn't know him, his grandmother formally adopted him a month before his eighteenth birthday. Jarel says he was lucky. He never got into serious trouble, and he was a resilient and strong advocate for his own interests. He knew education would be his path to a better life and so he worked hard, did well in school, and received a full scholarship to college. Others have not been so lucky.

For Jarel's full story, go to page 44 in the Appendix.

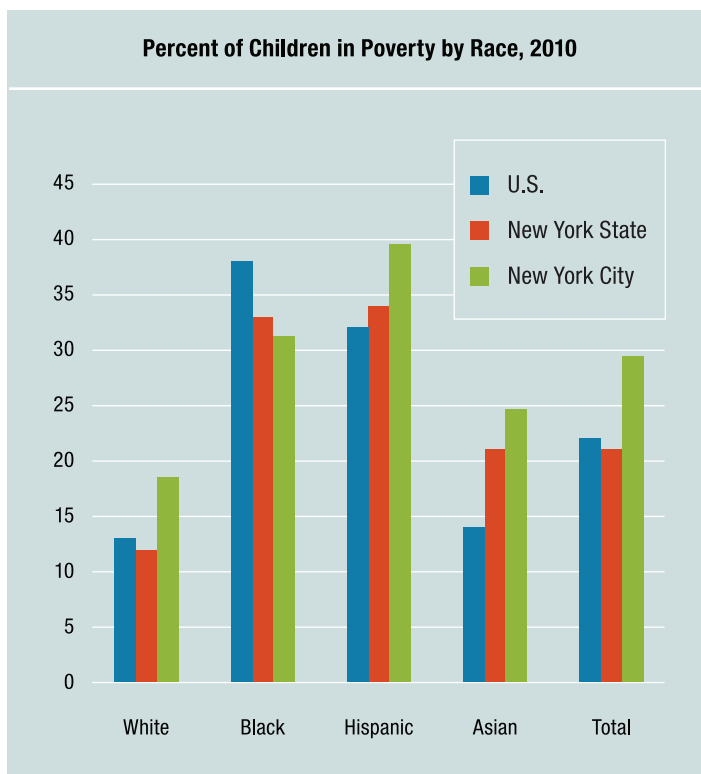
Poverty is the Common Denominator

More than one in five children lives in poverty in New York and one in 10 lives in extreme poverty.²⁶ The child poverty rate in New York's major cities is even higher: over 40 percent for Buffalo, Rochester, and Syracuse and over 30 percent for Albany, Poughkeepsie, and the borough of the Bronx.²⁷ The overall rate for New York City is 29.4 percent.²⁸

Poverty affects minorities disproportionately; one out of three black and Latino children and one out of five Asian children lives in poverty compared with almost one out of seven white children.²⁹ The number of homeless children in New York tripled from 2006 to 2010, from 45,195 to 142,084.³⁰ An estimated 17,000 children sleep in municipal shelters on any given night.³¹ As a result, 22.4 percent of New York State's children live with families who struggle to put food on their table on a day-to-day basis.³²

Disconnected youth are twice as likely to be poor when compared to the general population of youth the same age. The relationship between poverty and involvement with the child welfare system cannot be ignored. In both circumstances, families do not have the basic necessities of food, clothing, or shelter.³³

Rather than being investigated, poor families need help getting access to public benefit programs, job programs, and safe housing. Family Assessment Response is designed to address these poverty-related needs. FAR’s implementation began in 2012 in Queens, and its expansion should be encouraged throughout New York City.



Source: Kids Count Data Center and NYS Kids Well-Being Indicators Clearinghouse, NYS Council on Children and Families

Note: In 2010, the federal poverty threshold for a single parent and two children was \$18,310; for a married couple with two children the poverty threshold was \$22,050.

Black and Hispanic/Latino Youth More Likely to Become Disconnected

Because of the inequitable socio-economic legacies of slavery and Jim Crow, as well as present day institutional racism and generational poverty, among other factors, it is not surprising that black youth are more likely to become disconnected. Black children are over-represented in New York City’s foster care system, and nearly all of the admissions to New York State’s Office of Children and Family Services (OCFS) facilities are black and Latino youth. Regardless of any involvement in the child welfare system, New York City’s black and Latino male students are more likely to be in special education classes, significantly less likely to graduate from high school within four years and less likely to be college ready.³⁴ In addition, the unemployment rate for black youth and men ages 16–24 without a high school diploma is 52 percent.³⁵

Racial Group	% of Population 16–24	% of disconnected youth
White/other	67%	46%
Black	15%	32%
Hispanic	18%	22%

Source: NLSY97 data³⁶

Out-of-Home Placements Increase the Risk of Poor Outcomes

At this time, there is limited information about New York’s youth who age-out of care and their outcomes and, therefore, for this paper, relevant national data was incorporated. The federal government now requires states to follow youth who leave care and collect information on six benchmarks including self-sufficiency, homelessness, educational attainment, and health insurance. Each state was required to submit information to the National Youth in Transition Database beginning May 2011 and to continue doing so on an ongoing basis.³⁷ At the forum, Dr. Amy Dworsky, Senior

Researcher, Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago, discussed lessons learned from the Midwest study.³⁸

The older the person is when entering care, the more likely he or she is to age-out of care; nationally, 80 percent of those who age-out entered care at 10 or older and 50 percent entered at 15 or older.³⁹ Placements into care do not always result in the predictable, stable environment that children and youth need: 30 percent of youth in foster care had eight or more placements with foster families or group homes. Furthermore, 65 percent experienced seven or more school changes between elementary and high school. About half drop out of high school.⁴⁰ As a result, youth in foster care become disconnected from family and social networks.⁴¹

It is noteworthy that youth who have been in the child welfare system are also at higher risk for placement into juvenile justice facilities. They are arrested at a younger age, and arrested more frequently and for more offenses than other youth.^{42, 43} Young people who get placed in the juvenile justice system are more likely to be disconnected, and more likely to have substance abuse or mental health problems.⁴⁴ And youth who enter the adult criminal justice system have even poorer outcomes.⁴⁵

New York is one of two states that send 16-year-olds to the adult justice system regardless of the crime. There is some effort underway in New York aimed at treating 16- and 17-year-olds differently. Some tireless advocates, like the Honorable Judge Corriero (retired), are calling for increasing the jurisdictional age for juvenile justice to 18 and two bills were introduced to the legislature in 2012 but neither passed. Chief Judge Jonathan Lippman has indicated that he supports changing the way 16- and 17-year-olds are treated by the justice system, and has proposed the establishment of Youth Courts within the adult criminal justice system.⁴⁶ New York City's Close to Home initiative is also a strong step towards reform. This new initiative will return the city's youth who are in non-secure and limited security placements to New York City and its surrounding areas. This will encourage these youth to stay in touch with their

families and provide them with community-based and in-home services. The hope is that this will allow behavior and mental health needs to be more effectively addressed and thus reduce recidivism.

Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Questioning (LGBTQ) Youth Experience Additional Challenges

LGBTQ youth face additional challenges related to acceptance of their sexual orientation by others. These youth often are targets of discrimination, harassment, and violence by peers and others, and they face a lack of acceptance in group homes and foster care.⁴⁷ They are also likely to skip and drop out of school because of threats to their safety. Their risk of suicide is two to three times that of their heterosexual peers.⁴⁸ Many become homeless or cycle through foster homes, group homes, shelters, and the streets. One study estimated that almost four in 10 LGBTQ youth residing in group homes were forced to leave because of their sexual orientation or gender identity.⁴⁹

“[Professional caregivers] have to check their prejudices when they walk in the door. Whatever their LGBTQ or racial biases, caseworkers need to separate their personal opinions from their professional duties.”

—Jarel Melendez, Lawyers for Children

The importance of staff training and sensitivity regarding LGBTQ youth was reiterated in a recent U.S. Department of Health and Human Services memo to states encouraging the use of Title IV-E funds for training of staff to serve young people who identify as LGBTQ with sensitivity and to develop protocols to assure those in foster care are safe.⁵⁰ New York City's Administration for Children's Services issued guidelines in 2011 outlining its expectations for working with LGBTQ youth to achieve a safe and respectful environment with gender neutral practice.⁵¹ These practices should

be monitored for assurance that they are being followed by all agency staff. The best approach is to avoid placement into foster care through the use of prevention services to help family members accept their son or daughter when they disclose their sexual orientation or gender identity.⁵²

Youth Ages 16–24 Who Leave Foster Care Experience High Rates of Homelessness

Forum panelist Ruth White, Executive Director, National Center for Housing and Child Welfare, reported that youth who have aged-out of foster care struggle to find safe, secure, and affordable housing. Often they lack steady employment, stable credit, rental histories, bank accounts, and references needed to secure living arrangements.⁵³ Youth who age-out are more likely to report being homeless at least once after leaving foster care.⁵⁴ A major regional study of former foster youth found that 31 percent had been couch surfing or homeless; almost half had been homeless more than once; and nearly one-quarter had been homeless four or more times by the age of 26.⁵⁵

Nationally, about 50,000 youth per year are served by homeless youth programs, while an estimated total of 550,000 youth under the age of 25 are in need. Family interventions should be available to help youth remain in their homes and off the streets. More housing options are needed to support youth in their transition to adulthood. This requires investments by the federal, state, and local governments.⁵⁶ Two measures, Fostering Connections to Success and the Increasing Adoptions Act, have expanded opportunities to use Title IV-E funding for supportive housing.⁵⁷

There are some effective low-income and/or supportive housing programs in New York City, such as The David & Joyce Dinkins Gardens, Chelsea Foyer at the Christopher, Edwin Gould Academy Residence, and Shafer Hall Young Adult Initiative. Unfortunately, there are not enough to meet the need. Youth leaving foster care have priority for receiving rental assistance vouchers through HUD's Family Unification Program, but only one in four eligible families

receive the assistance.^{58, 59} A recent scan of many New York City neighborhoods—by Picture the Homeless, a nonprofit housing organization—provides evidence that an abundance of unoccupied housing stock and vacant lots, which could provide housing for many of the city's homeless, are deliberately left untouched for the purposes of real estate speculation.⁶⁰ Incentives to landlords are needed to increase the availability of affordable housing. Youth leaving foster care should also have access to any program related to housing utilizing foreclosed properties. In a June 2012 announcement, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, Annie E. Casey Foundation, and Edna McConnell Clark Foundation, along with the United States Health and Human Services Administration for Children and Families, made available \$35 million in funding over the next five years to replicate New York City's Keeping Families Together supportive housing program.⁶¹ New York State and City should pursue this new funding to expand housing availability to former foster youth.

Children and Youth Experience Trauma-Related Health and Mental Health Needs

Children and youth in foster care have higher rates of chronic health problems, developmental delays and disabilities, mental health needs, and substance abuse problems. Many have experienced traumatic events that lead to symptoms such as depression, behavior problems, hypersensitivity, and emotional difficulties.^{62, 63} Being removed from one's home is, in itself, a traumatic event, leading to the loss of and separation from family, friends, and neighbors. Twenty-five percent of youth who age-out of care experience Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)—double the rate for U.S. war veterans.⁶⁴

Symptoms of trauma and mental illness often overlap and can lead to the wrong treatment if not assessed correctly. Youth in foster care are 16 times more likely to be diagnosed with a mental illness and eight times more likely to take psychotropic medication than other children.⁶⁵ Practitioners must be able to differentiate what is, in fact, normal

behavior in response to traumatic events from the symptoms of mental illness.⁶⁶ Brain research demonstrates that trauma can slow brain development and affect emotional, social, and behavioral capabilities.⁶⁷ The research also indicates that the brain continues to develop and that adolescence provides another critical window of opportunity similar to the development that takes place in the early years.⁶⁸

At the forum, Dr. Gene Griffin, Assistant Professor, Northwestern University, recommended that children in the child welfare system receive a trauma screening or assessment and services that address the impact of trauma before any mental health assessment is conducted. No youth should be diagnosed with a mental illness without a provider first addressing any impact from trauma.⁶⁹ Service providers must be thoughtful about when a mental health assessment is done and what is gleaned from that assessment. This practice will line up with the United States Health and Human Services Administration for Children and Families recent guidelines and information in support of improving child well-being outcomes by addressing foster youth's trauma and mental health needs.⁷⁰ In the near future, New York State plans to move all youth in foster care into Medicaid managed care plans. Given the extraordinary health and mental health care needs of this vulnerable population, this plan should be thoughtful and ensure that the unique needs of these children and youth are adequately addressed.

Increased Pregnancy or Parenting

Nationally, the birth rate for teen girls in foster care is more than double the rate for those outside the foster care system.⁷¹ Among those who have left foster care, only one-third of the females and one-fifth of the males reported receiving family planning services or information about birth control.⁷²

Pregnant girls in foster care face significant challenges. For young mothers, self-sufficiency is linked to getting an education. Although New York City's Department of Education provides child care at several schools throughout the city, it is difficult for a young mother to find a placement in or

near her own school.⁷³ Mothers who leave foster care find obtaining subsidized housing difficult; about 40 percent left Inwood House, a transitional program, and went directly into homeless shelters.⁷⁴ Teens becoming parents is costly to society. The costs include Medicaid, public assistance, and lost revenue from taxes over the lifetime of children of teen mothers. The annual cost projection is \$8.6 billion or about \$4,080 per mother under age 17 and \$1,430 for mothers 18 or 19 years old.⁷⁵ Of course, not all young women will have such negative outcomes.

As described by Commissioner Richter at the December 1 policy forum, the Administration for Children's Services 2011–2013 Strategic Plan includes measures to reduce pregnancy rates among teens in foster care through targeted intervention. The plan also calls for these young parents to receive the tools they need to become effective parents.⁷⁶ This work should include sex education and pregnancy prevention efforts, access to birth control that young people will actually use, support so that young mothers can stay in school, access to positive parenting role models, and support for young fathers to help them succeed in life and take a constructive, active role in the lives of their children. Unrealistic and counterproductive child support enforcement policies are barriers to success that need to be changed.

Youth in Foster Care Are Less Likely to Reach Educational Milestones

The education of youth in foster care is more likely to be disrupted because they frequently move from school to school. Former foster youth are less likely to graduate high school, attend either a community or four-year college, or to receive a postsecondary degree. In addition, they are less likely to obtain a GED than their peers who dropped out of high school. This lack of educational achievement limits their futures.^{77, 78} Among disconnected foster youth, only 21 percent reached some level of higher education, compared to 62 percent of connected youth. These individuals report that the cost of pursuing an education and the need to support a family are the main obstacles to going back

to school. Though the great majority of them know they need additional education, finding a job is a more urgent priority.⁷⁹ While Chafee Education and Training Vouchers (ETV) are available to states to help finance foster youths' post-secondary education, the funds are inadequate to fully support it. It is important to promote education of youth in foster care, and the evidence shows that four critical elements are needed for success: 1) appropriate school placement/student advocacy; 2) tutoring; 3) counseling; 4) employment readiness. Youth in foster care who receive this support make remarkable academic gains, and they are far more likely to graduate.⁸⁰

New York City's Multiple Pathways to Education with a Learning to Work component provides a framework for reconnecting these youth by providing multiple educational pathways, although there are gaps in eligibility, such as minimum literacy levels. Multiple Pathways offers a "city-wide menu of options" for over-age and under-credited youth through a New York City Department of Education budget of \$11.4 million, strategic planning support from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, and analytic support from the Parthenon Group.⁸¹ It includes 45 Transfer High Schools, 23 Young Adult Borough Centers, and 100 full- and part-time GED programs. Transfer high schools and young adult borough centers have a six-year graduation rate of 55 percent and 50 percent respectively compared to a rate of 15 percent to 30 percent in traditional high schools. Most are affiliated with a community-based organization that offers a Learning to Work component—employment skills development, subsidized internships, college and career counseling, and job placement. Services such as academic tutoring, attendance outreach, youth development support, and individual and group counseling are also offered.⁸² Students are paid minimum wage for up to 15 hours per week. Learning to Work graduated over 8,500 students since 2005, and about one-quarter of the 2007–08 participants enrolled in postsecondary education in 2008–09, and one-third of these went on to a four-year college.⁸³

The Fostering Connections Act confirms the need for school stability by mandating that states accept a student's right to

remain in his or her school of origin, unless it is determined not to be in the student's best interest. Fostering Connections also requires child welfare organizations to address student transportation and other needs. The law, however, doesn't go far enough. The Franken amendment to the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, if passed at the federal level, would require each state's education system to collaborate with the state's child welfare system to improve educational stability and educational outcomes of youth in foster care. Sharing responsibilities, New York's child welfare and public education systems must:

- identify youth in care who have fallen behind their grade level and provide tutoring.
- create liaisons within the schools to monitor foster youths' progress.
- begin career development by age 14 to help youth determine their interests and the way those match career paths, and understand the level of education needed to achieve their goals.

New York State does little to support higher education for youth in foster care, so more needs to be done to lead them toward to postsecondary education. New York is in the minority when it comes to providing college scholarships to youth in foster care. Some states have gone so far as to offer free tuition to all youth in care with on-campus support, mentors, access to employment, and year-round on-campus housing to assure their success.^{84, 85}

Although there are individual arrangements between higher education institutions and child welfare districts to connect youth in foster care to New York's community and four-year colleges, there is no state policy that supports a postsecondary track for youth in foster care. Youth in care and former foster youth who aged-out of care should at least receive free tuition to attend SUNY/CUNY institutions upon meeting entrance requirements.

Difficulty Finding Full-Time Employment

Nationally, the unemployment rate was 18 percent for disconnected youth actively looking for work during the summer of 2011, and unemployment was 30 percent for blacks and 20 percent for Hispanics.⁸⁶ New York City's black young men are more than twice as likely to be disconnected from education and employment as white men of the same age. Latino young men are 1.5 times more likely.⁸⁷

The incomes of adults ages 25–28 who were chronically disconnected are low, just over \$15,000 per year. On average, disconnected youth will earn nearly \$400,000 less in lifetime income than the average worker.⁸⁸

Disconnected youth report that they lack either work experience or the education needed to get the job they want.⁸⁹ Getting youth into jobs while they are in foster care dramatically improves their chances for educational and economic success. Youth in foster care who have worked before their 18th birthdays are four times more likely to graduate from high school than foster youth who have not, and they are also more likely to find work after exiting foster care.⁹⁰ These youth need help and support to begin their working careers, including identifying job openings, completing applications, preparing for interviews, obtaining work permits, and overcoming transportation barriers.⁹¹ Youth in care can benefit from job shadowing, informational interviews, service learning projects, internships, and apprenticeships. Some programs also provide stipends to cover transportation and other basic needs; others offer incentives for attendance.⁹²

It should be noted that in March 2012, New York Governor Andrew Cuomo announced a new initiative to support connections to employment for at-risk youth.⁹³ The governor's plan calls for businesses across the state to join the New York Youth Works Program creating 2,900 full- and part-time job openings. Businesses that hire unemployed and at-risk youth will be eligible to receive wage subsidies. Those eligible include unemployed, low-income youth between the ages of 16 and 24 who are located in 12 cities, including

New York City. Participants will receive work readiness, occupational training, and digital literacy training for up to eight weeks. Programs like this have the potential to improve the employment prospects for disconnected youth.

Fear of Deportation and Other Challenges Immigrant Families Face

In a moment's notice, a child living in a loving, supportive, and caring family could be separated from his or her parents and placed into foster care. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) officials swoop in, arrest parents, and send them to a detention facility to await deportation hearings. When immigrant parents are detained, their children too often land in foster care. In some cases, parents detained by ICE have not been allowed to contact their children and don't know where they are.⁹⁴ Though both immigration and child welfare policies are based on the assumption that families should be united, the children—some of whom are U.S. citizens—face an uncertain future in foster care.⁹⁵

The arrest of a parent sets off a traumatic chain of events for the children. It is estimated that nationally 5,100 children are currently living in foster care because their parents have either been detained or deported. Over the next five years, it is estimated that 15,000 more children will be separated from their detained and/or deported parents.⁹⁶ Federal policy and newly enacted state laws will increase the number of these detentions and deportations.⁹⁷

When apprehended, parents often do not get the opportunity to make arrangements for their children's care. Once detained, immigrant parents face insurmountable barriers trying to reunite with their children—they cannot meet their reunification plan requirements, they cannot attend (family/dependency) court proceedings, and they do not have access to services.⁹⁸ If a parent's deportation is carried out, the family still has an opportunity to reunify if foreign consulates become involved in a case. Consulates can serve as a bridge between deported parents and child welfare departments, helping parents to locate their children, process pass-

ports, facilitate visits in border areas, and transport children to be reunified with parents who have been deported.⁹⁹

In New York, the Office of Children and Family Services and Administration for Children's Services need to work collaboratively with Family Court, ICE, and consulates to meet children's needs and coordinate children's reunifications with parents who have been detained or deported. As much as possible, child welfare workers throughout New York State should promote placement of children with immigrant family members. Families with immigration status issues should be referred to agencies for free legal assistance.

Undocumented youth (under the age of 18) in foster care can apply for Special Immigrant Juvenile Status (SIJS) to obtain legal immigration status, if they meet certain requirements. Administration for Children's Services policy requires caseworkers to inform the ACS attorney immediately if a youth might qualify for SIJS. This should be done in all cases with procedures in place to assure timeliness of applications for qualified youth. All involved, including judges, foster care agencies, caseworkers, etc., should have full knowledge of the eligibility and application process.¹⁰⁰ President Obama's recent policy announcement to provide relief from deportation to certain children who were brought into this country illegally before the age of 16 is to be applauded, but does not go far enough.

Children and Youth With Incarcerated Parents Suffer Adverse Effects

Fifty-three percent of the 1.5 million people held in U.S. prisons are the parents of one or more minor children—over 1.7 million minor children have an incarcerated parent. Black children are seven times more likely and Latino children two and half times more likely to have a parent in prison than white children.¹⁰¹ Children with incarcerated parents are significantly more likely to engage in antisocial or delinquent behavior, less likely to succeed in school or to get a job, and more likely to develop mental health problems.¹⁰²

Maternal incarceration is especially troublesome. Having a mother in jail has been linked to symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder among children.¹⁰³ In addition, 26 percent of children whose mother was incarcerated were convicted of crimes as adults, compared with 10 percent of a matched control group.¹⁰⁴ The trauma of separation can be magnified when a parent is incarcerated for substance abuse, as many are likely to cycle in and out of prison due to relapses.¹⁰⁵ Federal and state policy reforms that treat substance abuse as a public health issue rather than as a criminal offense are on the increase and should be widely expanded.

Visits, although emotionally difficult, are important to maintaining parent/child relationships and trust. New York is one of the few states to address the needs of children with incarcerated parents. The Administration for Children's Services' Children of Incarcerated Parents Program (CHIPP) offers a visitation program for children and their parents and provides specialized training to caseworkers for addressing the special needs of children with an incarcerated parent.¹⁰⁶ This program must be fully operational, monitored, and independently evaluated to ensure all incarcerated parents—fathers and mothers—and their children receive the program's intended benefits.

New York has also enacted provisions that allow districts to delay filing Termination of Parental Rights (TPR) petitions for incarcerated parents.¹⁰⁷ This is important because parents serving time in prison may not be available to reunify with their children within the timeframes provided in the federal Adoption and Safe Families Act (ASFA). Many parents serve sentences that run longer than the ASFA time limits. Unfortunately, these ASFA exceptions do not extend to family members detained due to immigrant status.

The trauma caused by witnessing a parent's arrest is also a serious concern. To mitigate the effects of children witnessing a parent's arrest, a handful of jurisdictions in the country have adopted formal protocols that guide police and child welfare agencies in handling these situations. Model child-sensitive arrest protocols include: looking for signs in the home of children who may not be visible at the time of

arrest; not hand-cuffing parents in front of their children whenever possible; allowing parents to reassure their children; waiting for a designated caregiver; not using the siren when leaving; and allowing the parent additional phone calls to arrange childcare. The New York Law Enforcement Handbook issued by the New York State Association of Chiefs of Police includes a model and detailed protocol for arrests when a child is present.¹⁰⁸ More needs to be done to assure that child-sensitive arrest policies are followed.

Visitation policies must encourage the relationship between incarcerated parents and their children. Judges must be educated about the importance of assigning parents to a facility close to their children. Correction facilities should explore additional ways to allow parents to have more frequent contact with their children through phone, video-conferencing, and Internet-based communications.

Having a Family Means Everything to Foster Teens

From Jarel, we learn just how important family ties can be. It took him seven years of overcoming obstacles and much despair before he finally found his way back to his grandmother, who adopted him just before his eighteenth birthday.

Most children want to be with their family of origin. Over 90 percent of youth who were in foster care report feeling close to at least one biological family member, and more than 80 percent had contact with a biological family member at least once a week.¹⁰⁹ While in foster care, children think about plans to reunite with their birth parents, and as young adults, often go home to visit biological family members after leaving foster care.¹¹⁰

New York State has been working to connect youth to family members such as grandparents, aunts, and uncles through family group conferencing, Family Finding methods, and better engagement of fathers. The Kinship Guardianship Assistance Program (KinGAP), a new permanency option in New York, allows youth to exit foster care, live permanently with a family member, and receive financial support. But funding for KinGAP is currently provided within the foster

care block grant. The Administration for Children's Services, many counties, and advocates support funding KinGAP as a permanency option with shared state and local funding, just like adoption.

Significantly, New York passed legislation (N.Y. Fam. Ct., Act. §§ 635-637) in 2010 that allows those over the age of 14 to return legally to their parents' custody under certain circumstances. The legislation does this by reinstating parental rights where termination of those rights took place some years earlier, and reunification is determined by a court to be in the youth's best interest.

New York must rebuild and build families to prevent disconnection in the first place and to support disconnected youth who have exited foster care. Although everyone recognizes that youth need a caring adult in their lives, they need much more than that. Though technically disconnected from school, work, and family, they yearn for their biological relatives, a yearning that can form the basis of reconnection. Child welfare policymakers and service providers must understand this and work to reconnect these youth with family members.

“We should acknowledge the strength of family ties and that children are choosing to reconnect with their families. We should support them in doing so.”

**—Michael Arsham, Executive Director,
Child Welfare Organizing Project.¹¹¹**

Preventive Services: In Her Own Words—A Mother's Story¹¹²

Teresa Marrero, a parent organizer at the Child Welfare Organizing Project (CWOP), discussed her involvement with the child welfare system at the December 1 forum and how she got her life back on track and kept her children out of foster care with the help and support of preventive services.

Teresa's story is like so many others. She tested positive for marijuana after the birth of her daughter in 2001, was reported to the State Central Register, and became involved with child protective services. Rather than having her children removed and placed in foster care, she was able to participate in New York Foundling's 18-month Pathways program, a type of Family Rehabilitation Program.

She then went to work at CWOP to help other families who face similar circumstances—the fear of losing one's children and the challenge of navigating the services required to meet the requirements of a case plan while keeping it together. At CWOP she helped families through child safety conferences, the last ditch effort before having children removed and placed in foster care. She does not understand why cases get as far as the child safety conference before preventive services are offered. She noted:

- Budget cuts over the past few years have led to fewer available services.
- The services now tend to be court-mandated instead of voluntary.
- There are stricter time frames for receiving services that often work against families.
- Families need easier access to services. For Teresa, that meant all the services needed to be in one place.

Teresa emphasized the need to get services back to their pre-cut levels, with a wide range of programs available to help families and prevent family break-ups. CWOP's staff were able to help families stay together about two-thirds of the time.

Barriers to Success

Lack of Funding and Systemic Problems Create Barriers

Over the years, many solutions have been proposed for the problems detailed in this report—some contain great ideas, promising programs, and innovative policy solutions. Yet progress is often hampered by programs that are too narrowly focused, lack flexibility, are designed as short-term solutions to long-term problems, and are in insufficient supply.¹¹³

Fewer and fewer families have been able to access preventive and community-based service programs, which have suffered from a combination of funding cuts and other problems.^{114, 115} BridgeBuilders, a proven practice that keeps families out of the child welfare system, experienced a more than 50 percent cut in funding during the last few years, as have many other programs that serve at-risk youth. One example of a program that is insufficiently funded to meet demand is the Summer Youth Employment Program (SYEP), which offered employment to just 23,000 youth, while applica-

tions for the program reached 143,000. In 2010, only 226 of the city's 600 specialized SYEP vulnerable youth slots went to youth formerly and currently in foster care. Over 7,000 youth over the age of 14 were in care at the time. Clearly, there is an insufficient number of jobs for youth in foster care who want to work.^{116, 117}

The Multiple Pathways to Education program has eligibility barriers, such as its literacy requirement, that are too high for many disconnected youth. Given the target population, the time constraints of performance goals can be unreach-able. For instance, a young person will not be able to obtain a GED within six months of entering the program if he or she has a below sixth grade reading level.

Legislation can also be limiting. The Chafee Foster Care Independence Act of 1999 was passed in recognition of the need for older youth in foster care to have independent living skills, education funding, health care, housing, and employment training and, most important, the need to stay in foster care up to age 21 if a state offers the option. But it did not include provisions that would support foster youths' connection to family and social supports.¹¹⁸ Still, many go unserved.¹¹⁹

“One challenge to overcoming this problem is that there is no organized system for recovery and re-engagement of these youth. The responsibility for high-risk, out-of-school youth has fallen predominantly to providers in the youth development, youth workforce, and adult basic education arenas, which are all under-funded, fragmented, and serve only a small portion of need.”¹²⁰

Independent living programs are supposed to prepare youth to live on their own, but they fall short of the goal. They need to start earlier and get youth personally involved in

individualized planning sessions. If youth get the right education about how to live independently, they stand a far better chance of success. They need skill training in five key areas—education, employment, money management, credit management, and consumer skills.¹²¹

Connected by 25 Can Seem Impossible for Many Youth in Foster Care

Youth leaving foster care face many obstacles to getting connected to education, employment, and family by age 25. These include a lack of understanding of the systems and benefits available to them, alienation from their biological relatives, and lack of financial assets to get started in life.

Youth often do not understand the systems and the support available to them. Jarel's story gives us a glimpse of the problem. Jarel did not understand that his law guardian was appointed to represent him in the process, so he did little to cooperate. Until he informed the law guardian about his situation, she could not intervene on his behalf—it took years, but when he finally did open up, the law guardian promptly obtained services for his grandmother, and he returned to her home.

More needs to be done to connect with fathers. Aging out of foster care could provide an opportunity to rebuild relationships with biological family members, especially fathers. Time and again, former foster care youth show that they want to find a connection to their biological family, and connecting/re-connecting not only with maternal relatives but with fathers and paternal relatives can help prevent youth from aging-out of care with no family support network.

The federal Fostering Connections Act requires that all relatives be notified when children enter care, and encourages placement of children with relatives before considering non-kin foster homes.¹²² The child welfare system sometimes overlooks fathers and/or paternal kin as a resource for children. Many child welfare professionals want to find ways to involve fathers more deeply in their children's lives.

However, fathers, especially non-resident fathers, struggle with problems of their own, including unemployment, homelessness, incarceration, and physical and mental illness. They may also be far behind in child support payments, and family conflict (sometimes about child support payments) can cause fathers to become marginalized.¹²³

The accumulation of unpaid child support can be a particularly difficult obstacle to overcome, and it serves as a significant deterrent to fathers who might otherwise emerge and reunite with their children. In New York City, the Mayor's Fatherhood Initiative attempts to remove barriers to paying child support by linking fathers to job opportunities, and by offering mediation to address any problems that would prevent visitation.^{124, 125}

Youth can't make it without resources. After age 18, most young adults continue to receive significant assistance from their parents for a number of years, including a place to live, college tuition, transportation, and spending money, and some parents continue to help their children beyond the age of 25. As it has taken longer for teens to grow into independent adults, family financial assistance has become essential. In 2010, the average young person received about \$47,500 in financial support from his or her parents after age 18.¹²⁶

Older youth leaving foster care don't have the safety net that family offers. Without sufficient income, youth exiting care are at risk for homelessness, hunger, substance abuse, and more.¹²⁷ They need seed money to cover expenses until they get on their feet, and so they can support themselves while continuing their education. Once a youth reaches emancipation, he/she faces a new set of challenges that immediately require money—things like a security deposit, first and last month's rent, transportation costs or a vehicle, education expenses, and even groceries. As a result, youth exiting foster care start to live independently by barely scraping by and accumulating debt. Almost half (45 percent) experience some material hardship and 47 percent had outstanding debts or had borrowed money. Many rely on public assistance programs including food stamps and Medicaid.¹²⁸

In some cases, such hardships could be avoided if youth were allowed to keep social security benefits due them.¹²⁹ The state takes these funds to reimburse itself for its foster care expenses, using the funds to match Title IV-E funding, when the payments are supposed to be used "to ensure that such use best serves the unique interests of each child beneficiary" with the goal of improving the quality of that child's life.¹³⁰ Instead of double-dipping into federal funds as is the current practice, New York State and the Administration for Children's Services should help youth build assets while they are in foster care, beginning with safeguarding Social Security benefits for children who qualify for them, and not using them to recoup the state's expenses for foster care. Public-private partnerships could also help these youth set up Individualized Asset Accounts as outlined in the Jim Casey Opportunities Initiative.¹³¹

Employment barriers exist for those who have been incarcerated, including juvenile offenders. Young adults with a criminal record may face legal and regulatory disqualification that prevent them from using their skills to contribute to society after their release.¹³² Employment applications often include a check-off box indicating previous arrests or convictions, which can disqualify a young person from employment, even if the job is unrelated to the criminal offense. While by law employers are not supposed to eliminate a youth from consideration based on a previous arrest or conviction, too many employers use that information as part of their hiring decision.

Models for Success

Family Assessment Response in New York State

A relatively new reform in New York State is fundamentally changing child protective services practice and making a difference for families. In 2007, legislation gave local social service districts the option of using Family Assessment Response (FAR) for suspected abuse and neglect reports. FAR is an alternative to the one-size-fits-all investigative approach for allegations of child abuse and neglect and can be a useful approach to prevent out-of-home placements for families with teens. Many reports do not involve a situation in which a child is in imminent harm, but can indicate that a family needs help. Under the FAR approach, a caseworker visits the family and works with them to understand their needs and to identify solutions and to provide concrete support. While the practice of investigating a report accepted by the New York State Central Registrar (SCR) is appropriate when there is reason for serious concern about a child's safety, most reports accepted by the SCR result from poverty-related neglect. New York City's Administration

for Children’s Services received a total of 45,526 allegations of child abuse and neglect in the first three months of 2012, and most of them were related to deprivation or neglect that could be addressed by a FAR approach.¹³³ Families need assistance getting the public benefits for which they are eligible, along with other kinds of help.

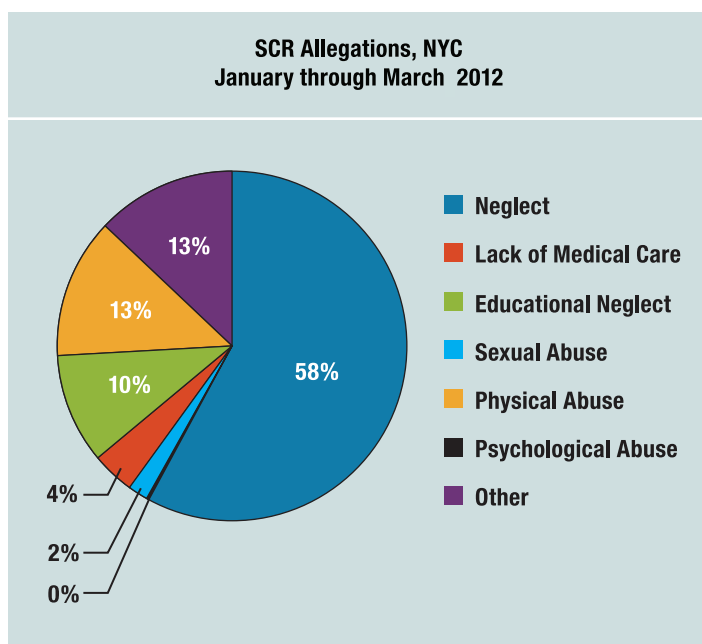
Over 20 social service districts now offer this new kind of response to SCR reports, and indications are that FAR has succeeded in helping families rather than putting them through an intrusive investigation. A 2011 evaluation in New York State concluded that FAR improves satisfaction for both child welfare workers and family members, leads to increased access to needed services, and results in fewer petitions filed in Family Court. Families received help with basic needs such as food, housing, and utilities. Equally important, families who benefitted from the FAR approach were less likely to have another case opened within six months of the initial case than families who received a full-scale CPS investigation.¹³⁴ Subsequently, New York made FAR permanent in 2011 (Chapter 45 of the Laws of New York).

Child safety, one of the biggest concerns of practitioners and others, actually improves when a FAR approach uses a decision-making process that involves families. In addition, although more expensive at first, FAR saves money in the long-term: an evaluation of Minnesota’s program found that FAR costs \$3,688 per case compared to \$4,967 per case when allegations are subjected to full-scale investigation.¹³⁵ If foster care placements are averted, the savings increase dramatically, and scarce child welfare resources can be more efficiently deployed in youth-centered, family strengthening, and preventive services at the local level.

Innovation in Family Court Leads to Successful Transitions

A newly formed Transition Planning Court in New York City is quickly becoming a model for the state and country. At the forum, Judge Bryanne Hamill, Transition Planning Court, New York County Family Court, explained that this innovative model targets voluntarily placed youth ages 16 and older whose goal is Another Planned Permanent Living Arrangement (APPLA), which means that adoption and returning to their family have been ruled out. Many have returned to foster care because of a failed adoption, and many are considered cross-systems youth because they are involved with more than one system or agency. Many are disconnected. The court serves as a problem-solver and addresses all issues simultaneously—it reviews their transition plans and monitors coordination of those plans across systems. Youth are involved directly in the process, and more time on the court’s calendar is allocated for hearings. The judge assures the involvement of each youth in any decisions made on his or her behalf and has the authority to take evidence at hearings and to issue orders.

Detailed protocols were developed, and the court provides intensive oversight of each case to enhance outcomes for the young people it serves. The protocols serve as a guide to the court to make sure that all relevant issues are addressed. The core component is a system of benchmark transition



Source: New York City Administration for Children’s Services Monthly Flash Indicators, May 8, 2012.

hearings, held frequently beginning at age 16 and continuing until discharge, which may not occur until the age of 21.

A resource coordinator, assigned to the Transition Planning Court, assists in making sure court orders are implemented and that agencies coordinate plans for transition. The resource coordinator can also serve as a liaison with the community and other government agencies and court administrators. The court and the resource coordinator work to ensure that youth receive the independent living skills they need, and that they have received the appropriate public benefits to which they are entitled, as well as housing, medical, and mental health care. They identify an adult who will serve as a key support person in that youth's life, and make sure he or she is included in the planning process. They also get the youth's school and/or vocational training grades, and address any educational deficiency. For immigrant youth who are eligible for Special Immigrant Juvenile Status (SIJS), the court ensures that applications have been filed.

The court is in session two days a week, but in order to meet the demand of over 600 youth it should be open twice as frequently. Lack of funding is the obstacle.

“In a great number of cases, youth are continuing their education, getting employment and housing, and exiting foster care more successfully.”

—Judge Bryanne Hamill³⁶

The Children's Aid Society's Next Generation Center Helps Youth Reach Their Goals

In the South Bronx, The Children's Aid Society is working to reconnect youth who have become disconnected, as well as prevent them from becoming disconnected in the first place, with its one-stop, multi-service center, the Next Generation Center. The center's work supports two primary goals:

- to reconnect young people to positive institutions (school, work, relationships with caring adults, and community-based supportive services); and
- to divert them from negative influences and institutions (criminal activity, detention, and incarceration).

Each year, the program serves between 250 and 350 youth ages 14 to 24 who are currently or formerly system-involved, along with neighborhood youth from Morrisania, Harlem, and Upper Manhattan. Since its inception in 2006, the center has gotten over 1,000 youth actively involved in its programming through outreach efforts with family courts, legal aid offices, youth advocates, homeless shelters, local foster care agencies, and other youth-serving organizations.¹³⁷

This one-stop center provides an array of services to help youth develop life skills, reach educational goals, and gain employment, including:

- life coaching and case management,
- educational support and guidance,
- intensive job training and subsidized internships,
- housing assistance and referrals, access to health care services, emergency assistance, benefits counseling, and legal referrals,
- life skills workshops, culinary classes, and arts and recreational activities.

By using evidence-based motivational interviewing and restorative justice practices, the center's staff works to help youth form relationships with caring adults and peers, attain stable housing, and avoid involvement with the juvenile or criminal justice systems. The Next Generation Center offers programs such as pre-GED and GED, a transitional employment program to develop job readiness, and internships. The center also offers housing assistance, educational guidance, and legal counseling. Most important, the center accepts everyone who walks through the door. Youth work with coaches who remain with them throughout the

program, providing important support and strong caring relationships. It can take up to a year for a youth to form a sufficiently significant relationship with his/her coach before the young person is able to move forward.

Outcome data is not yet available due to the long-term nature of this work. The center is using an “efforts to outcomes” database from Social Solutions to collect and analyze information. So far, the youth who get a larger number of outreach efforts and more face-to-face contacts show evidence of initial changes and higher levels of engagement compared others in the program.¹³⁸

The center is funded primarily with private money but needs a source of government funds if it is to succeed and thrive.

“You can’t have success in any one area without caring for the kids. We are able to help kids who don’t trust easily and have adults walking in and out of their lives.”

—Natalia Giordano, Next Generation Center Director

The Academy Is Helping Youth Find Their Futures

FEGS Health and Human Services (FEGS) launched The Academy in 2007 to help young people aging out of foster care to prepare for the future.

As discussed at the forum by Courtney Hawkins, Associate Vice President, Education and Youth Services, FEGS, the Academy, much like the Next Generation Center, provides multiple services to assist young people in reaching their educational and employment goals. They also match each youth with an advisor who provides constant support and keeps the youth on track.

Using the CareerFirstTM model, the program uses a multi-pronged approach to achieve self-sufficiency by emphasizing skill and personal development. Supportive services are of-

fered in conjunction with the youth’s foster care agency. The array of services includes tutoring, homework assistance, and pre-GED and GED classes; career development services including career exploration, job readiness training, job shadowing, internships, and job placement; post-secondary education planning; and supportive services that include mentoring, counseling, and personal skills development. Post-care services are an important part of the package of offerings. Like most young adults, youth leaving foster care tend to underestimate the challenges they will face as independent adults and therefore tend to under-utilize the services available to them.¹³⁹

The Academy uses a flexible intake process that integrates education, employment, and support services under one roof. It fills a gap for youth who do not meet other programs’ eligibility requirements. For example, the city’s Department of Education’s Access GED requires a sixth grade reading level for entry, but over 40 percent of the youth served by the Academy read below a sixth grade level.¹⁴⁰ They can also design programs to meet the needs of a referring agency and are open on nights and weekends.

The Academy has worked with 399 young people since its inception in 2007. Almost 60 percent of the participants were not in school, two-thirds were living in congregate care, and 32 percent entered the program reading at less than a seventh grade level. An evaluation of the Academy demonstrated that the program successfully engaged these youth: 70 percent demonstrated educational progress or continued to remain active in school. Eighty-eight percent completed the career readiness curriculum, 54 percent participated in work internships, and 52 percent participated in job search activities. Of those participating in job search activities, 40 percent were successful in securing employment; 32 percent remain actively engaged. The Academy’s annual cost is approximately \$5,000 per participant.¹⁴¹

Corporate Investment on Behalf of Youth Aging-Out of Foster Care

Gap Inc. is a leading global specialty retailer with five brands: Gap, Old Navy, Banana Republic, Piperlime, and Athleta. Gail Gershon, Executive Director, Community Leadership, Gap Inc., stated that the company leverages multiple assets to maximize the positive impact it can have in the community. Gap Inc. employees, with their knowledge around preparing teens and young adults to be successful in their first jobs, are central to the company's focus on equipping underserved youth with job readiness skills. Gap Inc.'s goal is to assist young people in low-income communities to see the connection between what they're learning in school and future careers, and better prepare them for adulthood by encouraging them through a campaign called "Be What's Possible."¹⁴²

This Way Ahead is Gap Inc.'s program to help connect youth in underserved communities to employment opportunities and education through career exploration and job readiness training in New York City and San Francisco. Over the course of 20 months, the program takes youth through four phases: career exploration; job readiness classes on topics such as diversity and conflict resolution; paid internships at Gap and Old Navy stores; and a year of follow-up support. Participants receive training in areas such as public speaking, how to manage conflict, and the need to think about the long-term consequences of their decisions. Employees serve as teachers and mentors, while participants rotate through a range of jobs, gaining insight into the world of work, gaining skills and confidence, and formulating long-term career goals. To date, *This Way Ahead* has trained over 1,100 youth and provided over 300 youth with internship opportunities.

This Way Ahead is a win-win for both the company and the community. Over three-fourths of the youth gained job skills, and they developed personal skills needed on the job and in life. They graduate from the program with greater maturity, along with skills in conflict resolution, leadership, financial management, willpower, and career outlook. For

the company, the experience provides valuable skills to its employees: more than 80 percent of employee volunteers grow in their professional skills as a result of the program, and express pride in being a Gap Inc. employee.

Each summer, the company also sponsors *Camp Old Navy*, which gives over 12,000 youth between the ages of 12 and 18 an opportunity to learn what goes on behind the scenes in a retail business. Youth get hands-on experience rotating through a variety of jobs. Over 750 Old Navy stores and nearly 4,000 employees participated in Camp Old Navy during 2011. The program is so popular the company plans to expand learning opportunities to help youth gain additional skills. Since the program's inception, approximately 60,000 youth have experienced the world of work.¹⁴³

"This work gives youth the opportunity to gain real work experience, develop relationship skills needed on the job, and the confidence to overcome challenges and enter the workforce. As part of our commitment to this work, we developed a toolkit so that other businesses can learn from our experiences and do the same."

**—Gail Gershon, Executive Director,
Community Leadership, Gap Inc.**

Public-Private Partnerships: Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative Invests in Futures¹⁴⁴

The Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative began as a demonstration project to test a set of strategies for youth moving from foster care to successful adulthood. It quickly grew and is now in 15 states with a yearly investment of \$12 million that stimulates another \$125 million in public funding to help youth in foster care develop their full potential. At the forum, Sarah B. Greenblatt, Senior Associate Director, Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative, reported that

the foundation's vision is that every young person leaving foster care has the opportunities and support needed to make a successful transition to adulthood. Backed by research and a belief that outcomes can be improved with the right support, Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative works to improve policies and practices, promote youth engagement, and build community partnerships.

The Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative offers considerable technical assistance and training to each site. Grants are given for planning purposes and discrete work. Grants are also made to national organizations to address systemic issues affecting young people by offering informed policies. The initiative has had an impact on more than 78,000 young people to date.

The framework for the initiative's investments is to ensure that young people are connected by 25, that they have a permanent family, an education, a place to live, health and mental health care, and employment. To achieve these goals, the initiative supports these and other policies leading to successful transition:

- Reconnecting older youth to parents or relatives
- Subsidized kinship care and guardianship
- Tuition waivers up to age 24
- Support for post-secondary education in addition to tuition
- Individual development accounts and asset building strategies
- Provisions for early work experience
- Priority access to affordable housing

The Opportunity Passport™ within the Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative meets foster care youths' need for seed money by providing them with a matching funds savings account, a personal bank account, and opportunities for housing, education, internships, and jobs. Building money management skills is a key component of the skills

taught to participants.¹⁴⁵ As an incentive to save, the Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative matches each dollar deposited by the youth with one dollar from the foundation, up to \$1,000 per person per year. These matched savings accounts (called individual development accounts) help youth accrue assets that can be used for education, purchasing a car, housing, health care, and even starting a small business. The program operates in 11 states.

Former foster youth start out with nothing and need an opportunity to begin to build financial assets. Evidence suggests that when individuals and families accumulate these assets, economic stability and educational achievement increase, residential mobility and intergenerational poverty decrease, and property values, local civic involvement, and adult health and general life satisfaction rise.¹⁴⁶

The results of this initiative are impressive: for every \$1 invested, an estimated \$6.50 is realized through public policy changes that result in expanded medical coverage, housing, and access to post-secondary education.¹⁴⁷ And the estimated return is on the conservative side.

New York City's Young Men's Initiative Strives to Improve Outcomes for Young Black and Latino Men

In her remarks at the December 1 forum, Linda Gibbs, New York City Deputy Mayor, discussed Mayor Bloomberg's unprecedented effort to address disparities faced by young black and Latino males with new resources, new policies and practices, and cross-agency collaboration to improve outcomes and ensure equal opportunity. This initiative, launched in August 2011, is the result of a 2010 report that identified barriers to employment and education for young minority males and made recommendations to the city on how to provide opportunities to this struggling population. Although blacks, Latinos, and whites make up the same proportion of the city's population, young black and Latino men have a 50 percent higher rate of poverty, a 60 percent higher rate of unemployment, and are twice as likely not to graduate from high school.¹⁴⁸

During the three years of this initiative, over \$125 million will be invested using city funding and funding from the Open Society Foundations and Bloomberg Philanthropies. A dozen city agencies will be involved in this work addressing education, fatherhood, employment, and criminal justice for 315,000 black and Latino men between the ages of 16 and 24. Key components of this work include:

- an overhaul of the Department of Probation that will connect probationers to economic and educational opportunities that are known to reduce recidivism from five new satellite offices
- strengthening educational support with mentoring and literacy services
- launching the Expanded Success Initiative to test strategies whose goal is to close the achievement gap in college and career readiness
- expanding of Jobs-Plus and summer youth employment to connect individuals to job opportunities
- creating new metrics for School Progress Reports that hold schools accountable for black and Latino educational achievement
- boosting fathers' skills as parents through CUNY's Project REDRESS

“When we look at poverty rates, graduation rates, crime rates, and employment rates, one thing stands out: blacks and Latinos are not fully sharing in the promise of American freedom and far too many are trapped in circumstances that are difficult to escape.”

—Mayor Michael Bloomberg¹⁴⁹

Recommendations

Connected by 25 has been accepted as the goal for young adults who have aged-out of foster care. By age 25, the adult brain has reached full development, most people have completed postsecondary education, and most have established connections to employment, further education, child-rearing, or other goals.¹⁵⁰ Unfortunately, coming out of the foster care system, too few youth reach this point. Young people begin to become disconnected, often as early as age 14.¹⁵¹

These young people can be helped with effective programs that take a comprehensive approach, using a strategic combination of services such as child care, legal assistance, job training, and employment. Alternative education and skills training are also needed.¹⁵² The goal must be that every young person who is in foster care has the chance to develop and reach his or her full potential.

The dollars invested in these programs result in significant long-term savings to New York taxpayers. However, while

investments are made in programs targeting youth in foster care, savings are often realized in another part of the state and city budgets. For example, employment programs for youth in foster care save dollars in SNAP, public assistance, and by reducing crime or the amount of juvenile justice expenditures. Therefore, these savings are not reinvested in the employment or other programs that generated them, but provide funds to serve more young people.¹⁵³

“If helping former foster youth make a successful transition to adulthood continues to be defined as solely or even primarily a province of the child welfare system and its over-burdened staff, this goal will never be reached.”¹⁵⁴

There is a scarcity of programs designed to help high-need, low-skilled youth—a category that describes many former foster children. In New York City, it is estimated that 160,000 youths between 16 and 21 are neither in school nor working in a legal job, yet there are only about 12,000 program spots available to help young adults get back into school or to work.¹⁵⁵

Systems Reforms

Implement Family Assessment Response (FAR) Across New York State

Currently, over 20 counties in New York offer FAR, with the possibility that several others will come on board. New York City plans to begin implementing a FAR pilot in Queens in 2012 and to evaluate the program after a six-month trial. FAR is a proven practice that helps and supports families, reduces the potential for neglect and mistreatment, and ultimately reduces the rate of removals and placements in foster care. New York City should

fully embrace FAR and make a commitment to offer a FAR response throughout the five boroughs for all allegations not excluded by law. We encourage all counties throughout the state to do so as well.

Address Children's Social-Emotional Health as a Core Element of Child Welfare Practice

The child welfare system's focus on safety and permanency is not enough to assure better outcomes for children who are in the foster care system. We know that children who enter foster care have experienced traumatic events and are more likely to exhibit symptoms of mental illness. Child welfare workers, residential staff, and program staff can help to ameliorate this problem by using trauma-informed treatment methods and by identifying treatment needs early on. Doing so can increase stability through improved relationships and behavior, and achieve success in other areas. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Administration for Children and Families has taken the lead with this major practice shift by issuing a memorandum detailing the need for improvements in the well-being of foster children. The memorandum calls for the use of evidence-based practices, scaling down of programs and services that don't work, and the use of regular trauma screenings and functional assessments.¹⁵⁶ Requests for proposals issued by the department are already incorporating these changes, and we urge the State of New York and New York City to adopt programs and practices that follow the concepts outlined in the memorandum and to build these components into child welfare practice.

In New York State, youth in foster care will be required to be enrolled in a managed care plan in the near future. Because their needs for medical and mental health services far exceed those of other youth, it is vitally important that their health needs are taken into consideration when the plan is developed. Ordinary capitation rates will be insufficient to cover the cost of the intense health and mental health care requirements for this population. Adequate funding must be provided for their medical services and treatment.

Develop a Cross-Systems Collaboration to Coordinate the Out-of-School Time, Career Exploration, Educational, and Employment Opportunities for Youth Ages 14 to 25

The Young Men's Initiative is an example of multiple agencies coming together and coordinating efforts to change the life course for black and Latino males in New York City. The same kind of effort is needed for youth in foster care to ensure services appropriate to the level of development, as well as connections to education and employment. Such efforts often can be enhanced by having the right adult guidance at the right time. To augment what can be achieved, public-private partnerships should be established to develop connections between education and the world of work. This collaboration should be long-term with the goal of removing barriers and pooling resources so that youth in foster care can gain access to a full range of opportunities.

Core Services

Provide Adequate Educational Support for Youth in Foster Care

Youth in foster care often fall behind academically because of the many disruptions in their education. That, combined with many other factors, makes it more likely that they will drop out of school before graduation. New York school administrators and caseworkers should identify people who will monitor and track the educational progress of each child in foster care and provide support as necessary to bring students up to grade level and keep them there. Service providers should identify and supply the kind of educational support as early as possible for those in foster care to help them get back on track or keep them from falling behind. Several counties in California serve as models for the use of such liaisons along with a full range of educational support measures to ensure the educational stability and progress of those in foster care.¹⁵⁷

In addition, the educational system must collaborate with the child welfare system to implement the educational stability requirements in the Fostering Connections Act within

New York State. The act requires that children remain in their school of origin when they enter care but that their records be immediately available if they must transfer to another school.

Provide Career Development and Employment Opportunities for Youth in Foster Care Ages 14 and Older

Youth in foster care need opportunities to identify and connect their academic strengths and interests to the world of work, and to understand the educational requirements necessary to acquire the jobs they desire as adults. They need part-time and summer jobs to help them gain important experience and skills and to explore areas of interest. They also need coaching and mentoring to support these efforts. Older youth in care should be automatically provided with these career development and employment opportunities. For example, youth in care should receive presumptive eligibility for the Summer Youth Employment Program, combined with support services to enable them to succeed in their summer jobs. Only 226 of the available 600 vulnerable youth slots for the city's Summer Youth Employment Program went to youth in foster care in 2010, although over 7,000 youth in foster care were eligible to apply.¹⁵⁸ The program received 143,000 applications and could serve only 23,000.

Funding

Increase Funding for and Utilization of Preventive and Community-Based Services

Over the past decade, the growth in city and state funding for preventive, protective, adoption, aftercare, and independent living services has been instrumental in reducing placements into more costly foster care. However, with the Great Recession, state claims for these services declined over the past three years. In New York City, about 2,000 preventive slots were lost before funding was baselined in 2011.

Waiting lists for community-based services are extensive and yet some preventive funding is not fully utilized. In addition, New York City's Close to Home Initiative, while new, must be monitored to assure that adequate funding is provided to help these youth move along a positive path in life. Beginning in the fall of 2012, the goal for this initiative will be to bring back to New York City those city youth in detention and non-secure residential placements across the state. Some will need residential care and others will require community-based services and/or in-home services. Funding for this initiative must be secure and stable in order to continue to reduce costly placements into care. The program models mentioned in this report are all struggling financially and should be adequately funded and brought to scale. Both the state and city must renew their commitment to these services.

Fund Kinship Guardianship Assistance as a Permanency Option

In 2011, the state began implementing the Kinship Guardianship Assistance Program (KinGAP), a new permanency option that allows youth to leave foster care, continue living with their relative foster family, and receive necessary financial assistance for living expenses. Many families want to continue caring for their grandchild, niece, or nephew but cannot afford to do so without the financial assistance offered by foster care. KinGAP removes that barrier. The Fiscal Year 2013 state budget provided funding for KinGAP within the foster care block grant. KinGAP is a permanency option and should be funded the same way as other permanency options using costs shared between the state and localities, just like adoption.

Provide Full Tuition Aid to SUNY/CUNY for Youth in Foster Care and Those Who Have Aged-Out

New York is in the minority of states that do not provide funding for the cost of higher education for youth in foster care who want to go to college. The provision of guaranteed, full funding to attend postsecondary educa-

tion or training can offer much needed hope, motivation, and opportunity to children and youth in foster care who are constrained by the lack of financial means to care for themselves and pay for further education. The state and local social service districts should ensure that youth in foster care are fully aware of the opportunities available to them, and encourage them to take advantage of vocational training as well as opportunities in two- and four-year colleges. In addition, youth in foster care should be considered as part of the dependent category for the Tuition Assistance Program (TAP).

Support Youth Aging-Out of Foster Care with Financial Assets

Youth who age-out struggle mightily because they lack even modest financial resources to get a start in life—to obtain housing, education, transportation, and other necessities. The child welfare system must assure that they have the resources needed as part of their transition plan, which must begin as soon as adoption and reunification with their families has been ruled out. All youth who age-out should have an asset account to draw on in a time of crisis or need with funds accumulated over the years through contributions made by the youth using earned income along with matching funds. Further, youth who have received Social Security benefits should not have that money confiscated by the state to pay for the costs of their foster care, something they did not choose for themselves. Instead, these funds should be added to their asset account to be used for education, transportation, and necessities purchased while in care and after they make the transition out of care.

Conclusion

As noted throughout this paper, the transition to adulthood is often difficult for youth in foster care and those who have aged-out of care. The many challenges seem insurmountable and the costs to society are tremendous. The costs of intervening early and with the right kinds of support—those that build and strengthen families, are developmentally appropriate for children and youth, and ensure that their education, employment, and family connections goals are met—seem small by comparison.

This paper outlines many opportunities to offer families, children, and youth the programs and services they need to achieve better outcomes. In particular, older youth who age-out of care deserve the same opportunities to reach their full potential in life as other young adults. We urge policymakers, child welfare administrators, state agency personnel, and elected officials to understand and address these issues with improved funding, legislation, service provision, and collaboration.

WHATEVER IT TAKES:

Strategies for Preventing and Addressing Youth Disconnection

Thursday, December 1, 2011

The New York City Bar Association

Co-hosts:

The Children's Aid Society and the Community Service Society of New York

Co-sponsors:

Child Welfare Organizing Project

Citizens' Committee for Children

The Committee for Hispanic Children and Families

Schuyler Center for Analysis and Advocacy

**With generous support from the Annie E. Casey Foundation*

PROGRAM

8:15 – 9:00 AM

Check-In, Coffee & Tea

Morning Plenary Session – The Meeting Hall, 2nd Floor

Moderators

Sania Metzger, Esq., Director, Special Projects, Poverty, Race & Child Welfare, Community Service Society of New York

Jane F. Golden, J.D., L.M.S.W., Vice President for Child Welfare Policy and Foster Care Services, The Children's Aid Society

9:00 AM

Welcome and Opening Comments

David R. Jones, President and CEO, Community Service Society of New York

Linda Gibbs, Deputy Mayor, Health and Human Services, New York City

Preventing Disconnection: A Vision for New York System-Involved Youth

Keynote Address

Gladys Carrion, Commissioner, Office of Children and Family Services, New York State

9:45 AM

Town Hall Meeting

Promoting Connections for System-Involved Older Youth through Public and Private Partnerships

Moderator

Eric Brettschneider, Esq., Assistant Commissioner/Regional Coordinator, NYS Office of Children and Family Services

Panelists

Brenda Donald, Vice President, Center for Effective Family Services and Systems, Annie E. Casey Foundation;
Youth Transitions Funders Group

Dorita P. Gibson, Ph.D., Deputy Chancellor for Equity and Access

Sandra Killett, Parent Advocate, The Children's Village; Board Chair, Child Welfare Organizing Project

Kate DeBold, Vice President, Corporate Affairs, BNY Mellon

Gail Gershon, Senior Director, Employee Engagement & Service Leadership, Gap Inc.

Gladys Carrion, Commissioner, Office of Children and Family Services, New York State

BREAK 11:00 – 11:15 AM

Concurrent Panels: I and II

11:15 AM – 12:15 PM

What Are the Challenges Faced by Aging-Out Youth? National and New York City Perspectives

The Meeting Hall, 2nd Floor

Moderators

Bevanjae Kelley, Parent Advocate and Board Member, Child Welfare Organizing Project; Stephanie Gendell, Associate Executive Director, Policy and Public Affairs, Citizens' Committee for Children of New York

Panelists

Amy Dworsky, Ph.D., Senior Researcher, Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago

Hon. Bryanne Hamill, Judge, Transition Planning Court, New York County Family Court

Jarel Melendez, Youth Advocate, Lawyers for Children

II Diverting Foster Care Placements, Preventing Disconnection: What Community-based Services do Parents/Families Need?

The Stimson Room, 1st Floor

Moderator

Jeremy Kohomban, Ph.D., President and CEO, The Children's Village

Panelists

Teresa Marrero, Parent Organizer, Child Welfare Organizing Project

Bill Baccaglini, Executive Director, New York Foundling

Sue Jacobs, J.D., Executive Director, Center for Family Representation

LUNCH 12:15 PM – 1:00 PM

Optional Lunchtime Workshop

The Evarts Room, 2nd Floor

Keith Heffner, Publisher and Executive Director, Youth Communication

Afternoon Plenary Session – The Meeting Hall, 2nd Floor

1:00 – 2:15 PM

III Essential Strategies, Services and Supports to Improve Outcomes for Disconnected Youth: What Does the Evidence Tell Us?

Moderator

Gina M. Samuels, Ph.D., Associate Professor, School of Social Service Administration, University of Chicago

Panelists

Lauren Frey, Project Director for Permanency Services, Casey Family Services

Sarah Greenblatt, Senior Associate Director, Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative

Angela Cooper, Director, Disconnected Youth Services, The Children's Aid Society

Ruth White, Executive Director, National Center for Housing and Child Welfare

Respondent

Velmanette Montgomery, Senator, New York State (D) 18th Senate District

2:15 – 3:20 PM

IV Policies to Promote Connections for Older Youth Impacted by Foster Care: An Advocates' Panel

Moderators

Vanessa Ramos, Director of Policy, The Committee for Hispanic Children and Families; Jonathan Bowles, Executive Director, Center for an Urban Future

Panelists

Layla Suleiman Gonzalez, Ph.D., J.D., Director, Program Evaluation and Research, Illinois Department of Human Services, “Promoting Equity: Race, Culture and Immigration”

MaryLee Allen, Director of Child Welfare and Mental Health, Children’s Defense Fund, “Reforming Child Welfare Financing: Supporting Youth Transitions to Adulthood”

Courtney Hawkins, Associate Vice President, Education and Youth Services, FECS Health and Human Services, “Opportunities for Employment, Careers and Economic Security”

3:20 – 3:30 PM

Remarks

Ronald E. Richter, Commissioner, Administration for Children’s Services, New York City

Policy Breakout Sessions: Building Towards Consensus and Moving Forward

3:30 – 4:30 PM

1. Building Social and Emotional Capacity: Meeting the Behavioral and Mental Health Needs of Older Youth

The Meeting Hall, 2nd Floor

Presenter/Facilitator

Eugene Griffin, Ph.D., J.D., Assistant Professor, Northwestern University

2. Youth Involvement in Family Court: Amplifying the Voices of Youth

The Evarts Room, 2nd Floor

Co-facilitators

Hon. Anne-Marie Jolly, Judge, Bronx County Family Court
Kareem Martin, Youth, Lawyers for Children

3. Housing: Safe, Affordable and Supportive

The Carter Room, 2nd Floor

Co-facilitators

Ruth White, Executive Director, National Center for Housing and Child Welfare

Ted Houghton, Executive Director, Supportive Housing Network of New York

Resource Expert

James J. Golden, Executive Director and President, Edwin Gould Academy

4. LGBTQ Youth: Supportive Homes, Safe Spaces

The Choate Room, 2nd Floor

Co-facilitators

Jarel Melendez, Youth Advocate, Lawyers for Children

Nancy Chapman, Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender & Questioning (LGBTQ) Coordinator, Administration for Children's Services, New York City

5. Supporting Young Families Impacted by Child Welfare

The Tweed Room, 2nd Floor

Co-facilitators

Susan Notkin, Associate Director, Center for the Study of Social Policy New York

Benita Miller, Esq., Founder and Executive Director, Brooklyn Young Mothers Collective

Resource Experts: Ivan Matos, Steve Grandison, and Tiara Harris

6. Supporting Immigrant Youth and Their Families

The Cromwell Room, 1st Floor

Co-facilitators

Layla Suleiman Gonzalez, Ph.D., J.D., Director, Program Evaluation and Research, Illinois Department of Human Services

Esmeralda Simmons, Esq., Executive Director, Center for Law and Social Justice, Medgar Evers College

Resource Expert

Mark Lewis, Immigration Services Director, Administration for Children's Services, New York City

7. Incarceration, Children, Youth and Families: What Needs to be Done?

The Hughes Room, 1st Floor

Co-facilitators

Martha Raimon, Esq., Senior Associate, Center for the Study of Social Policy New York
Maxine King, Outreach Coordinator, Women on the Rise Telling HerStory

Resource Expert

Hazel Beckles Young-Lao, Project Director, Record Repair Counseling Project, Community Service Society of New York

8. Prioritizing Employment and Economic Security

The Stimson Room, 1st Floor

Co-facilitators

Howard Knoll, Senior Director, Casey Family Programs
Courtney Hawkins, Associate Vice President, Education and Youth Services, FEGS Health and Human Services

Resource Expert

Lazar Treschan, Director, Youth Policy, Community Service Society of New York

Report Back – The Meeting Hall, 2nd Floor

4:30 – 5:00 PM

The Call to Action

Richard R. Buery, President and CEO, The Children's Aid Society

At 26, Jarel Melendez is an engaging, smart, and successful young man. He is a college graduate, employed full-time, and attends graduate school. But his journey to adulthood was anything but smooth.

Jarel entered foster care at the age of five when his parents became caught up in the crack epidemic of the early 90s and could not care for him. He and his brother were placed with their grandmother, who took good care of them. Jarel didn't know he was in foster care, and until age ten he did not even know what foster care was. That year, he was taken from his grandmother's home and placed into a stranger's home, and no one told him why. His brother remained with his grandmother.

He quickly learned his new foster mother wasn't as interested in caring for him as her own son. The first morning in her house, he was informed of her rules. At 10 years of age, he was told to leave her home at 8:30 a.m. even on the weekends and was not to come back until 10 p.m. He was given \$2.25 per week in spending money. He told his caseworker about these rules and said he did not want to be on the streets like that. He thought the caseworker would change things, but she did nothing. He came to realize two things by the time he was on his third or fourth caseworker: first, he was powerless in the face of the system; and second, nobody listens to children. He was on his own.

But Jarel was resilient and became a strong advocate for himself. He knew education would be his path to a better life and so he worked hard and did well in school. At age 11, he went in search of a tutor to help him improve his math skills. He decided he could find one at the Boys & Girls Club but needed an adult to sign a permission slip for him. He found a stranger on the street who was willing to sign his form if Jarel would give him five dollars. That was a lot of money for Jarel, but he believes it was the best investment he ever made. At the Boys & Girls Club, he found a mentor, someone who listened to him and cared about him. He was able to eat dinner at the club, and his mentor helped him by giving him money when he needed it. On the weekends,



Jarel Melendez shares his story at the December 1, 2011 policy forum *Whatever it Takes: Strategies for Preventing and Addressing Youth Disconnection*.

he went from one friend's house to another. He says he was lucky that he never got into serious trouble.

But he still felt a sense of desperation being in foster care. His foster mother mistreated him, and he felt as if he would never make it back home again. He felt betrayed by everyone he encountered. He cannot recall one adult in the foster care system who ever bothered to ask him what he wanted. At age 15 he believed he could no longer deal with what he called "this crazy nightmare" and wanted to commit suicide. He even wrote a suicide letter in his journal. But he left his journal at the Boys & Girls Club, where his mentor found his note and talked with Jarel about his strengths, how strong, smart, and resilient he was. And then his mentor said something magical that made all the difference in the world. He said, "You are the son I wished I had." That

was all Jarel ever wanted. It gave him validation and hope. It saved him.

Jarel continued to be an advocate for himself. At age 16, he remembered an aunt he liked and reached out to her asking if he could come live with her, and she agreed to take in Jarel and his brother. It took about a year, but the boys were moved to her home in North Carolina. Unfortunately, because his brother was unhappy about being uprooted from his grandmother's home, he began acting out and causing trouble, so the two boys were shipped back to New York. His brother's strategy worked, but not quite the way he planned. Both of them were removed from the aunt's home and placed back with Jarel's former foster mother.

By this time, Jarel was 17 and stronger. He told his caseworker that what had happened to him was not going to happen to his brother, and that she had three months to work out something different or he was going to leave with his brother. Coincidentally, he also had a scheduled court appearance and a meeting with his law guardian, whom he assumed was there to represent the foster care agency. Though he had court appearances every year, he never spoke up because he believed no one listens to children, and he saw the court appearance as a waste of time since it took him away from school. This time, the law guardian, frustrated that he did not talk to her, told Jarel that she was there to represent Jarel in court and she could not do that unless he talked to her. He took a risk and explained everything to her. She went into action immediately, rescheduling the hearing and arranging for services so the boys could be cared for by their grandmother. When the court hearing took place, he saw his grandmother smiling. He was told he was to go back to the foster home and pack his things: he was going home.

After spending seven years with a foster care mother and having 10 different caseworkers who didn't know him, Jarel was formally adopted by his grandmother a month before his eighteenth birthday. He calls his grandmother, 'Mom.' His mentor from the Boys & Girls Club—whom he now calls 'Dad'—was there for him all along. He graduated

from high school second in his class. His dad encouraged him to go to college. When his plans fell through to attend Xavier University in Baton Rouge due to Hurricane Katrina, his dad sent his essay to Baruch College. The admissions staff were so impressed, they contacted him and offered him a full scholarship.

His challenges along the way were magnified by the lack of acceptance by others, including caseworkers, especially when he disclosed he is gay. He was impressed with what his law guardian was able to do on his behalf and decided he wanted to help other foster youth as well. He now works for Lawyers for Children as an advocate and facilitates support groups for LGBTQ youth. And he is in graduate school working toward an MBA in marketing.

Jarel's journey started with his grandmother and took him full circle back to her in the end. He knows his was a journey into foster care that never should have taken place. His grandmother needed preventive services to care for both boys, but she did not get them until the end of Jarel's long and torturous experience in the foster care system. At 26, even though he lives on his own, Jarel relies on his mom and dad more than ever.

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