

DOING CHILD WELFARE RIGHT

Successful alternatives to taking children from their families

At the National Coalition for Child Protection Reform, we often are asked what can be done to prevent the trauma of foster care by safely keeping children with their own families. There are many options, ranging from specific services to entire county or state systems that can serve as models. We've listed some below. They are listed thematically; it is not a ranking. None of these alternatives will work in every case or should be tried in every case. Contrary to the way advocates of placement prevention often are stereotyped, we do not believe in "family preservation at all costs" or that "every family can be saved." But these alternatives can keep many children now needlessly taken from their parents safely in their own homes. Similarly, even communities that have turned their child welfare systems into national models still have serious problems, and often much progress still needs to be made. All of the things that go wrong in the worst child welfare systems also go wrong in the best – but they go wrong less often. Those communities also can regress. Those listed here have proven they *can* do far better than most, not that they always will.

1. Doing nothing. There are, in fact, cases in which the investigated family is entirely innocent and perfectly capable of taking good care of their children without any "help" from a child welfare agency. In such cases, the best thing the child protective services worker can do is apologize, shut the door, and go away.

2. Basic, concrete help. Sometimes it may take something as simple as a rent subsidy, or a place in a day care center (to avoid a "lack of supervision" charge) to keep a family together. Indeed, the federal Department of Housing and Urban Development has a Family Unification Program, in which Section 8 vouchers are reserved for families where housing is the issue keeping a family apart or threatening its breakup. Localities must apply for these subsidies. By doing so, they effectively acknowledge what they typically deny: that they do, in fact, tear apart families due to lack of housing. **CONTACT: Ruth White, Executive Director National Center for Housing and Child Welfare (866) 790-6766, info@nchcw.org.** Ms. White also is a member of the NCCPR Board of Directors.

3. Intensive Family Preservation Services (IFPS) programs. The first such program, Homebuilders, in Washington State, was established in the mid-1970s. The very term "family preservation" was invented specifically to apply to this type of program, which has a better track record for safety than foster care. The basics concerning how these programs work – and what must be included for a program to be a real "family preservation" program -- are in NCCPR Issue Papers 10 and 11. Issue Paper 11 lists studies proving the programs' effectiveness. **CONTACTS:** Charlotte Booth, executive director, Homebuilders (253) 874-3630, info@institutefamily.org, Susan Kelly, former director, Families First (Michigan's IFPS program) (734) 547-9164, skelly@casey.org

4. The Alabama "System of Care." This is one of the most successful child welfare reforms in the country, successful enough to be featured on the front page of *The New York Times*. The reforms are the result of a consent decree growing out of a lawsuit brought by the Bazelon

Center for Mental Health Law. The consent decree, now ended, required the state to rebuild its entire system from the bottom up, with an emphasis on keeping families together. The rate at which children are taken from their homes is among the lowest in the country, and re-abuse of children left in their own homes has been cut sharply. An independent monitor appointed by the court found that children are *safer* now than before the changes. **CONTACTS: Ira Burnim, Legal Director, Bazelon Center for Mental Health Law (202) 467-5730, ext. 129.** Mr. Burnim also is a member of the NCCPR Board of Directors. **Paul Vincent, Child Welfare Policy and Practice Group, Montgomery, Ala. (334) 264-8300, Paulvincent@childwelfaregroup.org** Mr. Vincent ran the child protection system in Alabama when the lawsuit was filed. He worked closely with the plaintiffs to develop and implement the reform plan. **Ivor Groves, independent, court-appointed monitor, (850) 422-8900.**

5. Family to Family. This is a multi-faceted program developed by the Annie E. Casey Foundation. One element of the program, Team Decisionmaking often is confused with the entire program, which has many more elements. The program is described at the Casey website <http://bit.ly/btOf0j> A comprehensive outside evaluation of the program, found that it led to fewer placements, shorter placements, and less bouncing of children from foster home to foster home – with no compromise of safety. **CONTACT: Gretchen Test, Annie E. Casey Foundation (410) 547-6600, gtest@aecf.org**

6. Community/Neighborhood Partnerships for Child Protection. These partnerships, overseen by the Center for the Study of Social Policy in Washington, are similar to the Family to Family projects. **CONTACTS: Marno Batterson, Center for the Study of Social Policy, (641) 792-5918, marno.batterson@cssp.org**

7. The turnaround in Pittsburgh. In the mid-1990s, the child welfare system in Pittsburgh and surrounding Allegheny County, Pa. was typically mediocre, or worse. Foster care placements were soaring and those in charge

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insisted every one of those placements was necessary. New leadership changed all that. Since 1997, the foster care population has been cut dramatically. When children must be placed, about half of all placements are with relatives and siblings are kept together 82 percent of the time.

They've done it by making big new investments in primary prevention and family preservation, embracing innovations like Family to Family and adding elements of their own, such as housing counselors in every child welfare office so families aren't destroyed because of housing problems. And children are safer. Reabuse of children left in their own homes has declined and there has been a significant and sustained decline in child abuse fatalities.

CONTACT: Karen Blumen, Allegheny County Department of Human Services, Office of Community Relations (412) 350-5707.

8. Reform in El Paso County, Colorado. By recognizing the crucial role of poverty in child maltreatment, El Paso County reversed steady increases in its foster care population. The number of children in foster care declined significantly – and the rate of reabuse of children left in their own homes fell below the state and national averages, according to an independent evaluation by the Center for Law and Social Policy. **CONTACT: Barbara Drake, El Paso County Department of Human Services, (719) 444-5532.**

9. The Bridge Builders, Bronx, New York. Combine the giving and guidance of ten foundations with the knowledge and enthusiasm of eight community-based agencies, add extensive involvement of neighborhood residents in outreach, service delivery and governance, then partner with the child protective services agency and what do you get? A significant reduction in the number of children taken from their homes, with no compromise of safety, in a neighborhood that is among those once losing more children to foster care than any other in New York City. That's the record of the Bridge Builders Initiative in the Highbridge section of The Bronx. (NCCPR received a grant to assist the Bridge Builders with media work). **CONTACTS: Joe Jenkins, executive director, (718) 681-2222; Jenkinsj@highbridgelife.org, John Rios, Jewish Child Care Association of New York, co-chair Bridge Builders Executive Committee, riosj@jccany.org**

10. The transformation in Maine. After a little girl named Logan Marr was taken needlessly from her mother only to be killed by a foster mother who formerly worked for the child welfare agency, the people of Maine refused to settle for pat answers about background checks and licensing standards. They zeroed in on the fact that Maine had one of the highest proportions of children in the country trapped in foster care. The combination of grassroots demands for change from below and new leadership at the top led to a significant reduction in the number of children taken away over the course of a year, the proportion of children placed with relatives has soared while the proportion in the worst form of care, group homes and institutions, plummeted. It's all been done without compromising safety, earning the support of the state's independent child welfare ombudsman. **CONTACTS: Dean**

Crocker, Vice President for Programs, Maine Children's Alliance, (207) 623-1868 ext. 212, dcrocker@mekids.org; Mary Callahan, founder Maine Alliance for DHS Accountability and Reform, (207) 353-4223, maryec_98@yahoo.com

11. Changing financial incentives. This change spurs both government and private child welfare agencies to come up with all sorts of innovations.

Illinois has focused on changing incentives for private agencies. Until the late 1990s, Illinois reimbursed those agencies the way other states typically do: They were paid for each day they kept a child in foster care. Thus, agencies were rewarded for letting children languish in foster care and punished for achieving permanence. Now those incentives have been reversed, in part because of pressure from the Illinois Branch of the ACLU, which won a lawsuit against the child welfare system. Today, private agencies in Illinois are rewarded both for adoptions (which often are conversions of kinship placements to subsidized guardianships) and for returning children safely to their own homes. They are penalized for prolonged stays in foster care. The foster care population plummeted, and children are safer. Today, Illinois takes away children at one of the lowest rates in the country. Independent, court-appointed monitors have found that child safety has improved. **CONTACT: Ben Wolf, Illinois Branch, ACLU, (312) 201-9760, ext. 420, bwolf@aclu-il.org**

12. The transformation in Florida. Less than a decade ago, Florida was the national example of child welfare failure. The disappearance of a foster child for more than a year before anyone even noticed symbolized the collapse of a system built on a take-the-child-and-run mentality. Then new leadership reversed course, replacing the former bunker mentality with an emphasis on openness and replacing the take-the-child-and-run approach with an emphasis on safe approaches to keeping families together. And Florida obtained a waiver allowing it to trade in its right to an unlimited open-ended entitlement to foster care money (discussed in detail in NCCPR Issue Paper 12) for a flat grant that can be used for better alternatives as well. Entries into care are down significantly and independent evaluators say child safety improved. The reforms were highlighted by *The New York Times*. **CONTACT: ALAN ABRAMOWITZ, Former Dir., Div. of Family Safety, Florida Department of Children and Families alan.Abramowitz@dcf.state.fl.us, 850-566-5670**

13. Due process of law. Even the best programs are no substitute for due process. That means court hearings in child welfare cases should be open. But that also means it's urgent for accused parents to have meaningful legal representation from well-trained attorneys with low caseloads and solid support staff. It's not a matter of getting "bad" parents off, it's a matter of challenging case records that often are rife with error, countering cookie-cutter "service plans" that provide no services and ensuring that families get the help they need. There is much more on this in NCCPR's *Due Process Agenda for Families* at www.nccpr.org Updated Feb. 18, 2011