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Child Services and Foster Care: Policies and Practices that Work

*Foster Care in Rhode Island: An Over-reliance On Out-of-home Care*

In May 2015, the Annie E. Casey Foundation and Kids Count released a joint report (*Every Kid Needs a Family*) to highlight the status of the national foster care system.[[1]](#footnote-1) The report found that 28 percent of children in state foster care are placed in non-family settings—*twice the national average.* As of December 31, 2014, there were 2,078 children under age 21 in the care of DCYF who were in out-of-home placements, representing the *second straight annual increase.[[2]](#footnote-2)* As of September 30, 2014, 12.4 percent of children in out-of-home care experienced at least three placements, 205 children are currently awaiting adoption and 13.7 percent of children in Rhode Island who entered out-of-home care re-entered care within 12 months—*far above the national threshold of 6.8 percent*.

These figures create significant challenges for the state and symbolize a system in need of improvement, one that is overburdened by a lack of caseworkers, inadequate resources for foster families and an over-reliance on group care. Foster youth in out-of-home care often experience multiple placements, lose contact with family members and may have overlooked educational, physical and mental health needs. Even while in the system, the turnover among caseworkers rests at 25 percent,[[3]](#footnote-3) a symptom of insufficient supports and the failure to shift enough youth to permanent care. As a result, they are more likely than their peers to drop out of school, commit a crime or undergo significant trauma. In fact, the Casey Foundation noted 40 percent of these children have no clinical need to be in such restrictive settings—and yet, with a short supply of foster parents, those who enter the system have no choice but to languish in the system. The cost of excess group placements extends to the state, resulting in expenses *seven to ten times greater* than a family placement.[[4]](#footnote-4) As a result, the state has produced a troubling culture centered on non-family placements, resulting in significantly higher operational costs, re-entry of foster youth into the system and frequent turnover of caseworkers.

*Improving Rhode Island Foster Care*

The impetus for reform is clear. The appropriate level of support and services can help youth in care maximize their potential and ensure they have the opportunity to succeed in schools and the workplace setting. More importantly, every child should have the opportunity to grow up in a caring home. Through the “A Family for Every Child Initiative”, Foster Forward’s “Works Wonders” program and other assorted initiatives, DCYF and Governor Raimondo are in the process of ensuring these outcomes.

The Rhode Island Family Impact Seminar (FIS) hopes to further elevate the discourse and chart steps toward significant reform, capitalizing on a unique opportunity to facilitate collaboration among key stakeholders across sectors. The Seminar plans to host 50 legislators, DCYF officials, non-profits and private providers to the State House—a large forum that, with institutional clout, can draw a variety of individuals from different vantage points in the field. In turn, by facilitating an open and accessible dialogue, the seminar can build policymakers’ relationships with researchers and academics surrounding foster care policy. The FIS aims to effectively bridge the gap between policy and practice, ensuring that ultimate policies are grounded in promising, evidence-based research and are feasible amid the state’s unique institutional environment. Ideally, the Family Impact Seminar is designed to leverage this collective dialogue and exchange of best practices to increase the range of wrap-around supports for families and strengthen the pool of prospective foster parents through more visible outreach and support.

This expected range of political officials, court liaisons, university researchers and subject matter experts can all additionally utilize the evidence-based framework provided by Dr. Mark Testa (our keynote speaker in RIFIS) to hone in on and discuss the promising practices that are most applicable (and most impactful) for the state of Rhode Island. Furthermore, with their localized knowledge and unique understanding of the institutional environment, this cross-section of stakeholders can adapt those principles to inform solutions that are both politically and economically feasible for the state. These strategies will provide the state with an innovative lens on the issue of foster care. For example, A Family for Every Child provides significant technical assistance and coalesces wrap-around supports for prospective foster families while Wonder Works builds upon cutting-edge workforce development theories and sector-based training programs to ensure professional success for foster youth. These are the types of initiatives that the Family Impact Seminar, with the support of external research and diverse stakeholders, can produce on a larger scale to more effectively address this problematic reliance on institutional care and the negative implications associated with such a focus.

The Rhode Island Family Impact Seminar hopes that legislators will incorporate the vast array of research and stakeholder insights into future initiatives, aligning foster care policy with best and community-grounded practices. As a result, we hope legislators—in conjunction with nonprofit stakeholders and subject matter experts—can produce innovative solutions to enhance permanency and provide steady support for foster families. FIS hopes to empower these individuals to produce positive academic and professional outcomes for foster youth. To do so, we will not only build upon the initiatives already in place but also facilitate discussion about other states’ benchmarked best practices, sustainable funding models, and collaboratively driven solutions. Ultimately, with the initial work of this Seminar, we can set a sustainable foundation for future, successful foster care policy here in Rhode Island.



Child Services and Foster Care:

Policies and Practices that Work

By Dr. Mark Testa (University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill School of Social Work)

The intersection of two policy questions frame many of the key policy and practice debates in children’s services and foster care. The first is: Should public child welfare be satisfied with the safe reduction in the number of children in foster care or should it set its sights on a diffuse array of child well-being improvements, such as such as fostering secure parent-child attachments, intervening when child development lags behind normative milestones, and offering post-permanency assistance to families who adopt or assume legal guardianship of foster youth? The second is: Should the primary group relationships of family, extended kinship, and voluntary association be responsible for achieving these aims largely on their own, or should the secondary systems of market institutions and state authority ultimately be held accountable for ensuring equal developmental opportunities and minimum well-being for all children? Responses to these two questions generate a matrix of policy alternatives, for example, alternative response vs. formal investigation in child protective services, informal vs. licensed kinship care in child placement, family preservation vs. adoption in permanency planning, and community-based services vs. residential treatment in caring for foster children with emotional and behavioral challenges.

*Foster Care: An Evidence-Based Approach*

The purpose of this talk is to present an approach to evidence-based policymaking, which encourages spirited partisanship when championing innovations but demands nonpartisan like-mindedness when evaluating the impacts of such innovations on the safety, family permanence, and well-being of children. This approach, which has been codified in *A Framework to Design, Test, Sustain, and Spread Effective Practice in Child Welfare* distributed by the U.S. Children’s Bureau, is based on four principles: 1) fund programs with the best available evidence of past success; 2) invest generously in program implementation; 3) rigorously evaluate outcomes using randomized controlled trials whenever possible; and 4) change or replace programs if the evidence shows they don’t produce the desired impacts.

*A Rhode Island Focus*

I apply this approach to the analysis of children’s services and foster care in the state of Rhode Island. I examine recent historical data on state performance in improving child welfare outcomes. I review the best available evidence on the comparative merits of different policies and practices, for example, alternative response vs. formal investigation when intervening with families reported to child protective services; family preservation vs. child removal when children have been indicated for maltreatment; kinship guardianship vs. adoption when children cannot be reunified with their parents; and community-based services vs. residential treatment when caring for children with emotional and behavioral problems. I discuss the challenge of building credible evidence for what works in children’s services and illustrate a method for incorporating low-cost, randomized control trials into routine quality improvement operations in children’s services and foster care.

In spite of the decline in Rhode Island’s foster care caseload, too many children in the state are removed from their homes and placed into foster care. Nearly six out of every 1,000 Rhode Island children enter out-of-home care, almost double the national average and higher than all but eight states. The best available evidence suggests that when in doubt, it is best to maintain children in their home rather than place them into foster care. For those children taken into foster care, there is an over-reliance on group homes in Rhode Island, especially for children under the age of 12. The best available evidence shows that young children’s well-being is best assured within the context of stable family life, and when indicated, by consistent attention from one or two adults who can help with the treatment of children’s emotional and behavioral challenges. The stability of family life after reunification also deserves to be a higher priority. Rhode Island has the second highest re-entry rate in the country. Over 15 percent of all children reunified with family reenter care within 12 months. Here the evidence for what works is less solid, but Rhode Island should take the lead in building evidence for post-reunification services as part of the post-permanency transformation already underway.

*Barriers to Evidence-Based Solutions*

My talk highlights several barriers that must be overcome in order to spread evidence-based innovations in children’s services and foster care. The first is what the sociologist, Peter Rossi, referred to as the “iron law of program evaluation:” the expected value for any measured effect of a social program is zero. In short, most programs, when properly evaluated, turn out to be ineffective or at best marginally accomplishing their set aims.” Of the 340 programs catalogued on the California Evidence-Based Clearinghouse for Child Welfare, only 29 were well-supported by research evidence. Of these 29, only 2 were rated as high relevance for child welfare populations. Given the low 2:8 success to failure ratio that is the norm in business, medical research, and other evidence-based fields, it will be important for the field to learn new ways of faithfully implementing and rigorously evaluating hundreds of promising innovations, which are smarter, cheaper, and quicker, so that the knowledge-base for what works in children’s services and foster care can be greatly expanded.

Even with an enlarged knowledge-base, however, it will be important for evidence-based policymaking to take into account the obstacle of motivated reasoning to widespread dissemination. Motivated reasoning refers to the formation of beliefs about what works, which reflect and reinforce prior commitments to one or another idealized ways of life. Motivated reasoning responds defensively to contrary evidence and pushes people to develop elaborate rationalizations to justify holding beliefs that evidence shows to be doubtful. In order to break the gridlock that currently stymies collective agency and impact, it will be important to incorporate competing moral intuitions and ideological visions into the design, evaluation, implementation, and dissemination of evidence-based innovations. This is the approach taken in the implementation and evaluation of the IV-E waiver experiments that were conducted on subsidized guardianship in Illinois, Tennessee, and Wisconsin. By mustering evidence that reinforced longstanding hopes but alleviated countervailing fears, a bipartisan consensus quickly emerged that reversed 50 years of inaction on subsidized guardianship as a federally-funded permanency option. The bipartisan consensus has continued to widen. On March 30, the President signed into law the Evidence-Based Policymaking Commission Act of 2016. Co-sponsored by Speaker Paul Ryan in the House and Democrat Patty Murray in the Senate, the Act charges the commission with making recommendations on how best to incorporate outcomes measurement, institutionalize randomized controlled trials and rigorous impact analysis into program design. As demonstrated by the child welfare waiver experiments of the 2000s, these types of evaluation help build evidence for what works best when invest investing in innovations to improve outcomes for children and families.

*About the Rhode Island Family Impact Seminars*

The Rhode Island Family Impact Seminar is affiliated with the Family Impact Institute which is the hub for a national network of university-based sites in over 25 states (<http://familyimpactseminars.org>). In 2014, Brown University was accepted to represent Rhode Island. The Institute provides training and technical assistance to state affiliates. We receive guidance from a legislative advisory council led by Senator Louis DiPalma and Representative Deborah Ruggiero. Legislative staff have provided additional support. Adam Rabinowitz and James DeCamp coordinated the 2016 Seminar.

The Rhode Island Family Impact Seminar shares two primary goals espoused by the Family Impact Institute. One is to strengthen policymaking by providing timely, objective, high-quality research on current issues for state legislators and legislative staff through seminars, discussion sessions, and issue briefs. The Seminar also promotes the adoption of a family impact lens to consider the effects of policy on family functioning and the fulfillment of key social responsibilities including childcare and economic support.

This issue brief was prepared by Dr. Kenneth Wong, Director of the Rhode Island Family Impact Seminars. Contact kenneth\_wong@brown.edu for further information. The Family Impact Seminars are sponsored by the Brown University Taubman Center for Public Policy.

1. The Annie E. Casey Foundation. *Every Kid Needs a Family.* Baltimore: The Annie E. Casey Foundation, 19 May 2015. Web. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Casey Family Programs*.* *Rhode Island State Fact Sheet.* Baltimore: The Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2014. Web. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Gourlay, Kristin. "Children in Crisis: Struggling to Recruit Enough Full Families." *Rhode Island NPR*. National Public Radio. Providence, Rhode Island, 14 Aug. 2015. Radio. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. The Annie E. Casey Foundation. *Every Kid Needs a Family.* Baltimore: The Annie E. Casey Foundation, 19 May 2015. Web. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)