



**Written Testimony from Casey Family Programs to  
Alaska State House Health and Social Services Committee  
March 16, 2017**

Casey Family Programs would like to thank the Chair of the Committee, Chair Spohnholtz, for the invitation to present written testimony. We would also like to recognize Vice Chair Edgmon and the other members of the committee. We are grateful for your leadership and focus on improving the foster care system in Alaska. Thank you for inviting Casey Family Programs to share our national expertise and experience regarding foster care and strengthening child welfare systems.

Casey Family Programs is the largest operating foundation in the United States dedicated to safely reducing the need for foster care and building communities of hope across America. Founded in 1966, Casey Family Programs has been analyzing, studying and informing best practices in child welfare for 50 years. We work with child welfare agencies in all 50 states, the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico, with tribal nations, including the Tlingit and Haida, Tanana Chiefs Conference and Kawerak, and with the federal government on child welfare policies and practices. We are a provider of foster care and related services as well, serving 1,400 children and families each year through our field offices in Arizona, California, Idaho, Texas and Washington. We partner with child welfare systems, policymakers, families, community organizations, American Indian tribes and courts to support practices and policies that increase the safety and success of children, strengthen the resilience of families and create supportive communities that can help reduce the need for foster care.

**Re-Directing Child Welfare to Improve Child and Family Outcomes**

Casey Family Programs is committed to protecting children from abuse and neglect. We believe that many children can be kept safe without being removed from their homes. Our goal is to ensure that more children grow up in safe, stable and supportive families. To accomplish this, we believe we must move beyond our current mindset and reimagine child welfare for the 21st century.

We base this approach on our belief that every child in America deserves a safe, stable and permanent family. Research shows that many children can safely thrive within their families when evidence-based services and networks of support are available. Research also shows that permanency and maintaining connections to family and culture are important for children to achieve better life outcomes. While foster care can be a necessary, temporary intervention for some children, we should prioritize effective interventions –including the support of kin –to help families safely keep children at home. Most children enter the child welfare system due to neglect-related issues, often as the result of parental mental health or substance abuse challenges. Foster care, as you know, is an intervention that takes place *after* a child has been mistreated. That is why it is so important to focus on preventing the need for foster care in the first place by using approaches to help strengthen families before removal from the home becomes

necessary. When a child must be removed from home, the priority is remediation of the risks that led to removal and then timely reunification. To maintain the emotional connection and stability of family, best practices and federal policy -including the Indian Child Welfare Act as it relates to Indian or Alaskan Native families -support a preference for timely placement first and foremost with siblings and kin. To avoid the negative consequences for children who linger in foster care and experience multiple placement changes, the goal is timely permanency through reunification. If reunification is not possible, the goal is to achieve a permanent legal home with kin or alternatively with a loving and committed non-relative family where the child will thrive.

The legislature provides direction for improving the lives of vulnerable children in a variety of ways. In addition to providing a legal framework that supports safety, permanency and well-being for children, legislators can invest public resources toward these goals. Aligning child welfare resources and financing strategies with the desired outcome of keeping children safe at home is critical. The legislature also can direct and align financing across public agencies to achieve better outcomes for vulnerable children and their families.

Reform of child welfare financing to expand support for prevention services has long been a goal of Casey Family Programs. We work to educate federal policy makers and their constituents about the need for finance reform that will allow states to use child welfare funds to safely prevent foster care. Currently, the vast majority of dedicated federal child welfare funds (Title IV-E dollars) and state matching funds are available to serve children only after they have been placed in foster care. The goal of child welfare finance reform is to provide flexibility to reinvest these funds in evidence-based and promising practices that will safely reduce the unnecessary use of out-of-home placement and improve child outcomes.

In addition, state legislatures can play a key role in moving child welfare forward by effective oversight. By actively monitoring the state's progress and capacity, legislators can support and guide implementation of policies and use of resources to keep children and families safely together whenever possible and to improve foster care for those children who do need that temporary intervention.

### **Improving Outcomes for Children**

It is important to consider the realities of foster care in Alaska when discussing what changes should be considered. In Alaska, the rate of youth entering into foster care is very high, roughly three times the national average. And, while exits from care have been increasing, entries into care are still higher than exits. This means that the overall population of youth living in foster care is growing every year. In fact, while there were 1,751 children and youth in foster care in 2005, this grew to 2,830 children and youth in 2016. Alaska's rate of repeat maltreatment – a measurement of the number of children who are victims of abuse or neglect after a prior substantiated incident of abuse or



neglect – is also very high at 13% of children after 6 months and 20% of children after 12 months, while the national average is 5.6% and 10%, respectively.

In our work with the child welfare agency, Casey Family Programs has been focused on achieving permanency for children who have experienced long stays in foster care as well as for children who are close to legal permanency – either reunification, adoption or guardianship. Another critical factor in Alaska is the disproportionate rate at which Alaska Native children enter foster care and remain in placement. That rate is about 55% for Alaska Native children even though they comprise less than 30% of the statewide population.

We believe that many children in out-of-home care today could be kept safely at home if a continuum of services and supports were available for families and if we could better engage families in service planning and delivery. The long standing Tribal State Collaboration Group and the current Strategic Plan is attempting to do that. Engagement of Tribes is vital to this endeavor and is very active in Alaska in the current administration. Casey's Indian Child Welfare Program has also entered into Indian Child Welfare Agreements with three Alaska Tribes. Those Tribes are increasing their infrastructure to keep children safely at home, provide culturally responsive services to youth and families, license tribal homes, and engage Tribal staff throughout service delivery.

### **Workforce Capacity and Performance**

In addition to engaging families in a continuum of services, a strong and stable child welfare workforce is critical to improving outcomes for children and families. In many states, child welfare workforce turnover has reached crisis proportions. Research shows that high worker turnover has a negative impact on repeat maltreatment, achievement of permanency for children, and child welfare system performance, including timely response in child protection investigations, timely closure of investigations, and frequency of caseworker contact with children.

Child welfare workers need to be supported by manageable caseloads and workloads; adequate compensation, benefits and career ladders; quality supervision and coaching; and reduction of unnecessary paperwork and other burdensome administrative requirements. In addition, we need to team caseworkers with other professionals who have expertise that can help address and strengthen families' protective factors, such as nurses, early childhood specialists, substance abuse treatment workers, mental health counselors, and domestic violence specialists. Teaming can also facilitate mentoring and coaching for staff and support safety for workers in isolated areas.

### **Promoting Positive Outcomes for Children in Temporary Foster Care**

While a small number of children do need to be removed from their families as the only option for their protection, it is important to recognize that removing a child from his or her home — even under such circumstances — is traumatic. Children do best in a

nurturing and permanent family, and when the trauma of removal can be avoided. In addition, serving them at home is a less costly option for the state. Therefore, for children who must be removed from their homes, it is critical that the placement of a child in foster care is temporary, with the focus on returning a child to their home or identifying another permanent home as quickly as possible. Having loving and supportive caregivers throughout their time in care is a critical factor in ensuring a child's well-being.

Placements should be in as family-like a setting as possible, ideally with relatives, close family friends or other adults known to have a supportive relationship with the child, and ideally in the child's same community, where school and other connections can be maintained. Best practices include diligent efforts to find, engage and support willing and able kin that are conducted immediately when emergency placement is necessary, whenever temporary placement options are considered, and when permanency planning takes place. In addition, best practice and federal policies require efforts to place siblings together, a practice that is critical to maintaining strong emotional relationships and reducing the trauma of placement. In the unusual circumstances when sibling placement is not possible, frequent and meaningful contact with siblings must be provided as long as it is in the child's best interest.

Research demonstrates that children placed in a family setting experience better outcomes than children who are placed in group homes or other similar non-family like settings. Children in these placement types experience increased negative outcomes, including higher rates of school dropout, higher likelihood of being arrested, and higher likelihood of aging out of foster care without achieving legal permanency. In addition, placing children who have already experienced trauma in group settings can put them at greater risk of further physical abuse when compared with children placed in family settings.

In addition to ensuring that a child's stay in foster care is temporary and short term, it is equally important to ensure stable placement for children while they are in foster care. While placement with kin or with other ICWA preferred placements is always the goal, if this is not possible on an initial placement or subsequent move, then research and our national experience indicate that reducing the number of moves while in foster care leads to improved outcomes. Research has shown that minimizing placement changes from one unknown foster home to another reduces trauma, lessens child attachment disorders and child emotional and behavior disorders, increases academic achievement, decreases foster parent stress and lowers program costs.

Many child welfare agencies use an approach of "first placement, best placement", which is critical to promoting better outcomes for children in foster care. Some basic practice principles specific to placement stability include:

- Effective training and supports for kin and foster parents,
- Matching the placement of children to the most appropriate home within their school district as opposed to placing simply based on availability,

- Targeted, need-specific training for foster parents (i.e. infant and toddler, adolescents, disability-specific, special needs),
- Frequency of face-to-face visits with foster parents and children by the caseworker.

It is critical to keep a child's time in foster care as short as possible. Research shows that the longer a child stays in foster care and the more moves a child has while in foster care – the poorer the outcomes for that child. Extended periods in care can harm the sense of belonging that comes from a permanent, lifelong connection and can reduce the ability of youth to develop relationships, connect with their community, and acquire life skills. Therefore, ensuring that children do not linger in foster care is a critical responsibility of any child welfare system. Timely permanency requires that Alaska's child welfare agencies, courts and Alaska's regional non-profits work closely together, as well as tribes where appropriate. The child welfare agency is responsible for developing case plans and for assisting families in accessing services to address the challenges that brought their children into care. The court is responsible for providing oversight of the process and ultimately deciding on a child's permanent placement.

### **A Comprehensive Approach to Improving Child Safety and Well-Being**

Another priority is promoting child well-being. A large body of research indicates that maltreatment harms the cognitive, physical, behavioral, and social dimensions of children's development and overall well-being. We know that it can be doubly traumatic when a child is removed from his or her family. While safety is always going to be our primary concern, it is important to recognize that there is a difference between risk of harm and immediate or imminent danger. As such, these factors should be assessed and considered when making a decision about removal. It is important to critically consider "Is this child better off?" by being removed. This question requires a larger perspective that includes community and other systems in order to move to a paradigm of safe and thriving children within healthy families and strong communities.

Casey Family Programs' Executive Vice President for Systems Improvement, Dr. David Sanders, co-chaired the federal Commission to Eliminate Child Abuse and Neglect Fatalities, which was established by the Protect Our Kids Act of 2012 and charged with developing a national strategy for reducing child fatalities resulting from abuse and neglect. Beginning in 2014, twelve Commissioners, appointed by the President and Congress, began a two-year process of holding public hearings in 11 jurisdictions across the country before concluding its work in March of last year. The commission heard from child protection officials, pediatricians, law enforcement professionals and other stakeholders from across the country to inform a comprehensive set of recommendations.

The commission found that, to keep children safe, a system must have a comprehensive strategy that fosters a collective sense of responsibility for protecting children. This

strategy must be backed by strong, coordinated leadership and accountability and must incorporate decisions about practice, policy and resource allocation that are based on the highest-quality data available. Decisions should be outcome-focused, data-driven and multidisciplinary. A comprehensive approach should also include active and effective oversight by elected officials to stimulate improvements and, more importantly, to sustain them.

Other key recommendations of the Commission include the following:

- First, focus on children at elevated risk of fatality. Children from birth to age 5, particularly infants, are the most vulnerable population.
- Second, require more cross-agency and cross-sector coordination. For example, we should require hospitals to also be responsible for child safety.
  - For newborns who meet risk criteria, health care professionals should collaborate with child welfare agencies to develop federally required plans to ensure these infants' safety and well-being following release from hospitals.
  - We also need to work together on parental substance use, which is a major challenge for Alaska and many other child welfare systems.
- Third, support data-sharing across the health care, education and law enforcement sectors for child protection. This can help anticipate harm to children not known to child protection agencies and help the agencies improve their response.

### **Implementation of the Indian Child Welfare Act**

As most of the children in foster care in Alaska are Native, we would be remiss if we did not mention the importance of implementing the Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA). For Casey, ICWA is the gold standard for child welfare. It emphasizes keeping children with their parents whenever possible and providing the necessary support for those families. It also prioritizes involvement of the extended family, as supports for the parents or as a preferred placement option if there the child must be removed for his or her own safety. It also emphasizes keeping children connected with their communities and cultures, which are important for the well-being of all children. We are aware of Alaska's efforts to improve compliance with the law and the state's efforts to work with the tribes and regional Native non-profit organizations to better comply with ICWA's requirements and protect the well-being of Native children and families. We believe that it is critically important that these efforts continue to be supported and prioritized.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, we would like to emphasize the following points:

- Make support of the child welfare workforce a top priority. A strong and stable workforce is critical to the success of any strategy.





- Clearly define success. Oversight should be driven by meaningful and transparent outcomes that everyone is working toward.
- Examine what more can be done to stem the rate of entries into foster care. Slowing entries and a focus on timely permanency are the keys to reducing the safely number of children in out-of-home care.
- Continue efforts to better implement the Indian Child Welfare Act in collaboration with tribes and regional Native non-profit organizations.
- Finally, recognize that the child welfare agency cannot do it alone. Most children in the system are served for neglect – in Alaska 77 percent of the children entered foster care due to neglect. It is critical that there is coordination with tribes, as well as with other departments and professionals, including those working in health, mental health, domestic violence, substance abuse and law enforcement.

Thank you for your attention and leadership in improving outcomes for children and families. Casey Family Programs would welcome the opportunity to be an ongoing resource to the Alaska Legislature moving forward.