

Lighting the Fire of Urgency...Families Lost and Found in America's Child Welfare System

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Catholic Community Services of Western Washington set out to learn what it would take for children and youth with complex needs living in the foster care and children's mental health systems to have connections with those who cared most about them: parents, relatives, and others that loved them. The children and youth initially targeted by this effort were those who were living in foster or group care or at immanent risk of psychiatric hospitalization in Pierce County, Washington.

A Key Question

What sort of framework and technologies would be necessary to overcome the systemic barriers that block the ability for children and adolescents living in out-of-home care to maintain or reestablish contact and relationships with those that love them?

The Strategy

Look inside and outside of child welfare and children's mental health service traditions for examples of extraordinary frameworks that could improve safety, well-being, and permanency outcomes for children in out-of-home care.

Some Extraordinary Frameworks

The International Red Cross

" Armed conflict and natural disaster leave millions of people around the globe in urgent need of humanitarian assistance every year. Adding to the physical losses, the confusion and chaos surrounding war and natural disaster often separate families just when they need each other most. Tragically, when families and loved ones are separated by war or disaster, their suffering is greater. But, through the strength of the Red Cross Movement and the work of trained volunteers at national societies around the world, including the American Red Cross, families reconnect." (Source: International Red Cross)

Imagine you are sent to the border of a country experiencing war, famine or disaster. One hundred and fifty thousand men, women and children of all ages are headed for the border to seek safety, food, water, shelter and medical care. You and your team have three days and nights to prepare the necessary provisions for these life-sustaining needs, or watch an even greater calamity unfold before you. A completely overwhelming experience, yet every year in places around the world the International Red Cross responds to just such situations, as do many other government and non-government organizations.

There is no choice; it simply must be done. Because of this imperative, people just like you and me have developed frameworks, strategies, and tools to make it possible. Even more remarkable, given the scale and speed of the response, the Red Cross gives equal priority to providing personnel and equipment to interview those affected and store information about their relatives. This is done to help family members reconnect as soon as possible after the tragedy. The driving force is the understanding that the family's best chance for recovery lies with one another, in a situation where civil government may have limited ability to help.

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints

Family ancestry is an important part of individual, family and spiritual life. Through the use of the church's extensive databases, search procedures and a worldwide network of Family Resource Centers, members of the church and others can work to extensively identify and document their family ancestry.

Through personal communication with church members, including members of the Ogden, Utah Department of Children and Family Services, it is estimated that the average American has conservatively between 100-300 living relatives.

Several of those interviewed spoke of family gatherings in Ogden that filled small soccer stadiums.

The American Family



According to the US Census Bureau 2000 Census, of 71 Million Children in the US:

- 98% grow up with family
- 2% foster care institutions

"In 1999, 2.3 million children, or 90 percent of children not living with their parents, lived with relatives, according to the 1999 National Survey of America's Families (NSAF). The vast majority (1.8 million) of these placements were private, without child welfare involvement. Data from the Adoption and Foster Care Analysis Reporting System (AFCARS) from 49 states (including the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico) that were able to provide data, show that in 1999 kin were caring for 151,864 children in foster care, 26 percent of all foster care children (US DHHS 2001b)." The Continuing Evolution of State Kinship Care Policies, Author(s): Amy Jantz, Rob Geen, Roseana Bess, Cynthia Andrews, Victoria Russell)