

Marguerite Casey Foundation Findings From Thinking Pieces

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Process

The initial step in Marguerite Casey Foundation's fact-finding process was the commissioning of the Thinking Pieces. In March 2002, the Marguerite Casey Foundation asked dozens of stakeholders from across the child and family welfare field to share their ideas for improving the quality and effectiveness of our nation's foster care system. The Foundation targeted experts in their respective fields to provide opinions on the opportunities for bold, imaginative and effective grantmaking.

Writers were chosen by the MCF staff based on their expertise in and passion for the well being of families, children and youth. Those selected represented a cross-section of organizations and perspectives that included service providers, foster children and families, academics, policy makers, activists, community leaders and foster alums. Writers were asked to identify primary problem areas and opportunities for improvement, to define potential arenas for grantmaking and to include relevant demographics, trends and statements of current or emerging needs. They outlined what they see as the most impactful grantmaking possibilities for Marguerite Casey Foundation and suggested existing assets or initiatives in the field that might be enhanced or better leveraged by MCF support.

Key Findings: Support for Families

When viewed in aggregate, the Thinking Pieces provide MCF a broad and highly informative perspective of the challenges and opportunities facing American children and their families – especially those families of color and of lower income.

Perhaps no single concept shone through more brightly than the idea that the traditional definition of American family is fast-becoming an anachronism. Whether directly or implicitly, writers repeatedly challenged the usefulness of the white, western construct of family (mother, father, 2+ children), demonstrating that, in most cultures, the traditional family never was as simple as our society would like to believe. With an array of statistics, anecdotes and social theories, this evolving definition of "family" was central to every paper, and it was evident that most writers could not examine the deeper issues at play until they had outlined their own definition of family.

The family acts as a microcosm for the larger community, and the modern American family is a varied as our society. Many people shared the view that the traditional definition of family was a narrow, Anglo-centric one. For instance, representatives of tribal communities point out that the family is really the larger tribe. As Winona LaDuke stated in her paper: "Each Native Nation is at the center of it's own universe.... The circle is comprised of the elders, the parents, the children, the ancestors and those yet to come."

In the majority of cultures in this country, “family” is not limited to siblings and parents, but includes grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins, and others who act as a vital support structure for the nuclear family. And, in an increasing number of situations, extended family members assume parental roles when biological parents are unavailable to care for their children.

What many of the stakeholders lobbied for was a more expansive and culturally sensitive definition of family, as well one that takes into account the socio-economic limitations and strains present in many modern households. For instance, single parent homes are increasingly common, yet social norms are still geared toward two-parent households. Additionally, in some families, the two parents that head the home are of the same sex, or the parent role is filled completely by another family member, such as a grandmother.

As communities, service providers and policy makers begin to understand and embrace the incredible differences in modern family structures as well as their own assumptions about what constitutes a successful family, they can begin to develop support structures that will work for all families.

The papers showed widespread consensus around the notion that there are common support structures all families need in order to be successful. The supports needed may be as basic as putting food on the table or as complex as forging consensus around the creation of housing cooperatives. However, all participants agreed that a number of common, fundamental supports would do a great deal to ensure the success of families and help prevent them from entering the child welfare system.

What follows is a description of six of the most common forms, or categories, of support to emerge from the Thinking Pieces. They are:

- Income support
- Parent advocacy
- Education housing
- Healthcare
- And direct support for youth

Income Support

According to research by Donald Hernandez, “Poor and near-poor children live in families with incomes no more than about one-half as large as the typical family in the U.S., and many have much lower incomes...” Yet, financial comfort remains one of the leading barometers of family success and stability. For the writers of the Thinking Pieces, income support mattered in practical terms (rent subsidies, matching savings accounts), but more importantly it mattered in terms of policy changes, such as living wage movements, affordable daycare and healthcare and inexpensive housing.

Policy changes were especially important for the writers because the gap between the haves and have-nots is widening in the United States, forcing more and more families closer to the poverty line. The implications of being poor are greater than simply not being able to “buy things.” Families without adequate means cannot afford childcare to enrich early-stage child development. They cannot get adequate health care, either because employers do not provide benefits, or they can’t afford medical care.

- These necessities can only be secured if workers are provided with fair wages. The reality is that families in which parents work in minimum wage jobs do not actually earn a “living wage.” In her Thinking Piece, Julianne Malveaux of Last Word Productions Inc. states: “The fact that the minimum wage has not risen in six years is a despicable reflection of our nation’s demonization of poverty. But even if the minimum wage were to rise by a dollar an hour, as proposed, it would not provide enough income to place a woman and two children above the poverty line. In several cities around the country, living wage campaigns have riveted public attention because they deal with the basic realities of low-wage life....”
- Fair wages are a problem that exists not only in urban cities, but also in rural communities. “[F]armworkers are the lowest paid workers in the nation, often paid at or only slightly above minimum wage. Such low wages do not allow farmworker families to afford adequate transportation, decent housing, or medical care. And perhaps most importantly, low wages do not allow for farmworker families to seek out childcare or educational programs for their children, resulting in children often working side by side with their parents in the fields,” writes Nelson Carrasquillo, executive director of CATA.
- For Janet Shenk of AFL-CIO, better wages and increased financial security provides a sense of dignity: “...the main factor determining whether millions of working families can live a life of dignity, with food on the table, decent housing, healthcare and time to spend with their children...is wages, pure and simple. Wages in poultry plants and meatpacking houses; wages in commercial laundries and hospitals; wages for janitors, child-care providers, hotel housekeepers, certified nurses aides and – until recently, airport screeners. Wages – and benefits, especially health care coverage – in jobs that won’t disappear with automation or globalization. These are jobs that are here to stay, in sectors of the economy that are expanding as middle-class manufacturing jobs disappear.”
- Poverty is an isolating phenomenon, points out Sandy Close, executive director of Pacific News Service: “Being poor in American once meant having no money; from the Depression on, the path out of poverty was a job. In 21st century America, being poor reflects not only the absence of financial capital or even human capital, but also the absence of social capital. In a culture so drenched with communications technology we call it the “network era,” the worst fate is to wind up incommunicado – alone, invisible, with no sense of a role or purpose in the larger society.”

The pervasive effects of poverty were echoed in nearly every Thinking Piece. Without the funds to provide for the very basic needs of their family, parents are at an immediate and ongoing disadvantage.

Parent Advocacy

Conventional wisdom declares that children are the future, and there is no arguing with the fact that healthy children will build the next generation of healthy communities. But, children learn from their parents, making them an invaluable conduit to the future. Unfortunately, it can be difficult for parents to ensure a smooth path for their children when they do not know how to lobby for their own best interests.

Families must have support from community and other social services so they can be the best parents possible. Parents need to obtain the knowledge required to unite and push for social change in their own best interests. Regardless of income level, parents have the power – and the duty – to advocate for their rights and those of their children.

The Thinking Pieces emphasize a growing need for tools and systems that can unite and advocate for parents with common goals and objectives. This need is especially prevalent in low-income communities. There are a disproportionate number of low-income families in the foster care system, and often these families often cannot afford the necessary healthcare and mental health services, substance abuse counseling, family counseling or legal assistance required to retain their children during adverse circumstances.

Additionally, many low-income families are immigrants and minorities who may lack requisite language skills and knowledge of their rights as U.S. citizens. They need access to the tools that can help them better understand their responsibilities as parents in the U.S. and the social services that are available to help them.

- Immigrant groups would welcome these resources and are usually eager for opportunities to learn about ways to impact U.S. policy making. In discussing a recent Immigrant Women’s Leadership Gathering, Young Shin of the Asian Immigrant Women Advocates states, “...there was one overriding issue which united all the women: the importance of organizing, educating and developing grassroots immigrant women leaders and organizers who can bring about change in their communities.”
- “The need for investment in leadership development for parents is essential. Supporting families and building on their natural caregiving capabilities, helping them understand their child’s developmental needs, being able to identify early learning or health problems, managing difficult situations at home, and understanding how to navigate the systems that serve their children, especially the educational system, will ensure that...parents are the best and most effective caregivers and advocates for their children,” states Yolie Flores Aguilar of Los Angeles County Children’s Planning Council.
- Reverend Everett Bell of Los Angeles Metropolitan Churches also discussed the disconnect between parents, communities and services. “Members of the community never learn the process to attract resources, nor do they learn the process needed to change the issues that affect them. No formal process is utilized to get answers to questions such as: What are the Causes? How do the causes contribute to the overall condition? Who are the people in power? How do we engage them?”

Education

It is often said that education is the key to opportunity, and one of the leading indicators of a child’s success is the education level of its mother. Not only does education increase job opportunities and wages, but it also enables youth to grow into adults who are engaged and active in their communities.

- Phil Sorenson of Casey Family Programs stated, “Youth who feel successful in school, possess academic and problem-solving skills, and have the employment and higher education options provided by a high school diploma will be more likely to...become self-sufficient adults.... [We] need to acknowledge the undeniable link between educational attainment and adult success....”
- Hal Lawson of University at Albany, State University of New York’s School of Social Welfare focuses on the make up of the country’s schools: “There is an enduring need for schools to improve their performance with low-income children, especially African-Americans, Native Americans and multi-ethnic Latinos.... There is a genuine workforce crisis in public schools and in public sector social and health service agencies. This crisis includes problems with quality assurance (e.g., the lack of qualified teachers, principals, and service providers), high turnover, and a shortage of African-Americans, Latinos, and Native Americans.”
- Education is not simply book learning. The Thinking Pieces point out a need for practical and continuing education opportunities, such as parenting classes, home economics, budgeting and the like. MAD DADS point out that, “[A] neighborhood network must be comprised of core organizations or groups, capable of addressing the following ten components: child welfare, community safety, juvenile justice, parent support groups, substance abuse, resource and referrals, child care, housing, recreation, socialization, education, career planning and job development.”

Housing

The amount of funds available for low-income housing has declined steadily since the 1970s, while the need for such housing has grown significantly. Today, families with children comprise 38 percent of the nation’s homeless population. Uncertain living situations can hinder children’s development and damage the family unit. Additionally, parents who cannot provide homes for their children are likely to lose their children to the child welfare system.

Many families who are homeless have jobs and could afford to pay rent. However, in many areas, potential renters are required to pay first and last month’s rent, along with a security deposit. The large sum of money required by landlords is a barrier to entry faced by working families searching for a suitable place to live. An alternative to the rental market is the “American Dream” – homeownership – something well beyond the reach of many families.

- An alternative to traditional homeownership, cooperative housing, was raised in the paper from the Cooperative Housing Demonstration Initiative’s Darryl Cox, “The opportunity to live in cooperative mixed income developments is of crucial significance for children in families with critical housing needs. Such communities offer their residents exposure to differing cultures, lifestyles and potentially influential role models. It is in these communities that some of the critical foundation blocks for comprehensive, enduring socio-economic integration can be formed providing a means for these families to begin attaining a share of the American Dream.”

- Father Randy Eldridge advocates for another model for homeownership, similar to that of Habitat for Humanity, “Our home construction project enables people to actually help build their own home giving them a feeling of worth and responsibility. This program employs people to work on the construction of the dwelling, training them to be productive and teaching skills that can be used in the outside world. We mill our own lumber for the projects, make our own cedar shingles and construct the cabinets and doors in our wood working shop. This project gives us the opportunity to train and employ individuals who otherwise would not have a job.”
- Homeownership also provides families with a sense of pride and belonging. The boost to one’s self-esteem that homeownership can provide will positively impact all aspects of a family’s life. “Homeownership is strongly correlated with higher rates of civic participation, such as voting, and higher rates of educational attainment,” notes Arturo Vargas of NALEO.

Healthcare

For most of its history, the U.S. child welfare system has focused its programmatic and policy efforts on issues of protection, but given very little attention to children’s health and well being. With mental health problems as a leading cause of families ending up in the child welfare system, it is clear that any system that seeks to support families needs to include access to quality healthcare.

Healthy families have good physical, emotional and mental health, and services to ensure health needs are met should be available to everyone, including low-income families. Yet, it is equally important to provide families with an understanding that seeking health services is nothing to be ashamed about. In some communities, the stigma surrounding families with poor mental health can discourage them from seeking help, forcing the family even further apart.

- “Many of these [barriers] – the cost of treatment, fragmented service or lack of services, social stigma and lack of parity and insurance coverage for mental health services – are problems for American families of all backgrounds,” points out Dr. David Satcher, former U.S. surgeon general.
- Dr. Neal Halfon from UCLA Center for Healthier Children, Families and Communities observes that children who are part of the social service system face even bigger hurdles to receiving quality healthcare: “Children in the child welfare system suffer from acute and chronic medical, mental health and developmental problems at rates that exceed by three and four times the rates observed in the general child population. Some of these problems have their origins in the abuse and neglect that lead to a child’s placement in foster care. However, many problems, in particular mental health problems, become more significant and severe after children are placed in care. While the shortcomings of current health service delivery mechanisms have been well documented, very little has been done over the past twenty years to systematically improve the delivery of health services, mental health services and developmental services for children in the child welfare system.”
- Dr. Bill Foege points out an even bigger problem – equity: “For every \$12 spent on people over 65, the federal government spends only a single dollar on

children under 18. For all our rhetoric on prevention and children, it is not where we put our money.”

Income levels frequently determine the quality of care received, making it difficult for low-income families to access the services they need. To ensure healthy futures for families, the organizations have to work together to get services to all needy families. There needs to be greater awareness of the barriers to achieving and maintaining good physical *and* mental health so we can overcome them.

Direct Support for Youth

At age 18, foster children are faced with the reality of losing everything they have ever known. While foster families, schools and friends may not have been consistent, youth in foster care knew “the system.” The transitional period is often one of uncertainty and hardship, with less than ideal outcomes.

Like many teens at age 18, youth transitioning out of the system have few practical life skills, such as the ability to budget their money. However, they also face problems unique to their situation. For instance, in some states foster children cannot accumulate “assets” leaving them ill-equipped to support themselves after leaving the child welfare system. Additionally, higher education opportunities are often beyond their reach, simply because they do not have the required transcripts from all the various schools they attended during their years in care. Finally, while most youth have access to their parent’s health insurance until age 25, once they age out of the system, foster children no longer have access to the same state services they had while under foster care.

- Lissa Osborne and Mary Anne Herrick, foster care alumnae, point out the quandary faced by most foster youth, “The expectation that foster youth at 18 would transition out of care, from a life where they were allowed very little freedom and responsibility abruptly to independence is illogical. In essence, it is setting them up for failure. How many parents who consider the well-being of their child would expect them to leave the home when they turned 18, not let them move back if things did not work out, not offer any financial support if the youth needed it, and not prepare them for all the new responsibility they would have by teaching them the skills they need in order to live on their own?”
- The statistics are clear; there are numerous children segueing into adulthood through the state system at any given time. Gary Stangler of Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative cites, “Every year, at least 16,000 young people formally ‘age out’ of the nation’s foster care system. Because the transition process actually extends well beyond the formal age of emancipation (18 in most states), at any given time approximately 100,000 young people in America are in the process of transitioning from dependency on the child welfare system to adulthood.”
- Foster alumni can serve as some of the best supports for foster youth. There’s a Way Youth Advisory Council expressed its willingness to help others, “We want opportunities to work directly with young people that are still in the system. We consider ourselves as experts and feel like we could be a source of information and strength for someone in foster care. It would be nice if there was funding to help us start mentoring programs. Maybe we could help make a foster child’s experience a little better than our own. We could do this by advocating for them

or just talking to them as one who understands what it is like to be in a foster home.” Coupled with other forms of financial and life-skills support, mentor programs could increase the chance that those aging out of foster care are successful in their endeavors, and turn into active and engaged members of their communities.

Conclusions

Regardless of how the definition of family continues to evolve, it is evident that all families need a better support structure. The child welfare system is made up predominately of low-income families, who also happen to be families of color.

- “In addition to being the fastest growing group of children in the country, Latino children also have the fastest growing poverty rates. Between 1980 and 1996, there was a 141 percent increase in child poverty for Latino children (from 1.7 million to 4.1 million). Although the number of poor Latino children has dropped over the last three years, today 30.3 percent of all Latino children live in poverty.” (Cited by Yolie Flores Aguilar)
- “The African American and Latino families, especially those with children, shouldered a disproportionate amount of poverty, at rates of 22.1 and 21.7 respectively.” (Cited by Julianne Malveaux)
- “[The Native] population is fast growing, with at least thirty five percent of the Native population under the age of 20. Yet, most of our children live in economic poverty. At least one third of the reservation-based children live in substandard, or overcrowded housing, many without some basic resources, like a telephone.” (Cited by Winona LaDuke)

By focusing on the services and policies that could prevent families from entering the system in the first place, Marguerite Casey Foundation could make great inroads into system reform.

Prevention is a cornerstone of Casey’s ideals, and the focus on equipping parents with the tools they need to prevent families from breaking apart in the first place is in line with the goals of the Foundation. As two people who have experience the devastating effects of foster care can attest, Mary Anne Herrick and Lissa Osborne plead, “The bonds that exist in unhealthy families, between parents, children and siblings may be just as strong as the bonds that exist in families that are healthy.... Breaking family ties by removing children from their homes and placing them in foster care is a very heavy sentence for both parents and children and should be considered only as a last resort.”

Helping parents advocate for their own interests is key to the success of any Marguerite Casey Foundation initiative. The Thinking Pieces emphasize that losing one’s child is not in any parent’s life plan. In most cases, parental instinct is to protect and provide for one’s child. Sometimes, parents just need some guidance to learn how to argue for their own best interests.

Marguerite Casey Foundation has been challenged to do its grantmaking in an innovative way, in a way that keeps the central focus on the people who hold the

systems accountable. Lots of foundations provide direct services to families and lots of funds flow to these programs. However, community-based organizations that attempt to teach families life skills do not always have reliable sources of funds.

Without a doubt, funding for direct services and programs are necessary, as these programs fulfill families' immediate needs – food, shelter and the like. However, funds also need to get to programs that go to the next step – teaching life skills.

Hal Lawson captured Marguerite Casey Foundation's charge the best when he wrote: "The Foundation can be a catalyst for systems change and cross-systems change. It can generate knowledge, provide effective working models for practice, influence policy, and contribute to a new generation of leaders. This work will respond strategically to the needs and aspirations of diverse, low-income families, at the same time helping the hard working, dedicated professionals who serve these families."