Forever Families: The Key to Iowa Child-Welfare Reform

Safety. Permanency. Well-Being. These are the three foundational goals for Iowa’s, and the nation’s, child-welfare systems to respond to child abuse and neglect. When a child comes to the attention of the child-protective system and is “at imminent risk of harm,” the predominant goal is child safety—preferably by removing the risks in the home and preserving the family, but where that is not immediately possible, by securing a safe setting in foster care.

While physical safety is critically important, and draws much of the public’s attention about the child-welfare system, achieving well-being requires much more than finding a place where a child is safe from such harm. In fact, removing a child from his or her home, while necessary, can cause separation anxiety and learning loss in the short term, and disrupt the bonds to people and community all children need in the long term.

What is required is to ensure that vulnerable children who come into the state child-welfare system leave with “permanency”: the presence of people in the child’s life to whom the child is attached and can count on over time and distance. Ideally, that’s parents, but if that’s not a realistic option, it can be friends, relatives or mentors.

In Iowa, how to assure that all kids involved in the foster-care system have “forever families” has become one of the biggest reform topics, and for good reason. Too many foster children are disconnected from any ongoing connections to the people and communities they came from. For youth who “age out” of the system at age 18, missing those connections makes successful transition into the adult world—a transition that for most kids is cushioned by their families—incredibly challenging.

Building the community supports to assure that families and children are not left to fend for themselves after foster care is a key goal of those working in Iowa’s child-welfare system.

Although there are many miles to go in meeting that goal, Iowa has some exemplary models for working with families and youth that offer a strong path for maintaining, building, or re-establishing children’s community connections, depending on where they are in the state’s protective service system.
For older foster youth, some of the current work got its start following the 1999 suicide of Reggie Kelsey, a young Des Moines man with mental-health troubles who had aged out of foster care and struggled with homelessness. His tragic story, and the resulting report from the state ombudsman that criticized DHS management of his case, galvanized the child-serving community to act.

“Out of [this tragedy] came a real resolve to do better,” recalled Carol Behrer, executive director of the Youth Policy Institute of Iowa.

For younger children, Iowa’s efforts began with involvement with the Edna McConnell Clark’s family preservation services initiative in 1985. In the 1990s, that evolved into participation in the Clark Foundation’s “Community Partnership for Protecting Children” effort. Linn County was one of four local sites chosen from across the United States. Iowa became the flagship state to adopt Community Partnerships as a community-based model for providing front-end services and supports to ensure that children retain important family and community bonds when they enter the child-welfare system.

Iowa has also been a leader among states in supporting foster and adoptive parents in their critical roles, both as reunification partners and as short-term and long-term supports for children and connectors to community.

Most recently, and perhaps most importantly, Iowa foster youth themselves are receiving state support to support one another and be a voice for all foster youth.

This Kids Count Special Report describes these initiatives, which represent vital pieces of ensuring safety, well-being and the presence of “forever families” in all children’s lives.

For younger children, supporting family is key

When possible, the focus in the child welfare system is on reuniting the child with his or her family and, then connecting the family with community support and information, said Sandy Lint, coordinator of Communities Partnerships for Protecting Children. CPPC has 39 sites throughout the state whose local councils focus on strengthening local child-protective services.

These partnerships take a variety of tacks to support families. One CPPC effort called “Circles of Support” encourages informal social and educational events, often in church basements, to strengthen community bonds. Typical are efforts like twice-monthly dinners put on by volunteers. People in the community provide child care for kids, and parents listen to an educational piece or discussion on topic they themselves have chosen. It’s about building friendships.

“Out in rural Iowa, where the biggest town might be 7,000 or 8,000 people. Imagine a young mom getting off drugs, trying

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**AMP (Achieving Maximum Potential)**

AMP is a youth-driven, statewide group that seeks to unleash the full potential for personal growth among foster and adoptive children in Iowa. AMP offers leadership opportunities, service learning projects, speaking opportunities, and educational/vocational assistance. AMP also helps youth develop the life skills they need to become self-sufficient, independent adults.

AMP focuses on training members in leadership skills and how to become advocates for themselves and others, telling their own stories. They educate legislators, foster parents, the public, child welfare professionals and juvenile court representatives about foster care and adoption from the youth perspective.

In fact, AMP’s legislative agenda includes education policies to make it easier for foster youth to graduate from high school, mandatory anti-bullying training for school personnel and other mandated reporters and increased funding for the state’s Mental Health Waiver and Foster Care Youth Councils.

AMP members do service learning. They encourage others to open their homes to teens in foster care or those available for adoption. They provide support and encouragement to one another to gain the life skills and school and work options to become healthy, independent adults.

“AMP builds that trust and sense of normalcy and permanency,” said Oliver. “It becomes a family” filled with people who know how you truly feel. “These kids really can relate.”

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to better her life. What kind of social groups do you have that cross over economic lines?” Lint asked. Social events like these allow kids and the parents to stay connected to their community and expand their social network to folks with connections to better jobs and other resources they may not have known existed.

For families involved in the child-welfare system because of incidents of abuse or neglect, a technique used around the state is the family team meeting. This strength-based event is attended by the family and other key individuals in the child’s life—relatives, friends and mentors as well as professional supporters. It leads to an individualized action plan identifying activities to be carried out by parents to keep the child safe in times of stress and detailing strategies for accessing support.

The movement now in Iowa is toward family team meetings for families with no DHS involvement, Lint said. In those cases, families in need of extra support are identified by people in the community—often in schools or churches—and the meetings are led by specially trained facilitators.

**Children in foster care need a family—and a community response**

For children who have been placed into care, foster and adoptive families play a critical role in efforts to maintain and build community connections, said Lynhon Stout, executive director the Iowa Foster and Adoptive Parents Association (IFAPA). IFAPA offers a wide array of training and support to adoptive and foster families and is one of five such state-supported organizations in the country governed by those families themselves.

IFAPA helps foster and adoptive parents build those community connections. They are encouraged to provide role modeling for parents, in circumstances like doctor’s appointments, and to help students maintain connections with schools and teachers. (Efforts to smooth transitions in the education system, such as making it easier to transfer records and credits among school districts, is still a work in progress, advocates say.)

Most foster families are willing to serve as community connectors and maintain children’s critical ties with relatives, friends, and mentors—as well as with their parents—if they are given the tools and resources to do so, Stout said. IFAPA is a trusted resource for help in this respect, because it is governed by those actually doing this difficult but rewarding work.

It’s a challenging time for foster families, she said. The foster families she talks with say they are seeing more children with behavioral issues. “Kids are troubled, and families don’t know how to parent them,” she said. She has concerns about “burnout” among foster and adoptive parents because they lack the resources and

> “How is it possible to convince a child of his worth, if he has been told he is no longer worthy to live in the only home he knows.” — Maya Angelou

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**Iowa Foster and Adoptive Parents Association**

The Iowa Foster and Adoptive Parents Association is a resource to foster, adoptive and kinship families in Iowa. A nonprofit funded primarily by the Iowa Department of Human Services, IFAPA offers a variety of continuing education to foster, adoptive and kinship parents on parenting, working with the system and birth parents, and other relevant issues in foster care and adoption, including an annual training conference.

IFAPA also has a statewide network of Foster and Adoptive Parent Peer Liaisons who provide peer support to foster and adoptive parents in their assigned areas. They contact newly licensed foster homes and are available as an on-going source of information and support. They also employ Resource Information Specialists help families successfully meet the challenges of parenting the children placed in their home through telephone support, educational materials, knowledge of services available, and connections to other families.

IFAPA offers other resources for foster families, including respite care, support groups and a phone line for foster and adoptive parents across Iowa who face an allegation of abuse or neglect. It also engages in public policy advocacy around child welfare and the child protective system, and its Friends of Children in Foster Care program provides foster children with the funds they need for the “extras,” such as music instruments, summer camps and senior pictures, that foster children may otherwise miss out on.

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Permanency is finding a “forever” connection with at least one adult who provides love, unconditional commitment and lifelong support.

back-up support they need when faced with challenges and stresses in supporting children who often are very troubled. IFAPA helps to provide peer support, but also to advocate for changes to the system that will better meet the needs of foster children.

What’s more, advocates note Iowa’s system faces particular struggles meeting the needs of communities of color. “Iowa is weak on cultural issues,” such as recruiting families of color to serve as foster families and keeping cultural connections in tact for children who are in care, said Stout. That’s troubling on its own, and is all the more serious because minority communities are highly overrepresented in the child welfare system.

Supporting foster families and keeping them in the system is so important, Stout said, because a large base of potential foster families helps officials make a match that works for kids and keeps them geographically close to their hometowns and neighborhoods.

Older kids need help building connections

While a family-based approach is often chosen for younger children, with the goal of preserving families or providing for adoption, there are many children for whom foster care, in both homes and residential settings, becomes permanent care.

Youth exiting the system at age 18 have likely spent much of their time between ages 12 and 18 in some form of foster care.

For those youth the goal is permanency—finding a “forever” connection with at least one adult (and really several) who provides a safe, stable relationship, love, unconditional commitment and lifelong support.

If not parents, that may be extended family, an adult found through a faith community or volunteer experience, a teacher, or maybe a family friend.

In addition to all the useful formal resources helping with education, health care or employment, young adults need someone to be there when they need to talk, do laundry, or have a place to stay during the holidays, said Jenna Oliver, a former foster youth who has been active with Achieving Maximum Potential (AMP), a statewide collaborative youth engagement program.

A “forever family” offers those comforts.

Her ties to her “forever family” started with weekly laundry visits to a family she had known for a while. The ties grew during conversations while waiting for clothes to finish washing and drying cycles.

Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative

The Youth Policy Institute of Iowa oversees implementation of the Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative in Iowa. It is one of a handful of sites nationally piloting an approach to help youth in foster care make successful transitions to adulthood and self-sufficiency based on training, learning community and youth engagement.

The Jim Casey Initiative provides access to the ideas, people, skills, tools and learning opportunities needed to expand opportunities for young people. YPII partners with local youth-serving agencies to recruit and support youth and young adults, coordinates a community partnership group to identify and address emerging issues related to older youth in foster care, and works with DHS to replicate the Initiative strategies and improve the delivery of services to foster youth.

It also runs Opportunity Passport™, a program to help youth who are or who have been in foster care develop financial capability and acquire assets as they transition to adulthood. To date, it’s provided a half a million dollars in matched asset purchases since 2005. Currently there are upwards of 90 youth participating, with capacity for 150. United Way provides almost all the funds for asset matches working with the Greater Iowa Credit Union, and with ten to 12 youth-serving agencies.

“The Opportunity Passport™ is the most tangible aspect of the Jim Casey Initiative. It’s the hook, but it’s a small piece of a comprehensive approach to improving outcomes for this population,” said executive director Carol Behrer.

The Jim Casey Initiative also includes a Youth Leadership Board that helps guide local implementation and engages Opportunity Passport™ participants in leadership activities; they also have a small pot of money to assist current or former foster youth who find themselves in a financial emergency.

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There is no one way to define permanency, Oliver agued. “Being back at home is number one, if not, then adoption—my personal point is that’s great if it can be done, if there’s a connection. But sometimes that doesn’t happen.”

Permanency is so valuable in part because foster youth have had so many people in and out of their lives, Oliver noted. But “their job is therapist or social worker or judge, lawyer. They are paid to be there, to be supportive and look out for your best interest, but when their job is done, there’s no ongoing relationship, and in all honesty, there can’t be. There are so many kids who go through” the system without ever making the permanent connections most take for granted, she said.

The strength of AMP is that it, too, is owned by the youth themselves. Oliver’s first reaction to her local group in Council Bluffs was elation, she said. “I thought, Wow, this is the first group that doesn’t make you feel like a foster kid. They were talking about everyday problems, but it wasn’t focused on, ‘you’re in this because you’re a foster child.’”

AMP encourages leadership and camaraderie. Moreover, AMP has taken on a role of helping other youth who enter to child welfare system by being a voice for needed changes in the foster care system.

Its members release and lobby for a legislative agenda focused on foster youth, and regularly speak to DHS workers, judges, church groups and social workers about their experiences—and ways to improve the system.

Also focused on this population is Iowa Aftercare Services, a group of youth-serving agencies that offer case management for foster-care alumni ages 18-21. Their efforts include assistance finding housing and medical care and job training and employment, reaching educational goals, and sometimes assistance with emergency or unexpected bills. The movement is pushing itself to giving more decision-making power to the youth themselves.

“Iowa’s model for services to former foster youth is one of the best in the country,” said Carol Behrer of the Youth Policy Institute of Iowa. Her agency coordinates the efforts of the Iowa Aftercare Services programs and those of the Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative, which works with local youth-serving agencies to recruit and support youth and young adults, and works to replicate the Initiative strategies statewide.

Because what comes after foster care can be so variable, youth do best with an individualized approach, like that offered through Aftercare, she said. “There’s such a range of abilities of kids in foster care, you can’t just do the same things” for all them.

Behrer said we tend to do better with those self-motivated, resilient kids who just need a little

“Community Partnerships for Protecting Children (CPPC)

CPPC is a community-based approach to child protection coordinated by the Iowa Department of Human Services. Partnerships work to prevent child abuse, neglect, and re-abuse, safely decrease the number of out-of-home placements, and promote timely reunification when children are placed in foster care.

CPPC’s model grew out of work in Cedar Rapids in 1995 and now encompasses the entire state, with 39 CPPC sites covering all 99 counties. Several new policy and practice changes in Iowa have been promoted, piloted and implemented through Community Partnership efforts. Family Team Decision-Making, Parent Partners and Iowa Youth Dream Teams are examples of these efforts.

CPPC offers training, professional development opportunities to support improved practices and ensure quality and consistency across the state. It also offers state and regional networking opportunities, workshops and forums.

Most sites cover multiple counties—they align with the state’s Decategorization clusters—and most employ a site coordinator. All sites embrace four areas: shared decision making, neighborhood/community networking, individualized course of action (generally, a family team meeting process) and policy and practice change. “Beyond that, they can take very different forms,” said Lint. “It’s a philosophic approach—a framework, not a program. Every site could look different, but it follows those four strategies.”

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“If a child doesn’t have friends, he won’t succeed.”
— John Vandenburg
guidance; we also do a pretty good job at moving those really high-need kids into the adult system, she said. It’s the youth in that big middle group who often gets less support than they need.

CPPC’s effort for these older children is called the Transitioning Youth Initiative. It takes a local-level approach asking communities “to really brainstorm about how they can engage in wrap-around connections for youth, particularly those aging out of the system and who have no immediate family or supports,” said Lint.

The results of local brainstorming range from creating a community directory with people offering help with everything from cookie-making to sorting out insurance, to informal community dinners, swimming parties and a phone tree to identify people who can help fill the need of a youth, like a bed or a bicycle. In one community, community members were able to find a place for a youth to stay for a few days before a local Job Corps program started. In Waterloo, local businesses cooperated to throw a graduation party for transitioning youth.

“It’s all about how to connect youth with people in the community, to build relationships in many different ways,” said Lint.

Stepping back

Advocates, while encouraging these innovative approaches to helping foster kids retain family and community connection while in care, cautioned to not lose track of the need to avoid out-of-home placements in the first place.

“We put too many kids in foster care” in Iowa, said Behrer.

Overall, Iowa spends over $200 million annually on primarily professional treatment and out-of-home placement services for the 10,000 or so most vulnerable children in Iowa, those who have been determined to be “at imminent risk of harm” and to need state actions to protect them.

Indeed, one of biggest challenges of child welfare is how to shift at least some of those resources to prevention, said Lint. That requires figuring out “how to intervene with that group that’s headed toward our door before they start knocking,” through readily available resources in community that are accessible, meaningful and relevant. It might be substance abuse treatment, domestic violence programs, or even a set of tires so mom can get to work.

Once a child enters the foster-care system, a focus on retaining or creating community bonds must remain a primary goal.

Together, investments made in AMP, Community Partnerships for Protecting Children, the Iowa Aftercare Services Network, and the Iowa Foster and Adoptive Parents Association are tiny in comparison to those made in treatment and out-of-home placements. But these efforts may hold the real key to creating well-being by helping children and youth find their “forever families” and true permanence.

As Iowa moves forward with child-welfare reform and mental-health redesign, such programs—and their ability to bridge between professional services and vital community connections—should be front and center of the policy discussion.

Don’t forget prevention, advocates say. “We put too many kids in foster care” in Iowa.

“I’ve had good foster parents and I’ve had bad foster parents, but I know one thing—in six months I’ll have new foster parents. It’s best not to get attached.”

— Arkansas Foster Youth