

Child Welfare Watch

HOMES AWAY FROM HOME:

Foster parents for a new generation



IDEALISM AND PRAGMATISM coexist in a difficult tension in New York child welfare these days. That's exactly as it should be: this tension defines the great potential strength of government and the social services sector as they maneuver the rapids of positive change.

Right now, idealism reigns on the top floors of the Administration for Children's Services (ACS) downtown headquarters, where agency leaders champion a vision of reform that seeks to reshape foster care, family support and child protection into a more organic, interlaced network of programs, each part with a more sharply defined role, each supporting the other. In this report, we look at some of their objectives, such as transforming the work of foster parents and the nonprofit organizations that oversee foster homes, and building stronger relationships between kids, parents and foster families to stabilize and improve young people's lives—and make sure teens don't find themselves completely untheathered as they become young adults.

In one radical shift, 12- and 13-year-old boys and girls entering foster care today are far less likely to be placed in a residential treatment center or group home than they were just three years ago, and far more likely to live in a private home with a foster parent. This is a direct consequence of Bloomberg administration policy, and it will intensify as the city moves more aggressively away from institutional care for foster teens. Some of these kids

continued on page 2

CONTENTS

Recommendations and Solutions	3
The Changing Face of Foster Care	6
The city's move away from institutional care	
All in the Family	7
The struggle to keep more kids in family homes	
Making the Right Match	11
Lessons on finding homes for hard-to-place teens	
Greater Expectations	15
Foster parents confront new demands	
Hide and Seek	19
Why are so few foster children living close to home?	
A Personal Mission	22
New ways to recruit more foster families	
Behind Closed Doors	23
Diaries of three foster moms	
For the Sake of Their Children	31
Parents and foster parents try to bond	
Learning to Love the "Other Family"	34
A personal essay	
High-Risk, Low Priority	36
Teen parents in foster care are overlooked	
Watching the Numbers	39
A six-year statistical survey	

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- The percentage of children placed in foster boarding homes in their home neighborhoods has dropped to below 11 percent, a level not seen since the late 1990s. This runs counter to a target of 75 percent community-based placement set by ACS in 2001. (See "Hide and Seek," page 19.)

- In June 2004, there were 3,908 New York City foster children living in congregate care. That number dropped to 2,595 by March 2008. Foster parents are now taking care of more than 1,000 children who, if they entered foster care in 2004, would likely have been placed in group care. (See "The Changing Face of Foster Care," page 6.)

- Teens make up a larger percentage of the foster care system than just a few years ago, but the majority of new placements are young children. Nearly two-thirds of children placed in foster care in 2007 were 10 years old or younger. (See "Greater Expectations," page 15.)

- The city's foster care agencies have reduced the number of "step-up" moves of children from foster homes to group homes and residential treatment centers by 34 percent since 2004, from 722 to 474 in fiscal year 2007. (See "All in the Family," page 7.)

- Most pregnant and parent-ing teens in foster care live in foster homes. Yet there are no citywide standards for how foster parents should be trained to help young mothers, and ACS does not systematically measure whether or not pregnant teens are getting basics such as prenatal care and parent-ing skills. (See "High-Risk, Low Priority," page 36.)

return home to their parents within months, but many remain in foster care a long time, and—compared to past generations—many fewer will spend their teenage years abiding by the impersonal structures of institutions. Instead, they will share life with a family.

That's idealism. Pragmatism pushes back. Managers in nonprofits and government struggle with the everyday complications of overstretched frontline caseworkers, shortages of fundamental community services including mental health care, and the complexities of stressed parents and children living in overcrowded, poverty-level housing. To them, reality can make idealists seem out of touch.

Directors of some of the nonprofit organizations that oversee foster homes for 17,000 city children privately accuse the Bloomberg administration and ACS Commissioner John Mattingly of deploying reckless ideology and taking risks with the future. They say we may one day need group homes that are now being closed to city kids. They charge that some children clearly in need of a spot in a treatment center are denied necessary care.

They also know the relentless challenges of implementing change as they stretch budgets, assign staff to new projects, put out fires and try to remain focused on the basic case-work that is their mission. They are mostly operations experts, and they have frequent disputes with the administration.

Yet the reality is that New York is still a long way from ending institutional care. Older foster teens, those 15 and up, are still placed in group homes and residential treatment programs at very high rates—just as high as three years ago—despite efforts to find more family homes for them. For now, efforts to move more of these young people out of institutions into foster homes will continue. But that work is part of a transitional period, because with fewer younger teens entering institutional care in the first place, there will soon be far less pressure to move hundreds of kids each year from group programs to homes with foster families, relatives, and adoptive parents. They'll be there already.

The total number of children in foster care has dropped by more than 10,000 since the start of the Bloomberg administration. And yet, there are nearly as many teens 14 and older in the system today as there were back in 2002—about 7,500 as of December 2007.

Finding foster parents and relatives able to provide good homes for teenagers will continue to be a high priority for some time to come.

For this, the practical knowledge of the people who do this work on the ground, in the agencies, will be the best guide for visionaries. For example, if fewer children will live in group programs and more are to be fostered with families—including their birth families and relatives—then there have to be strong alternatives to institutions, including intensive family support systems that provide close personal attention and meaningful resources to foster parents, parents, and children (see "Recommendations and Solutions," page 3). Without the fruits of practical experience, reform would be nowhere.

Yet without the power of idealistic visions of the future, the child welfare field would be shaped solely by reaction to blistering news coverage of high-profile child deaths, political opportunism of public figures and the long-term priorities of institutions and bureaucracies. This child welfare system doesn't exist for them, but for the city's families, including the roughly 80,000 children who are subjects of reports of abuse and neglect each year, the 30,000 who take part in preventive services, the 17,000 living in foster care, as well as their parents and siblings and the foster parents who try to help them.

In this edition of the *Watch*, we take an especially close look at the experience of these foster parents. Most New York foster parents are working class people living in working class and low-income neighborhoods. Most have had wrenching experiences on an emotional obstacle course, helping children overcome often unspoken traumas. Three of them kept diaries for the *Watch* to give our readers a view into the unvarnished hazards and happiness of their daily lives (see "Behind Closed Doors," on page 23). Some of their experiences are timeless, but others are emblematic of this moment. Similarly, we explore what it takes to be a truly temporary parent, helping children and their mothers and fathers become family again ("For the Sake of Their Children," page 31).

In this work, there is no better example of the invaluable, positive tension that thrives in the space between practical life experience and the idealists' vision of change.

—Andrew White

FOSTER PARENTS TODAY CARE for many children who, in years past, would have been placed in group homes, residential treatment centers and other institutions—most notably younger teens, many of them with emotional and behavioral difficulties. Remarkable foster parents are meeting this challenge, often with the help of new supports like crisis intervention teams, foster parent advocates and special counseling programs. Yet while New York has invested millions of dollars in added supports for foster families, the city is still a long, long way from providing the resources and policies that foster parents, parents and caseworkers need to help teens settle in truly stable homes. Following are recommendations proposed by the *Child Welfare Watch* advisory board.

CITY, STATE AND NONPROFIT AGENCY OFFICIALS MUST COLLABORATE TO PROVIDE FOSTER FAMILIES WITH EXCELLENT MENTAL HEALTH CARE AND SUPPORT SERVICES FOR TEENS.

Many foster parents interviewed by *Child Welfare Watch* say their biggest unmet need is effective mental health services for children in their care. Studies show only about one-third of children in the city's foster homes receive therapy, even though as many as 50 to 70 percent of kids in foster care overall are dealing with serious emotional difficulties, according to a number of studies. Mental health issues need not be debilitating. With care and support and their own strong will, many young people in foster care complete high school and enter college while coping with depression or post-traumatic stress disorder. But they usually can't do it on their own.

The limited services available are seldom tailored to the needs of teenagers, who tend to view therapy sessions held in traditional clinic or agency settings as stigmatizing. Community clinics that do have appropriate services tend to have long waiting lists. Teens respond best to group therapy, peer counseling and other therapies that provide them with some degree of control, experts say. Counseling services that are part of broader programs involving recreation, youth development or skills training are more likely to keep teens engaged. Yet these are the least likely options in many city neighborhoods.

For teens who in the past would have been in residential care, there are a few especially promising options to build upon. The state Office of Children and Family Services' six-month-old, Medicaid-funded

Bridges to Health program provides health and mental health care coordination, case management, family supports, crisis services and education advocacy, to help keep foster children out of institutional care until they are 21—even after they leave foster care. The program is open to those diagnosed with emotional problems, developmental disabilities or fragile medical conditions, and is intended to serve 3,300 children statewide by 2010 at a cost of \$50,000 per child, far less than the cost of residential treatment. Few agency leaders or advocates have yet formed opinions about how this still-small program is working, but its promise is great—at least for some children.

Meanwhile, New York Foundling's Blue Sky program, funded by the city's Administration for Children's Services (ACS), is another potentially promising model for addressing teens' emotional and behavioral issues in a family setting. Through the program, teenagers who would otherwise enter juvenile justice centers live with their families or, for concentrated periods of time, in foster homes. Foster parents receive extensive training and support, and Foundling's caseworkers have small caseloads so they can work not only with a young person, but with their entire network, including family and friends, to help reinforce positive behavior.

This intensive approach has proven effective in other cities and could be broadly adapted to provide more New York City teens in foster care with the support they need to live with families in stable homes. At Foundling, the program costs about \$44,000 for each child for one

year—more than the cost of a therapeutic foster boarding home but less than one-third the cost of a placement in residential treatment. Foster parents in the Blue Sky program receive \$55 a day, which is the highest rate foster parents receive for looking after children living in therapeutic foster boarding homes.

For young people who need less intensive services, a handful of organizations have established the innovative but still very small Foster Care and Mental Health Project, which has created three state-licensed satellite mental health clinics within foster care agencies. These clinics can efficiently tap Medicaid funding, provide services designed for foster children and involve parents and foster parents in treatment. But the project remains very small. More foster care and mental health agencies must create clinic partnerships and pursue approval from the state's Office of Mental Health (OMH). The project also needs strong champions among OMH and ACS executive leadership, who should help facilitate growth of new satellite clinics so that at least 1,000 young people take part in their services, rather than just several dozen.

NEW YORK CITY SHOULD PROVIDE A BROAD SPECTRUM OF MEDIATION AND RESPITE CARE OPTIONS TO SUPPORT FOSTER FAMILIES WITH TEENS.

The task of maintaining stable foster homes often comes down to helping families weather short-term crises, such as disagreements that arise when a young person breaks house rules, sparks

angry conflicts or is overly aggressive or disruptive. Several foster care agencies have experimented with new tools for helping foster parents and teens resolve differences and remain together. Round-the-clock crisis counselors and emergency group conferences have both proven effective, albeit on a small scale.

Much more could be done to ensure greater stability. Two services that have worked well to help families cope at such times—respite care and mediation—are underutilized by the city child welfare system.

In other parts of the country, host families or respite centers offer teens a place to stay for short periods, helping prevent costly, long-term institutional services—and shoring up troubled families. Some foster care agencies have created their own small-group respite programs; others depend on foster parents to informally fill this role. But these slots are extremely limited. Respite remains a blind spot in the foster care system.

There are also viable models for mediation services that could be made widely available to foster families. The city's Family Court judges have a mediation program that brings together families, friends and relatives, service providers and lawyers to resolve cases before they become lengthy court battles. And ACS itself oversees a mediation program that is part of its efforts to divert teens from court-ordered Persons in Need of Supervision (PINS) placements in foster care.

A similar approach could be used to help support families working with teens already in foster care to help families ride out short-term difficulties and keep kids from bouncing from home to home. There is a well established skills base for this work in the community mediation centers that operate in every county. Community-based mediation is particularly effective with teenagers because it gives everyone involved in a dispute a voice and a role in resolving a crisis—including young people. Mediation can also ease some of the burden on frontline caseworkers, experts say, freeing them to work as a provider of supportive resources in the context of an agreed upon plan.

ACS could contract with those centers to provide training for frontline staff and handle cases, supplementing the facilitated

family team conferences that are increasingly guiding foster care case planning.

STATE LEGISLATORS AND THE PATERSON ADMINISTRATION SHOULD ELIMINATE THE CAP ON LOCAL FOSTER CARE EXPENSES IMPOSED BY THE STATE FOSTER CARE BLOCK GRANT.

Foster care services in New York are largely funded through federal reimbursements and a tightly capped state block grant, as well as local taxpayer dollars. In our following two recommendations, we call for more manageable foster care caseloads and higher rates paid to foster parents to cover the true cost of caring for the children in their homes. These goals cannot be achieved without a dramatic change in the methods of foster care financing. The annual state block grant allocation to New York City currently amounts to about \$250 million, covering only a fraction of the true cost of foster care.

The legislation authorizing the foster care block grant is due for reconsideration during the spring of 2009. As the debate is engaged later this year, New York State legislators, Governor David Paterson, and county and city child welfare directors across the state should join with advocates and practitioners to end the state's overly restrictive method of funding the care and support of foster children.

CITY AND STATE OFFICIALS AND THE STATE LEGISLATURE SHOULD ALLOCATE FUNDS TO REDUCE CASELOADS AT FOSTER CARE AGENCIES.

Lower caseloads can greatly improve the quality of services that foster care agencies provide to families, increasing the likelihood that foster children will live in stable homes and either reunify with their parents or move toward adoption more quickly.

And while lower caseloads require a larger up-front investment by government, they can also save government money in the long run by helping to shorten the length of time children spend in foster care.

At many agencies, foster care caseloads are well above 20 children per worker, substantially higher than the national standard of 15. According to a recent state study, barely one-quarter of each caseworker's time is spent in face to face or phone contact with families. Between paperwork, lengthy periods in court and

other responsibilities, the amount of time a worker has for direct contacts with each child or family on her caseload is barely one or two hours each month. Their supervisors report a fast and accelerating staff turnover (and burnout) rate. Combined with low caseworker salaries and the spectacular inefficiency of the city's Family Courts, these high caseloads all but guarantee overlong stays for children in foster care.

The Administration for Children's Services has effectively and admirably reduced its own child protective services caseloads from 15 last year to about 12 today. With City Council-sponsored funding, several preventive family support agencies managed a similar reduction over the last 12 months. Advocates and agency leaders agree these lower caseloads result in better interactions between preventive caseworkers and the families and children they serve—and ultimately, more meaningful assistance.

CITY AND STATE OFFICIALS SHOULD INCREASE PAYMENTS TO FOSTER PARENTS, PARTICULARLY THOSE CARING FOR TEENS.

There is a popular misconception that foster parents are paid for the time they devote to children. The rates paid to foster parents today rarely cover the full cost of food, clothing and other expenses for the children in their care. For most children, the monthly rate ranges from \$495 to about \$680, or \$16.50 to \$22.59 per day, depending on their age, according to ACS. Foster parents caring for children with special needs, such as severe developmental disabilities, receive a higher rate of about \$1,650 per month. In fact, they are described as "parents" for a reason: society expects them to do this work out of love and compassion rather than money.

But any parent knows that raising children takes financial resources. An October 2007 report by Children's Rights, a national legal advocacy group, posits that rates paid to foster parents across the country are far below what is needed to cover the true cost of caring for a child. The report estimates that New York ought to increase its daily foster parent rate 43 percent for families caring for children aged two and younger; 39 percent for those caring for kids aged

nine to 16; and 32 percent for families of those 16 and older.

Any meaningful increase would cost tens of millions of dollars and cannot be accomplished without concerted political action, including revisions to the state's foster care block grant. In addition, New York's legislators in Washington should call for new federal rules that require states to set a minimum standard for foster care rates, and boost the already substantial federal reimbursement.

ACS SHOULD END THE STEEP DECLINE IN COMMUNITY BASED PLACEMENT BY PAYING SOME FOSTER PARENTS "RETAINER FEES," ENSURING THAT HOMES ARE AVAILABLE IN LOW INCOME COMMUNITIES WHEN CHILDREN NEED THEM.

Since 2004, the proportion of city foster children living near their families, schools, and other community institutions has fallen sharply. This trend runs counter to ACS reforms begun nearly a decade ago to keep children in their own communities in order to preserve bonds with their families, relatives, schools and friends. Today, barely one-in-ten children placed in a regular foster boarding home is living near his or her community.

Foster care agencies have long sought to open more foster homes in districts with high concentrations of children entering care. Their greatest difficulty is finding foster parents willing to work with older teens or large groups of siblings. Yet data provided by ACS suggest that the real problem isn't a lack of foster homes in each neighborhood, but the city's management of existing slots. The vast majority of foster homes in any one neighborhood are filled with children from elsewhere, and children are frequently sent to foster homes outside of their home districts.

Under ACS's current therapeutic foster boarding home program, the city retains a set number of homes in each community district specifically for kids from that area and pays those foster families a retainer fee to keep the homes open. Applying this practice systemwide would help ensure that more children are placed in their own neighborhoods. Already, community leaders in the Highbridge section of the Bronx are trying out this idea, earmarking a handful of foster homes for kids from Highbridge.

Experts in other cities where this model has been tried say that to succeed, there must be a modest surplus of foster homes so that the system can afford to have some sit empty while they wait to take in neighborhood children. City officials say there is indeed a surplus of regular foster homes, but foster care agencies debate this point. Either way, more intensive efforts to retain current homes are necessary in order to boost community placement rates.

ACS SHOULD EXEMPT TEENAGERS 15 AND OLDER FROM COMMUNITY PLACEMENT GOALS—AND ALLOW THEM TO DECIDE FOR THEMSELVES.

Older teens frequently do not attend schools in their community districts and are able to travel independently to visit parents. Advocates say teens who struggle with peer pressures and dysfunctional friendships frequently fare better in a new neighborhood. Teens themselves, with their families, should decide whether to live in their community or not. Similarly, placement with kin should continue to supersede geography (in fact, kinship placements are more often in the same neighborhood than not, according to city data). At the same time, ACS should closely measure how many younger children are appropriately placed in foster homes in their neighborhoods.

ACS AND NONPROFIT FOSTER CARE AGENCIES SHOULD ENSURE THAT FOSTER PARENTS CARING FOR PREGNANT AND PARENTING TEENS RECEIVE APPROPRIATE TRAINING.

A 2005 survey of the city's foster care agencies found that more than 400 teen girls in foster care were pregnant or mothers. Most live in regular foster boarding homes. Yet looking after a teen with a baby is a big undertaking, especially for foster parents who aren't fully trained to care for this special population. Currently, most foster care agencies have no specific training for foster parents working with pregnant and parenting teens, and there are no specific guidelines for how they should work with teen moms.

At the same time, many foster parents refuse to continue providing a home for teens who become pregnant or have babies. Some foster care agencies have been known to turn a blind eye to teen

mothers leaving homes on their own because they feel unwanted. Some become homeless or isolated, and off the radar screen of any potential assistance.

ACS and nonprofit foster care agencies need to ensure that there are more clearly identified mother-child homes available in the system, and that teens who give birth in foster care are properly attended to and supported.

If history is an accurate guide, many of these babies will be part of the next generation of foster children. Their mothers must be fully supported and provided with pre- and post- natal care, guidance in nutrition and diet, education advocacy and support, and help preparing for a life in the workforce, among other things. Inwood House has created a foster parent training program that could be replicated citywide for contract foster care agencies. That program emphasizes the nurturing and coaching aspects of looking after teen parents—a crucial role for foster parents in helping vulnerable young people become good parents themselves.

Of course, the city and its contract foster care agencies must also be diligent in ensuring that teens in foster care have full access to birth control and are not denied information about the availability of abortion services.

The Child Welfare Fund is interested in supporting projects to implement the recommendations of the *Child Welfare Watch* advisory board. For application guidelines, contact:

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THE CHANGING FACE OF FOSTER CARE

The end of an era of institutionalized foster care for teens?

When he was 17, Emmitt Hunter (right) moved into the foster home of Karen Zimmerman (center). Though Zimmerman has three grown children, including Eric Alexander (left), she is still experiencing a steep learning curve parenting Emmitt.

SINCE MAYOR MICHAEL BLOOMBERG'S second year in office, New York City's Administration for Children's Services (ACS) has steadily picked up speed in its turn away from institutionalized care for foster children, reflecting a growing consensus in favor of family-based care. Today this shift has the potential to become permanent. Men and women who work with teenagers in foster care are making headway figuring out how to help create stable family homes for young people who once would have spent years in group homes and residential treatment centers. Officials are creating funding streams and enacting policies to support this work.

As a result, a higher percentage of the city's foster children now live with foster families and relatives than just a few years ago. In June 2004, there were 3,908 New York City foster children living in congregate care. That number dropped to 2,595 by March 2008—a 34 percent reduction. Over the same period, the total number of children in foster care declined by 19 percent. The city has been closing residential treatment centers and group homes and shifting resources to family foster homes. Recently, ACS announced its intention of eliminating 1,200 more group care beds.

On the following pages, our reporters explore the city's move away from institutional care. What happens when foster parents struggle to care for teenagers? How successful are the city's new efforts to help agencies and foster families care for kids? What can

practitioners learn from one nonprofit foster care agency's careful effort to move teenaged boys from institutional care to family life? And how are teens dealing with these changes?

Nonprofit foster care agencies are demanding more government resources for flexible support services to help hold foster families together. They are also calling for restraint in closing institutions.

Nonetheless, more than 1,000 children who, if they had entered foster care in 2004, might well have been placed in group homes or treatment centers are instead finding temporary homes with families in the city's neighborhoods. The biggest shift has been among young teens—those 12 and 13 years old, according to city and state data. But even 14- and 15-year-old boys and girls are more likely to be placed with families today than they were in the past. The change is far less marked among older teens. Today, 16- and 17-year-olds entering foster care are just as likely to be placed in congregate care as they were four years ago, according to city data.

Social work practitioners have long advanced the theory that teenagers in institutional foster care programs would stand a better chance adjusting to society and achieving long-term success if they were in family care. A study released in 2003 by the Seattle-based foundation Casey Family Programs demonstrated that, with ample support, teens placed in stable foster family settings achieved a higher level of education than their peers in group care.

City child welfare officials agree. "We have too many kids spending too long without that permanent family," ACS Commissioner John Mattingly told participants at a December 2007 public forum at The New School. "Too many kids [are] being bumped up into residential treatment because we haven't had the resources focused on good foster families to care for troubled kids."

Julie Farber, director of policy for Children's Rights, a national legal action group, cites studies showing 60 percent of children adopted from foster care are adopted by their foster parents, while those in group care often lack adoption plans. "Too often, the child welfare system looks at a group facility as a permanent placement and efforts to find that child a family just stop," she says.

And while residential treatment centers and other institutional programs are supposed to provide children with services they might not receive in a family setting, "there is very limited evidence of [their] effectiveness for a child's mental health," notes Farber.

"Life in society is best defined by the experience of the family," adds Jeremy Kohomban, president and CEO of The Children's Village, a foster care agency once known primarily for its institutional care programs. "We can stabilize them and bring them from the precipice," he says. "But it's only in the family that you learn to be a father, brother and citizen." ❖

All in the Family

Despite recent successes, agencies struggle to maintain the momentum of the move away from group foster care.

BY BARBARA SOLOW

KAREN HORNE ARRIVED at work one morning to discover one of her agency's long-time foster homes in turmoil.

The foster mother had recently died and her adult daughter felt she could no longer care for the 14-year-old boy who had been living with them since he was a toddler.

"His behavior got really bad," says Horne, who is director of health and mental health services at Edwin Gould Services for Children and Families. "He was acting out at school and cursing and being disrespectful all the time at home. The family had just bought a house upstate, away from their old neighborhood in the Bronx. Maybe it was too many adjustments at one time."

Social workers at Edwin Gould went into action, trying every way they could to preserve the boy's ties to the family with whom he had lived for more than a decade. They moved him to a temporary foster home in Brooklyn and enrolled him in a new therapy group for teens. They made sure he had regular contact with his original foster family, as well as his 18-year-old brother, who is still living with them.

Caseworkers hope the younger boy will return to his original foster family soon. "The good thing is, we've been able to keep him out of a residential treatment center," Horne says. "If we can just get him over this rough spot, I think we can patch this one back together."

CHANGING
FACE



“I think everyone would agree that kids should only be in residential care when they really need it. The question is, when is that?”

Edwin Gould is one of nine city foster care agencies taking part in a new, experimental model of funding and case management that aims to invest more resources in stabilizing foster families—and fewer dollars in institutional care. The idea is to enable more young people with mental health or behavioral issues to live with families instead of spending months or years in group homes or residential treatment. Ultimately, the model, which began in mid-2007, is also intended to reduce the length of time many children spend in foster care.

Under the city's Improved Outcomes for Children (IOC) plan, these nine agencies are redirecting money saved from capping their use of costly group care toward additional staff and services for foster homes. These nine agencies account for about 38 percent of foster care cases overseen by the city's Administration for Children's Services (ACS). Of those, only a fraction involve children who are “stepped up” from family homes to residential treatment or group homes.

Early reports show that agencies piloting IOC have been able to meet or surpass their goals for moving fewer children to congregate care. Those agencies had set a limit of 63 step-ups for the period between July and December of 2007, but reported only 38, according to city documents. The previous year, they had a total of 129 step-ups among them for the entire year.

Nor is the trend limited to these nine agencies. System-wide, the number of step-ups has fallen by 34 percent since 2004, from 722 to 474 in fiscal year 2007, according to ACS.

City officials originally planned to extend this new model of foster care funding to all contract agencies by the end of 2008. But in late May 2008, ACS announced it was pulling back from that deadline. The breadth of the proposed changes, along with delays in state approval and the impending release later this year of new, far-reaching contract requirements for nonprofit agencies providing child welfare services in New York City, all contributed to the decision, sources report.

While the original IOC model included financial incentives for the nonprofit agencies to reduce their use of

residential treatment and group homes, as well as penalties for not doing so, these will not be part of the model going forward, according to ACS. City officials say they will, however, continue flexible funding and supports for foster parents. In the fiscal year that ends on June 30, 2008, ACS will have provided nonprofit agencies with a total of about \$29.5 million in flexible funds for supporting foster families with services not traditionally covered by federal, state and city dollars.

Several directors of nonprofit agencies, however, worry whether they can rely on that funding for much longer. “The issue at the end of the day is, in this increasingly difficult fiscal climate, will the dollars be sufficient for us to meet those goals that we all agree on?” asks Bill Baccaglini, executive director of The New York Foundling, one agency taking part in the IOC pilot.

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In more than a dozen interviews with agency executive directors, *Child Welfare Watch* heard a common concern that the city's efforts to limit moves to residential treatment and group homes could result in more children bouncing from one family to another if foster parents aren't prepared to handle those youngsters who previously would have been in group care.

“At what point does a kid present such complicated issues and behaviors that it's counterproductive to keep them in a family setting?” asks Baccaglini. “I believe family settings can accommodate more challenging kids if there are appropriate services in place. I just don't see that we're there yet.”

“You have to ask, with all of these group care beds closing down, at some point do we reach a point of no return?” adds Robert Gutheil, executive director of Episcopal Social Services, which is also participating in IOC.

Since the initiative began last fall, social workers and agency leaders have been trying to reconcile their support for reducing step-ups with their anxieties about how the city's growing reliance on family foster care is playing out. As Lee Pardee, director of policy and practice implementation at SCO Family of Services, another IOC participant, puts it, “I think everyone would agree that kids should only be in residential care when they really need it. The question is, when is that?”

• • •

Caseworkers say step-ups usually result from a sudden crisis in a foster home: a child lashing out physically or withdrawing into silence, a youngster refusing to follow the rules or a teenager bringing a weapon home in a backpack.

“Sometimes, things just reach a point where the foster parent delivers an ultimatum to the agency,” says Episcopal Social Services' Gutheil.

The IOC model is meant to help foster care caseworkers and their agencies prevent these scenarios from reaching the breaking point. The flexible budgets allow them to lower case-loads and pay for mental health consultants, additional training

Foster parents need far more help caring for children who suffer from anxiety, depression and other mental health issues.

for staff and foster parents, and supports for foster families such as peer advocates and 24-hour crisis intervention teams.

Craig Longley, associate executive director of programs and support services for Catholic Guardian Society, credits more intensive case reviews and the addition of a crisis worker at his agency as the reason it had only four step-ups this year, compared to 23 the year before.

“We are really training our foster parents in how to deal with crisis by putting our social workers in their homes,” Longley says. “That never existed before. It was the foster parents and the caseworkers on their own. Now, we have someone who can be in there immediately.”

The rapid response teams at his and other agencies have worked to reduce tensions between foster parents and kids in their care—referring teens to recreation programs, for example, where they can blow off steam. In other instances, they’ve been on-scene mediators, talking parents and children out of giving up on each other when disagreements arise.

“We had one case of a 17-year-old who had a foster parent that was pretty conservative and strict,” says Pardee of SCO. “The kid was frequently disrespectful but we were able to come in and help them talk through those issues and reach an agreement to give it another try.”

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Another fundamental component of the IOC model is its method of team-based case conferencing and management, which is designed to improve services for foster children and their families. City officials say they intend to eventually extend this approach throughout the child welfare system.

Participating providers are required to organize “family team conferences” every three months with foster parents, parents, agency staff and others involved in the child’s case—and to also hold those sessions whenever they are considering moving a child to group care or another foster home.

Lorna Wilson, who has been a foster parent since last August, says she requested such a conference when she began to feel tense around the father of two toddlers she had taken into her care in February. “He said he didn’t want me in the room. One time he cursed me out,” says Wilson, who lives in the Bronx and used to run a child care center in her native Virgin Islands. “I called for a meeting. I said, ‘Is there some way we can have something done? Or I have to give up these children.’”

Caseworkers at Catholic Guardian Society arranged a meeting with the father, and now Wilson says things are going smoothly. “That conference helped a lot,” she says. “I

found out more about his situation and we both apologized. I’m starting to feel more comfortable with him. Last week, he said to the children when he saw me, ‘Go and meet mama!’”

In situations where children are moved to group homes or residential treatment centers, the IOC model also requires the referring foster care agencies to retain responsibility for managing their cases.

“Previously, we would have transferred a child to a new agency and that would be that,” says Pardee of SCO. “Now, we retain long-term planning and management of those cases. So there’s incentive for us to think, ‘Could that child come back to us?’ We are having to think more about how to help our foster care parents deal with these higher-need kids.”

The combined effect of these reforms has been to raise the bar on step-ups, says Richard Altman, chief executive officer of the Jewish Child Care Association (JCAA). “Five years ago, I think the system would have had a much lower threshold for what would constitute behavior that would have resulted in a decision to move a child to a higher level of care,” he says.

Although JCAA is not yet part of IOC, Altman says his agency has achieved a 10 percent drop in the number of children moved to congregate care in the last year, a fact he attributes to new foster-parent training programs, buddy systems—where veteran foster parents help new ones—and other supports. “We’re trying to do everything we can to give them the message that they are the backbone that makes this system go,” he adds.

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Foster parents report they need far more help caring for children who suffer from anxiety, depression and other mental health issues.

“It’s a very, very stressful situation to be dealing with a child with behavior problems,” says Valentina Staton of the Bronx, a veteran foster parent who is now the official foster parent advocate for Leake and Watts Services. “Sometimes you have to wait for [treatment] beds to open up and you have to keep a child that is acting out until there is a bed available. You have to keep an appointment book, you have to follow all their medications. It’s a lot.” She says that many of her agency’s foster parents are dealing with these kinds of issues.

Caseworkers say sexual abuse and domestic violence are common in the histories of kids in foster care—and such experiences can exact an extreme emotional toll. Yet a 2005 study by the Citizens Committee for Children found that only about one-third of children living in the city’s foster boarding homes

were receiving individual therapy, despite the fact that researchers estimate that as many as 50 to 70 percent of all children in foster care have serious emotional problems.

If the child welfare system wants to prevent step-ups, agency leaders say, foster families must receive more mental health services. “It’s up to us to develop the capacity for that,” says Aubrey Featherstone, executive director of Edwin Gould. “And I’d say we’re not there yet. [ACS Commissioner John] Mattingly has put resources in place with IOC and I commend him for that. But we still don’t have enough to hire a full-time psychologist or psychiatrist. We only have them as consultants.”

Child welfare leaders hope the state’s new Bridges to Health program, which offers Medicaid-funded services to vulnerable children in foster care, will help ease the resource crunch. The program is designed to help keep children who would previously have been in institutional care in family and community settings. It offers children diagnosed with emotional problems, developmental disabilities or fragile medical conditions services ranging from crisis management to school advocacy. Assistance is available not only to the kids in care but also to their parents, foster parents and siblings. State officials say the program, which is just getting off the ground, will serve at least 3,300 children over the next three years.

Meanwhile, nonprofit leaders say existing funding lags well behind what agencies need to bolster family foster care. “Through IOC, ACS is offering agencies flexibility in the use of funds they already receive,” says Jim Purcell, head of the nonprofit Council of Family and Child Caring Agencies, a statewide association. “But this is not enough to cover the added cost of conducting family conferences, taking on case management and reducing caseload sizes so that workers have the time to devote to each family.”

Others say services that would be especially helpful to foster families, such as respite care and therapy programs geared to teens, are still scarce or nonexistent in many city neighborhoods. “What we really need are more community-based services, not just for foster families but for all families,” says Pardee of SCO. “After school, sports and church-based programs and more mentoring would help.”

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When caseworkers at Episcopal Social Services are asked about the city’s emphasis on family foster care, 19-year-old Cecil Lundy often comes up.

He’s an example, they say, of someone who never adapted to foster homes. Instead, the tall, husky teenager—who has been in care since he was 8—spent most of his childhood in group homes and residential treatment centers. A few unsuccessful tries in family settings ended after he got into verbal and physical fights with foster parents or siblings.

Things have gotten better lately for Lundy, though. In January, he and a roommate moved into an apartment in the

Bronx that is under the supervision of their foster care agency. Social workers check up on them regularly to offer support and to enforce curfew and other program rules.

Lundy says his new living situation has been a real boost. “The other places didn’t go too well for me,” he says with a smile that reveals the sweetness beneath his tough exterior. “Here, it’s quiet and nobody bothers me. I’ve been through a lot and I tried to change my life and my way. I’m doing well with that now.”

Therea Ivey, assistant director of foster care and adoption at Episcopal Social Services, wonders what the city’s dramatic shift away from group care will mean for other hard-to-place young people like Lundy before they are old enough to live on their own.

“Family foster care just doesn’t work for everybody,” she says. “There are a lot of things outside of our control. So where are these others going to go?”

Dorothy Worrell, director of Harlem Dowling-West Side Center for Children and Family Services—which is not part of the IOC pilot program—has similar concerns. “The young people we are stepping up are not the kids from regular foster boarding homes,” she says. “The kids that we have had step-ups from have been the young people that we have taken from residential treatment centers that have not worked out in boarding homes. Many of those young people have been in institutions for so long, they have difficulty adjusting to family life.”

City child welfare leaders acknowledge that not all children in foster care have the same needs. For example, ACS’s 2007-2009 Residential Care Plan makes a distinction between how the system should deal with children who’ve had numerous failed placements in family homes and those just entering care. While the former population needs more structured group care, the report states, “the large majority of children and youth entering care without previous negative interactions with the child welfare system benefit from placement into family care.”

That’s a goal few agency leaders would disagree with. But they worry that under IOC the tendency will be to apply the same broad brush to all children. Some have called for more data on the characteristics and needs of children coming into the system so they can determine how best to help them.

More than anything, as they try to carry out reforms, agency leaders want assurances that the goal of keeping more kids in family care will not close out needed options for vulnerable children.

“The best system has flexibility and allows kids to be in the level of care they need at the time,” says Jane Golden, director of adoption and foster care for Children’s Aid Society, which is participating in IOC. “We need a continuum there.”

Pardee, of SCO, agrees. “Agencies doing this need to be supported by ACS to say, ‘It’s OK for kids who need it to go into congregate care,’” she says. “They are trying to push us the other way. I think that’s a dynamic we need to keep working through: they push us, and we push back a little.” ❀



Making the Right Match

One agency's efforts to move hard-to-place teens into foster homes offers lessons for the entire system.

BY ANN FARMER

AT FIRST GLANCE, The Children's Village looks like a summer camp. This residential home and school for at-risk teenagers is situated within a wooded, upscale neighborhood in Dobbs Ferry, one hour north of Manhattan. A series of speed bumps crisscross the roadway leading to its gatehouse. Beyond lies a sprawling campus with red brick administration buildings, a chapel and dozens of Tudor-style cottages with names like "McAlister" and "Fanshaw." Paved pathways circumvent grassy fields and basketball courts.

Sixteen-year-old Juan is among the 250 teens who live at Children's Village, and one of the approximately 80 currently placed here by New York City's foster care system. He came in 2002, after the Administration for Children's Services (ACS) removed him from his mother's care and he'd bounced from one foster home to another. Here, he lives a structured life that includes daily chores and lining up to wash hands before meals, along with the 15 other young men in his house.

This breezy March day, however, is his last. Clutching his black poetry journal, he explains he has been so excited about moving to a permanent foster home in Parkchester, New York, that he packed his bags days ago. "It's awesome. It feels good," says Juan, his freckled face, which is framed by bouncy red curls, breaking into a smile when he mentions his new foster dad. "The first day I saw him—sometimes you get a feeling that things are good. That's the feeling I got." He even has reason to hope that his new father will adopt him. "My father has already adopted eight other kids," he says.

He's seated next to Rianna Berkeley, permanency specialist for Children's Village and one of the people responsible for finding him this new home. Her fingers are crossed that Juan's departure will mark yet another success story for the agency which, in recent years, has undertaken concerted efforts to move its teen residents out of group care and into foster or pre-adoptive homes.

During the period from 2004 to 2007, Children's Village found stable foster homes for 35 of its longtime teen residents. It did this by closely partnering with another non-profit, You Gotta Believe!, a Brooklyn-based organization

that finds foster parents for older kids. It also assumed a more thoughtful and measured matching strategy and buttressed the placement process with intensive family follow-up support. In reaching this goal, Children's Village learned some valuable lessons for the foster care system.

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The process of moving children from a residential facility into a permanent foster or pre-adoptive home is known among social workers as "stepping down." Teens are traditionally much harder to step down than younger children, especially those who've been referred to residential care after several failed foster family placements. Most teens at Children's Village, for instance, struggle with mental illness or severe emotional disturbances such as depression, fear and anger, for which they receive counseling, drug therapy and other services thanks to the agency's mental health program and 24-hour staff.

In 2004, Children's Village identified 69 teen residents, ranging in age from 13 to 20, all of whom had been in residential care for at least five years and were, more or less, poised to age out of the system without ever leaving care. The staff redoubled its efforts to find foster homes for these young people. "It was all about believing we could do this," says Mona Swanson, Children's Village's chief operating officer.

To launch the operation, the agency used funds raised by its board of directors and from the New York-based Robin Hood Foundation to hire a permanency specialist. Later, it hired an additional permanency specialist, using funds received from ACS in 2006 for the purpose of strengthening New York City's foster family network.

One new initiative was to attempt to match the teens with people they already knew and with whom they felt a special connection, such as an aunt, uncle or former foster parent. "It's easier and more natural to create a permanency situation with someone the child knows," says Swanson, describing how they asked the teens themselves for suggestions and pored over the records of each one, searching for leads.

The staff also researched each teen's interests and background, including their clinical documents and evaluations, to determine what type of family situation would be the best

“We wanted young people stepping down to homes with parents that were making a lifetime commitment to them, rather than providing them a temporary home.”

fit. Any information gleaned was passed on to You Gotta Believe!, which had independently received a four-year federal grant to find homes for 100 older kids in residential care, including those at Children’s Village.

“We wanted young people stepping down to homes with parents that were making a lifetime commitment to them, rather than providing them a temporary home,” says Pat O’Brien, founder and executive director of You Gotta Believe!

Both organizations employed a range of matchmaking tactics. Children’s Village presented some of its foster teens in the role of panelists for educational seminars and orientations geared to prospective foster parents. “We got a lot of matches that way,” says Stephen McCall, a permanency specialist advocate with You Gotta Believe! who acted as the point person for Children’s Village’s recruitment needs.

But the most effective recruiting strategy was simply talking to the kids about anyone in their past or in their current sphere of connections with whom they might like to live. “I kept talking to the kids about who they know and who they’re close to,” says McCall, who met with all the teens from Children’s Village. “Talking to them is very useful.”

One important lesson learned by Children’s Village staff was to not rush into any matches prematurely. “Some people criticize us for taking so long,” says Berkeley, describing a methodical matching process that often took six to 12 months, beginning with supervised visits on campus, then community visits and, finally, home visits. This allowed the teenager and prospective parents ample opportunity to assess whether the match felt right.

They tried to provide pre-adoptive parents with everything they might need to make a well-informed decision. Even then, some matches failed and the search had to begin again. “Some people have no clue what they’re getting into,” says Swanson. “We look for backbone, for people who are able to set limits and not take things personally, and know how it is to live with a teen.”



Throughout the endeavor, Children’s Village teens participated in individual and group counseling sessions to discuss

whatever feelings came up for them, including issues of trust and abandonment. “It’s important to talk about expectations,” says Berkeley, describing how some foster kids are so bruised from failed placements that they give up hope. “They need to be convinced,” she says.

Juan, for instance, lived in five foster homes before coming to Children’s Village. Asked why those placements didn’t work out, he puts his head between his hands and explains that he still felt bonded to his natural family. “I’m used to my family,” he says. Of his foster families, he says, “They didn’t understand what I had gone through.”

However, after his mother died of cancer in 2001, Juan experienced a change of heart. “I decided I needed love and attention like anybody else does,” he says. But like many foster kids who feel trapped in group care settings, he would run away from Children’s Village, which prolonged efforts to find him a home. He once went on the lam in Brooklyn, hiding from the police and earning pocket change by handing out political flyers. “We do stupid things,” Juan shrugs.

After his last return to Children’s Village, Juan was placed in the pool of 69 teen step-down candidates. His foster father was found last year through an adoption agency, although Juan’s transfer didn’t occur until March. He credits Berkeley with helping him face his problems instead of running away from them. “She listens. A lot of people like to talk and don’t listen,” he says. “She hasn’t given up on me. She pushed and pushed to help me get my goals, to get adopted, to have a kind family.”

McCall also played a tremendously important role in the broader step-down project. “He lent a lot of credibility to the process,” says Swanson. “They saw a cool black man who was determined to help them.”

One Children’s Village teen McCall helped was Victor, who had been removed from his mother’s care at age 9 because of her substance abuse and mental health issues. By the time McCall caught up with him in 2004, Victor was 16 and embittered by a trail of failed foster home placements. “He was disrespectful and out of control,” says McCall. “He had given up. He thought he’d age out of the system. He was like, ‘What are you going to do for me?’”

McCall asked him to name three people he would like to live with. Victor could only name two. One of them he had no contact information for. The other was his godmother, Angie, a New York City police officer.

McCall called Angie, who was single with no children. She said, “I would love to take him but I’m living with my mom.” McCall asked to meet anyway. He explained to her that if they didn’t find Victor a home, he’d be out on his own at age 21 with no family support. “I was honest with her. I told her he’d been rejected a lot. But to get out of there, he’ll take a chance,” says McCall.

Angie got an apartment and agreed to take the agency’s 10-week parental training and licensing course titled “Adopting Older Children and Youths” (A-OKAY), which follows a prescribed curriculum created by ACS and includes information specific to foster parenting an older child. She also completed 16 hours of therapeutic training, which teaches foster parents how to set clear expectations for teens who present special challenges. Many of these teens are so wounded by abuse, neglect and rejection that they tend to act out, doing things like talking back, lying, staying out late and running away, which can put considerable strain on foster families.

The classes were led by two social workers who were also foster parents. “You’ve got to hear their real firsthand experience,” Angie says, adding that foster teens were also brought in for some sessions so that “you could hear their side of it too.”

But even with this extensive preparation, Angie experienced rough patches after Victor moved in with her about one year after the process began. “He was good for about two weeks. No, maybe a week and a half,” says Angie, describing how Victor quickly started missing curfew. He also resisted doing chores. One time Victor called her “crazy.” “I don’t stand for that,” says Angie, who got McCall to come over at 11 p.m. to help them work it out.

“Being a parent is difficult,” she says. “But being a foster parent is more difficult. It is just more work. You’re dealing with other people’s children. The foster child views the foster parents as, ‘You’re not my parent.’ They can be disrespectful. You have to get the child motivated. You have to get the trust of the child. And you have to get the child to do something with their life.”

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In a break with tradition, Children’s Village also opened up the foster and adoption process to its own staff. “That was difficult for us,” says Swanson. “We had a strict policy about staff not overstepping their boundaries with the children.”

A handful of staff members expressed interest and enrolled in the parental skills training and licensing process. Two of them took teens into their homes. In one case, it worked out. In the other, the boy was disruptive. “He did what a lot do,” says Swanson. “He tested the limits and

presented some pretty challenging behavior.” He starting talking back to his foster mom and, when he took a physical stance that felt intimidating to her, she returned him to the campus.

The flip side to Children’s Village’s successful placement of 35 teens are the 34 others who were neither matched nor placed, or who returned to the agency because their new family settings didn’t work out. Six teens placed during the period from 2004 to 2007 returned to campus because of disruptive behavior. “One threatened to set a fire,” says Swanson. Eleven others had to move at least once before settling in to what appeared to be a successful family match by the end of 2007. One teen, who’d been successfully placed in a family along with his brother, had to be hospitalized for psychiatric treatment after stabbing his brother with a kitchen knife during an argument over cereal. His foster parents were so committed to him, though, that they welcomed him back into their family.

Some of the 34 teens who weren’t placed had such severe behavioral and mental health issues that family recruitment efforts were never even attempted. Sixteen never became available for the new permanency efforts because they were either hospitalized, ran away, became incarcerated or aged out of the foster care system, or because their social workers did not refer them.

Many foster care agency leaders believe that some teens are better off staying within the stability of group homes and residential treatment centers—especially those with needs requiring a level of care and attention that only 24-hour staff can provide. “No one size fits all,” says Jim Purcell, CEO of the Council of Family and Child Caring Agencies, a statewide association of foster care agencies. While he offers great praise for Children’s Village’s placement initiatives, he adds a word of caution. “To me, the jury is out as to whether the needs of these kids can be met.”

Nonetheless, many of the teens who moved from Children’s Village had once been thought to have such mental, emotional and behavioral issues that they could not succeed in family settings. So what did it take to make this change in their lives?

Providing sufficient family support and steady follow-up care are arguably the most important components to making these matches stick, according to the agency’s leadership. First of all, almost every matched teen from Children’s Village was immediately entered into the city’s Therapeutic Foster Boarding Home Program, which provides greater than average foster care support, including a larger stipend for foster parents. A team is set up for each teen, composed of a social worker, a behavioral specialist, a psychologist and psychiatrist. The teens are supposed to receive weekly visits from their assigned social worker and behavioral specialist, who “advocate for them, support and counsel them, and provide respite for the family,” says Swanson. The parents can also

receive family counseling.

You Gotta Believe! provided extensive follow-up support in the form of shadow workers skilled at family intervention who made themselves available any time of the day or night to help resolve crises. McCall also holds monthly support group meetings where foster parents can meet, swap stories and mentor one another. Because of the effectiveness of these programs, You Gotta Believe! recently received a contract from ACS to continue its work with Children's Village and other agencies.

"I can tell you this, if it weren't for Stephen my foster son would have gone back a long time ago," says Karen Zimmerman, a foster mom who has McCall as her shadow worker. "His phone is open 24 hours," she says. "Sometimes I feel bad. It's the weekend and [Stephen] needs to be with his family. But I need to vent."

Zimmerman, a single mom with three grown kids who works as a clerk for Beth Israel Medical Center, brought Emmitt into her home last summer from Children's Village when he was 17. Her plan was to eventually adopt him. "When he

bringing a foster teen with complex needs into their home. Berkeley coaches Zimmerman on matters like setting limits and adhering to a clear, consistent pattern.

When it comes to telling parents how to mete out punishment, Berkeley says, "We don't tie anyone's hands, but we do make suggestions," explaining that the agency opposes any corporal punishment or physical or verbal abuse. And, she adds, "We don't use our agency as a consequence." Children's Village might bring a teen back for safety reasons or to provide a respite, but not as punishment. Ultimately, Berkeley believes that Zimmerman and Emmitt can make it. "It's a work in progress," she says. "There are challenges. But both are in for the long haul, which is important."

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Jeremy Kohomban, president and chief executive officer of Children's Village, says the agency has gained invaluable knowledge from its initiatives to step down these particularly hard-to-place teens. "We took a cohort of kids that the system had given up on. That's why we've learned so

"Some people have no clue what they're getting into. We look for backbone, for people who are able to set limits and not take things personally and know how it is to live with a teen."

first came, he was great. He was wonderful," Zimmerman says. However, after Emmitt returned to high school in the fall, he started slipping. "All of a sudden, now, he gets high. He's been arrested for stealing a bike," she says.

Now she has doubts about adopting him. She's even harbored thoughts of sending him back to Children's Village for a period of time. "You don't want to give up on him," she says. "But it's rough, it's hard."

Being a foster and adoptive father himself, McCall is able to draw on personal experiences when counseling foster and pre-adoptive parents. "They may think they need to give up. But they just need someone to talk to," he says.

Zimmerman and other foster parents say they have benefited greatly from support groups. "A lot of those parents, they are in the same situation," she says, describing the monthly sessions as a good opportunity to get things off her chest.

The foster parents also receive coaching from the agency's social workers. Rianna Berkeley says she has observed many parents like Zimmerman, who have already successfully raised children but still experience a steep learning curve after

much," he says. The enormous difficulty of this endeavor, he points out, is demonstrated by the fact that the agency was only able to place 50 percent of the teens, despite its determination to place more. "But our position is, 50 percent is better than zero."

He and his staff have concluded that with well-planned support systems, individualized follow-up and the other resources that come with the state's Therapeutic Foster Boarding Home Program, it will indeed be possible to step down more teens who have spent long years in institutional care—and the lessons may just as well apply to older teens entering foster care for the first time.

"We learned that it's never too late for a youngster to have a family," says Kohomban. "There are families out there who will step up to create a home for youngsters even when that youngster does not seem ideal for that setting."

Just as critical, he adds, was for his own organization to modify and revise its practices, assumptions and habits. "As important as anything, we learned that some of the greatest changes required were not with the child or the family, but with the organization." ❖



Greater Expectations

Foster parents confront new needs—and new demands.

BY KENDRA HURLEY

LOURDES ALVAREZ WAS proud of the fact that in nearly two decades of being a foster parent she had turned away only three children. Those three had been acting up so much, she remembers—stealing, fighting, getting suspended from school—Alvarez felt they were causing the other kids in her home to suffer, and after a few months she asked the agency that supervises her home to place them elsewhere.

But recently, Alvarez says, the job of being a foster parent has gotten even more difficult. In the last six months, she turned away one teen because he constantly argued with her about house rules, and requested to have another boy moved as well, although she has since decided to try again with that boy.

Like many foster parents, Alvarez finds teens especially challenging. But she also believes the younger kids she looks after today have more emotional and behavioral problems than those she cared for in the past.

“I think the kids now are wilder and they respect a lot less, and these teens are off the hook,” says Alvarez, who leads the Downtown Brooklyn chapter of Circle of Support, a support group for foster parents. “I see it with me and I see it with other foster parents.”

Today, not only are foster parents taking care of children who in the past may have lived in group homes or residential treatment centers; they are also expected to devote more time to this work, say directors of some of the 36 nonprofit agencies that run the foster care system under contract with the city’s Administration for Children’s Services (ACS). Changes over the last few years have significantly increased the demands placed on foster parents, altering the very nature of what it means to take in children whose parents have been accused of abuse and neglect.

“That shift is dramatic. It’s a huge commitment one must make to being a foster parent today,” says Richard Altman, CEO of Jewish Child Care Association (JCCA), which provides foster care for about 825 children. Many children in the system today, he adds, “are really suffering from behavioral and mental health issues that we’ve never seen before. Those of us on the provider end see, live and feel the difference.”

Helping these children adjust to family life has proven challenging for foster parents, says Stephen McCall, a foster parent who also provides support for more than 100 others as a consultant for several nonprofit agencies, including The

Children’s Village. He says that many of the teens currently living with families were once in congregate programs.

“A lot of these kids have been institutionalized and they don’t know how to live with a family,” he says. “In residential care, everything is structured, and when they step down to a family they go wild because the structure is not there anymore.”

In 2005, the Council of Family and Child Caring Agencies, an association of the city’s privately-run foster care agencies, assessed the behavioral and emotional challenges of 213 adolescents at six agencies who were sent to live with foster families. During the three-month study, they found that 44 percent of the teens had previously lived in foster care, 26 percent had mental health issues, 33 percent had problems with truancy and 16 percent had exhibited violent behavior.

“Foster care is no longer the idealized vision of taking the infant in the home and becoming a mother to that kid,” says Altman. “It’s now an angry, turned-off adolescent who has been abused for years until someone made an intervention.”

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The numbers systemwide don’t entirely confirm Altman’s grim picture, as nearly two-thirds of the children placed in foster care in 2007 were 10 years old or younger. But even so, many leaders in the foster care field say they do see the system changing. It is much smaller than in years past, more targeted to helping children and families with extremely complicated issues in their lives—and intensely reliant on foster parents’ creativity, skillful parenting and commitment of time and goodwill.

One reason for these changes is the firm belief among ACS leadership that whenever possible, children should live with families rather than in institutions. As the city moves more rapidly away from institutional care, a growing percentage of foster children now live with foster families and relatives compared to even just a few years ago.

But that is not the only factor. Since early 2006, the city’s network of preventive family support services has been increasingly devoted to working with families referred directly from child protective services, in an intensifying effort to keep families together while making sure parents participate in programs that can help address problems ranging from poor housing to mental illness, domestic violence and sub-

stance abuse. The city has increased funding for these preventive services by more than \$70 million since 2005.

At the same time, the Bloomberg administration has increased the use of court-ordered supervision, allowing city caseworkers to keep closer track of parents suspected of abuse and neglect, even as their children stay in the home.

Observers say this intensification of family support and oversight means those children who enter foster care today may represent a higher concentration of more complicated cases than in the past, as many are from families that have not responded well to services.

“Preventive services don’t operate at random,” explains Fred Wulczyn, research fellow at Chapin Hall Center for Children at the University of Chicago, who has done extensive evaluation research on New York City’s child welfare system. “Preventive services are designed to target certain kids and families. If they have their intended effect, we should expect to see the caseloads of both preventive and foster care agencies begin to change.

“It’s a possibility that difficult kids make up a larger proportion of the kids coming into the foster care system because of what happens when you put in preventive services and those services work,” Wulczyn adds.

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Over a plate of rice and chicken at Alvarez’ Downtown Brooklyn foster parent support group, one foster mom speaks matter-of-factly about a child in her home who molested another child. The moms swap tips for how to “cover your ass” when a teen goes missing. Alvarez herself laments that most fire insurance policies will not cover fires set by foster children. This worries her, as one child in her home has a penchant for playing with lighters. “You have to be more responsible for those kids than you are for your own, because all eyes are on you,” Alvarez advises.

The parents in the support group also discuss the delicate dance of managing relationships with their children’s birth parents. No longer is adoption considered a natural offshoot of foster care; in theory, at least, helping birth parents get their children back home is now part of a foster parent’s job description.

This is not a new idea. For more than a decade, ACS has encouraged its foster care agencies to prepare foster parents for this kind of supportive role. But as the number of children in foster care has declined, this role has become increasingly central. (See “For the Sake of Their Children,” page 3.)

“Before, foster parenting was seen as almost, ‘This child is going to come into your home and we want you to be a parent,’” explains Jeremy Kohomban, chief executive officer of The Children’s Village, which runs a residential campus and provides foster care and aftercare services. “Today we say, ‘This child is coming in to your home, and we want you to be a parent, but we also want you to be aggressively working with us to make sure this child remains connected to his family.’”

“What I’m looking for is foster parents that see themselves as part of an intervention,” he adds. “That they buy into this notion that they are very temporary and that they’re part of the treatment, and that we’ll be working very, very hard together to give this child permanency, ideally with the biological family. We want foster parents to understand that if we do good work that they could have three children in one year, not one child for three years.”

Keeping children connected to their families and getting them back home faster generally means more appointments for foster parents to attend. Under state regulations, foster care agencies must plan and facilitate at least one visit between a child and his or her parents every two weeks, unless visiting is prohibited by court order. Agency directors say that some foster parents are expected to bring children to visit their birth parents once or twice a week.

“When you reduce the length of stay, it’s not an accident that it’s also a higher intensity of services, and so the demands on foster parents are pretty great,” says Kohomban. “It’s our job to facilitate as many visits as possible. If it’s every other day, so be it.”

These demands are expected to increase. An internal ACS evaluation obtained by *Child Welfare Watch* found that visitation goals are still not being achieved. Cases analyzed in the study reflected visitation with mothers taking place not even once a month, on average. Visits with fathers were even less frequent. Advocates and ACS are pressing agencies to increase visitation rates for children who are expected to return home.

The city is also fielding a highly regarded initiative that, so far, involves more than one-third of all foster children. It requires agencies to organize regular family team conferences that bring together foster parents, birth parents and caseworkers every three months.

Craig Longley, associate executive director of programs and support services at Catholic Guardian Society, finds these meetings help foster parents become more involved in planning for a child’s future, and give them a regular venue to ask for services and support they might not otherwise get.

But, he adds, the conferences also require much more time of foster parents. In the past, these types of meetings happened about twice a year. Now they’re quarterly, and each conference lasts at least two hours, often longer. An initial ACS evaluation of its recent Improved Outcomes for Children reforms found that during the first several months these conferences were put into place, between 30 and 60 percent had to be canceled and rescheduled. Sometimes cancellations happen at the last minute, forcing foster parents to rework their schedules and return once again at another date and time.

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Foster parents interviewed by *Child Welfare Watch* say they routinely left their jobs early or shirked other responsibilities to show up for agency visits—too often only to be told the meeting had been cancelled. One agency executive director

cited two foster parents who lost their jobs due to scheduling conflicts with visits and therapy appointments.

One woman in Alvarez' support group who had five foster children told her caseworker that, on Mondays and Fridays, she couldn't bring the children to their therapy appointments or visits with their birth parents because of her own children's after school activities. She says the social worker threatened to place the children in a different home if she did not rearrange her schedule.

When Jasmine Jensen, who asked that her real name not be used for fear of exacerbating conflicts with her agency, took in a newborn from SCO Family of Services, the child's caseworker scheduled her to bring the baby to the agency for four visits in the first week alone. Two of those days the baby's mother didn't show up. One day she showed up an hour late, and Jensen says she sat in the waiting room for four hours that day. When she complained that her son was missing his guitar lesson, the caseworker told her not to arrange anything for herself or her son in the evenings—that evenings were to be reserved for the baby's visits. Frustrated, after only three and a half weeks, Jensen asked that the infant be placed in a different home.

"It was an overwhelming situation," she says. "I wanted to keep the baby until they turned her over to her mother. I didn't want her to go from home to home to home. But they left me no alternative. When I do something, I want to do a good job."

Agency directors respond that when it comes to visitation, their primary responsibility is to the children—and that means accommodating birth families, even if it might inconvenience foster parents. But Kohomban says that when there's an irreconcilable scheduling conflict with a foster parent, his agency will send staff to pick up the kids and bring them to their visit, even if they need to do so every week. Even then, he points out, foster parents must be around to coordinate the pickup.

"They expect a lot more from us," says Alvarez about the foster care system. "Sometimes we feel that they don't think we have a personal life and we don't have family. Our lives have to revolve around the kids and the parents."

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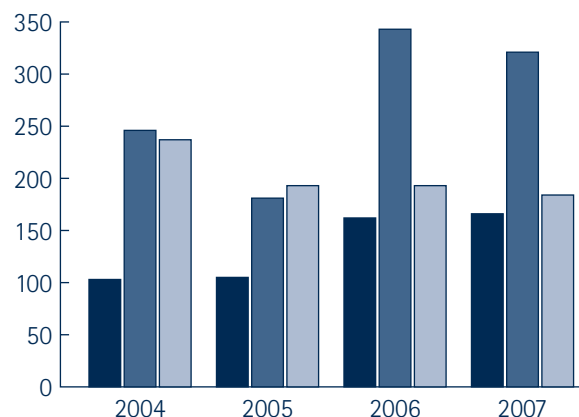
Despite the system's greater reliance on foster parents, the stipend they receive from the city to cover the cost of caring for each child has increased only slightly in recent years. This stipend starts at \$17.52 per day and can sometimes range as high as \$57.60 a day depending on a child's age and level of need, though most children fall at the lower end of the spectrum. This money includes a child's allowance—at Children's Village this is about \$40 a week for teens—as well as money to be spent on clothing, food and other necessities such as haircuts. For most foster parents it's simply not enough to cover the cost of looking after a child, says Stephen McCall. "It's ridiculous," he adds. "They're going into their own pockets, and then we're asking them to take days off work for training refreshers and meetings and appointments."

WHERE TEENS WERE PLACED UPON ENTERING FOSTER CARE:

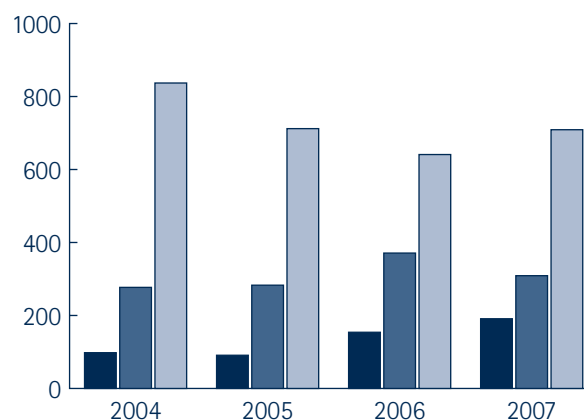
More 12- and 13-year-olds are being placed in foster homes than in the past, and fewer in congregate care. But more older kids were placed in congregate care than two years ago.

KINSHIP HOME **FOSTER BOARDING HOME**
GROUP HOME OR RESIDENTIAL TREATMENT

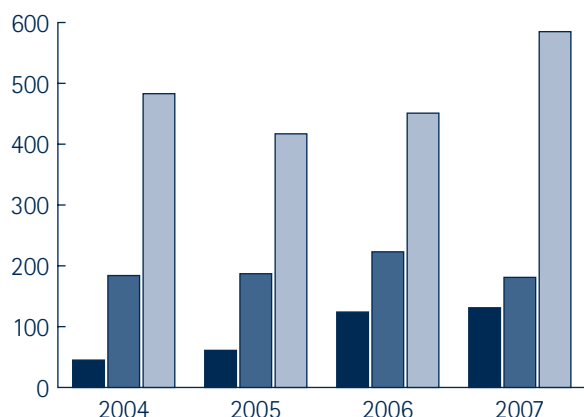
12- AND 13-YEAR-OLDS



14- AND 15-YEAR-OLDS



16- AND 17-YEAR-OLDS



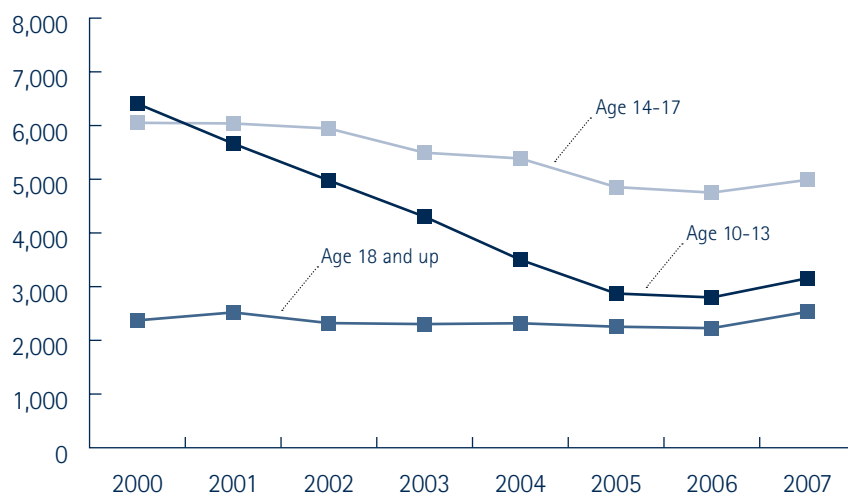
Source: NYC ACS Top 12 Performance Report, March 31, 2008

NUMBER OF TEENAGERS IN NYC FOSTER CARE

END OF CALENDAR YEAR

- Age 10-13
- Age 14-17
- Age 18 and up

Sources: NYS OCFS Monitoring and Analysis Profiles (2000-2007); NYC ACS Top 12 Performance Report, March 31, 2008



ACS Commissioner John Mattingly has often acknowledged that his vision for New York City's child welfare system hinges on building a stronger, more sophisticated foster care base that can rise to the demands posed by recent reforms. But observers say this would be a difficult time for the city and state to raise the stipend to a level that would help agencies find and hold onto stronger foster homes. A \$15-per-day increase for all foster parents would cost the government about \$65 million annually.

"In these times, when things are getting tougher [economically], they're going to say, 'I'm sorry, we have better things to spend it on,'" says John Courtney, co-director of the Partnership for Family Supports and Justice at the Fund for Social Change.

Mattingly and his administration have, however, invested resources to help agencies better support their foster parents. In 2006, ACS slated \$11.5 million for agencies to help recruit and support foster parents of children aged 10 and older. It renewed this funding in 2007. Some foster care agencies, including Harlem Dowling-West Side Center for Children and Family Services, used the money to reduce caseloads so each foster family could receive more attention. That agency also began offering optional training for all its foster parents on how to work with children with special needs—something that used to be available only to those families licensed as therapeutic foster homes.

Other agencies, including Little Flower Children's Services, The Children's Village, Edwin Gould Services for Children and Families and Forestdale, Inc., have used those funds to hire foster parent advocates who give foster families the support that caseworkers are often too busy to provide. The advocates also give foster parents a safe space to vent. "A lot of foster parents are afraid to tell what's going on [to a caseworker] because they think the agency

is going to look at them like they aren't a good parent," explains McCall.

...

In her nearly 20 years of foster parenting, Renee Francis, who herself lived in foster homes, has made a point to take in children with serious emotional and behavioral issues. "I'd rather take a 'special needs,' because they're the ones who need us," she says.

Francis has adopted seven children and takes vicarious pleasures in their successes, like the girl who overcame severe personality disorders and is now studying to be a teacher. Or the girl who arrived thinking she was "no good" and refused to speak, but who is now thriving in college.

"You study them and see what works with them," says Francis. "I stayed in therapy with them and I found out that each child works different."

Forestdale, Inc. Executive Director Anstiss Agnew has seen this heartfelt commitment from many foster parents at her agency. But she does not believe they are all equipped to deal with the children in their homes. At a recent meeting with Forestdale's foster parents, Agnew heard from those looking after children whose level of need was on a par with children Agnew had worked with years ago at a residential treatment center. That center had psychiatrists on staff, she recalls, but these foster parents were going it alone.

Two teenagers in one foster home had been arrested for gang-related violence. A 16-year-old had beaten up his mother before going into another foster home. One woman talked about a foster daughter who had ripped off her prosthetic limb and shook it at her, saying, "What makes you think I'm not a mass murderer and I won't kill you with this?"

Despite all this, says Agnew, these foster parents wanted to find a way to make it work. "They're well-meaning people but not trained," says Agnew. To be a foster parent today, she sighs, "you need a direct pipeline to God." ❖

Hide and Seek

The rate of children in foster care living near their families and communities is plummeting.

BY KENDRA HURLEY

MORE THAN A DECADE after New York City child welfare officials set out to create a new, neighborhood-centric foster care system, a key element of that initiative appears to have all but fallen off the table. Today, the percentage of children placed in foster care in their home neighborhoods—near their families, friends, schools and churches—has dropped precipitously, to below 11 percent, a level not seen since the late 1990s.

This strong trend away from community-based placement of foster children began in 2004 and picked up speed two years ago. It runs counter to a 2001 target of 75 percent community-based placements that is still acknowledged in official Administration for Children's Services (ACS) performance indicator reports. And it directly contradicts the agency's massive reform plan kicked off in 1997.

"We have not placed children in neighborhoods anywhere near the way we should have," ACS Commissioner John Mattingly conceded at a Center for New York City Affairs forum held in December 2007. At the time, he also spoke about the need to form a stronger base of foster homes in communities with high rates of children entering care.

Indeed, four years ago, soon after his appointment as commissioner, Mattingly assured *Child Welfare Watch* that neighborhood-based placement would be a priority of his tenure. His deputies said that they believed "far more" than 25 percent of children placed in foster boarding homes should remain within their community district.

Executives at several nonprofit foster care agencies that contract with the city to manage foster homes describe several hurdles that make community-based placement difficult, including a persistent dearth of appropriate homes for teens and special needs children. Nonetheless, city data reveal that even though poor and working class communities have hundreds of foster boarding homes, the vast majority of them house children from other communities—and often other boroughs.

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From the time of the original ACS strategic plan delivered by then-Commissioner Nicholas Scoppetta in 1997, city officials

have advocated placing foster children either with relatives or with families living near their parents and schools. Many child welfare experts contend this minimizes the trauma of a stay in foster care, facilitates more frequent visits with parents, maintains connections with friends and communities, and can even speed family reunification.

Most children who enter foster care eventually return to their families. But before the late 1990s, proximity to parents and home communities was rarely even considered in placement decisions. This meant parents routinely endured hours-long bus and subway rides across boroughs and even outside the city simply to visit their children.

The percentage of foster children living in boarding homes in their original community districts reached a peak of 23 percent in fiscal year 2004 but has declined ever since. As of early May 2008, the rate had dropped below 11 percent, according to ACS data.

The rate of placements of children within their original borough has also declined rapidly, from a peak of 77 percent in fiscal year 2005 to just 52 percent during the first four months of fiscal year 2008. (These rates refer only to children placed in regular foster boarding homes. Children placed in kinship care or in group homes or residential treatment centers are not counted in these figures.)

Cynthia Garcia's infant used to live in a foster home that was a bus and a train ride away from her in the Bronx, and she has three other children who still live on the "clear other side of the borough," she says. Last year, Garcia had to quit her job because of all the time she spent traveling to and from visits with her children, on top of parenting classes and domestic violence counseling sessions, some of which were held in Manhattan. "It was a good job, but I couldn't keep it because they always wanted me to run around," says Garcia.

John Courtney, co-director of the Partnership for Family Supports and Justice at the Fund for Social Change, says he has heard countless stories like Garcia's. "This is a reform that's going in the wrong direction, and they don't know how to fix it," says Courtney about neighborhood-based placement.

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Many executives of foster care agencies attribute the drop to a shortage of foster homes in neighborhoods that have high rates of children entering foster care. This problem was exacerbated when the city increased the rate of removals following the 2006 murder of Nixzmary Brown, these agency heads say.

"We got flooded with intakes that really took up all the empty beds and there weren't enough beds," says MaryEllen McLaughlin, assistant executive director for foster care/adoption services at Good Shepherd Services.

"We just can't open homes fast enough," adds Richard Huckle, deputy director of foster home services at Jewish Child Care Association of New York (JCCA).

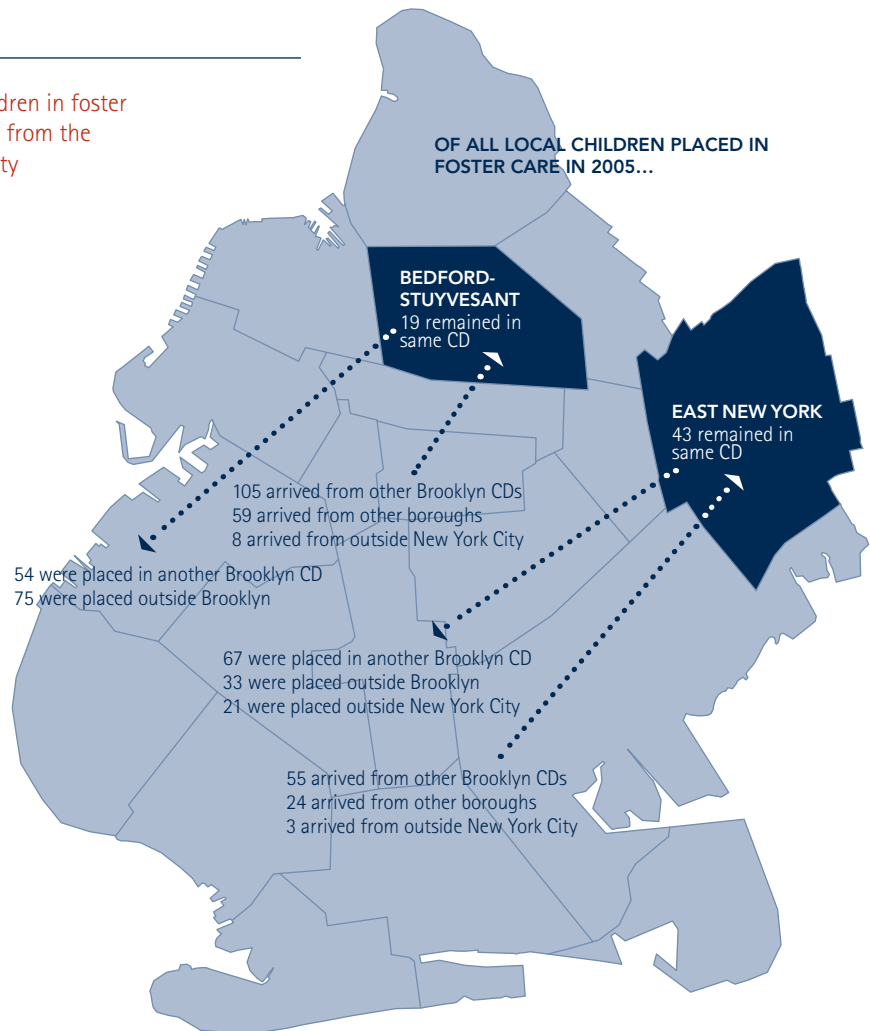
Yet city data show many hundreds of foster boarding homes in each of the most high-need communities—

Foster boarding homes in New York City neighborhoods are filled mostly with foster children from other community districts. This map of Brooklyn and the table below illustrate how a very small minority of children remain in their communities when they enter foster care. In 2005, for example, 164 children from East New York, Brooklyn, entered foster care. Of those children, about three-quarters left the community and one-third left Brooklyn. About 90 percent of children entering foster care from Bedford-Stuyvesant left the community.

Brooklyn Community District	Number of children living in foster homes*	Number of children in foster homes who are from the same community
Williamsburg	65	8
Fort Greene	81	3
Bedford-Stuyvesant	482	60
Bushwick	140	14
East New York	393	63
Red Hook/Park Slope	47	7
Sunset Park	20	5
Crown Heights	191	17
South Crown Heights	103	3
Bay Ridge	21	1
Bensonhurst	2	0
Borough Park	24	4
Coney Island	52	0
Flatbush/Midwood	52	1
Sheepshead Bay	11	0
Brownsville	323	19
Northeast Flatbush	222	16
Canarsie	315	2
Unknown	2	0
BOROUGH TOTAL	2,546	223
CITYWIDE TOTAL	7,898	860

*Table does not include kinship homes.

Source: NYC ACS Resource Directory Report 5/12/08 (table); NYC ACS Community Partnership Initiative (map data)



including homes that are vacant and presumably available for placements.

Based on reports from the foster care agencies it oversees, ACS estimates that about 1,400 available beds in regular foster boarding homes are sitting empty.

Some of these 1,400 beds may be temporarily unavailable because a foster parent has decided to take a vacation, has a temporary personal issue to attend to, or already has a particularly challenging child to look after and feels unable to handle more, says James Purcell, executive director of the Council of Family and Child Caring Agencies. “Foster parents take a break, and agencies don’t necessarily close the home,” says Purcell. And many beds are empty because they are not open to the types of children entering foster care, including teenagers, special needs children or sibling groups, says Purcell.

“We are currently experiencing a mismatch in the beds available and the children coming into care,” ACS’ press office agreed

in an email. “Our recruitment efforts are focused on increasing the number of beds that are available to these groups.”

Taken neighborhood by neighborhood, the numbers reveal a relentless mismatch. For example, Highbridge and its surrounding neighborhood, Community District 4 in the Bronx, has long had one of the highest numbers of children removed from their homes and placed in foster care. As of May 2008, there were 264 foster children living in foster boarding homes in Highbridge. Just 27 of those children came from that community. The others were from other parts of the city.

At recent community meetings in all five boroughs, ACS officials presented data showing how many children who entered foster care were sent to live in unfamiliar neighborhoods, even as nearby foster homes were often filled by children from other communities.

These data show that in the Mott Haven section of the Bronx, for example, of the 351 children from that neighbor-

hood who entered foster care in 2006, only 37 remained in the community. Meanwhile, 187 children from other neighborhoods moved into foster homes in Mott Haven.

In 2005, 148 children from Bedford-Stuyvesant were placed in foster care, but only 19 of them remained in the neighborhood. At the same time, there were 191 children living in foster boarding homes in Bed-Stuy—nearly all of them from other neighborhoods and boroughs.

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Paradoxically, even as the city has fallen further from its goal of placing more children in their home communities, the overall need for foster boarding homes has declined steeply. In 2000, there were 5,015 children newly placed in regular foster boarding homes. In 2007 that number had fallen to just 2,767.

To cope with the shrinkage of the system, for several years foster care agencies consistently closed far more homes than they opened. Only last year did the number of newly opened homes nearly equal the number of foster parents who had left the system.

But keeping recruitment at a stable level is only part of the solution, observers say. Some critics say that the city's system for selecting foster homes for children is itself part of the problem and should be reformed.

When a child is first removed from his or her parents and slated for a spot in a regular foster boarding home, ACS' Office of Placement Administration seeks to identify a home as quickly as possible. Officials check listings of vacant beds to see if any are available in that child's neighborhood and, if so, whether these beds are appropriate for the child's age and gender. If there aren't any open, they check to see if there are any openings in the child's borough. If that fails, they place the child wherever there is an opening.

Sometimes there are no immediate openings. Even if a child's neighborhood has many foster homes, they may not be available when needed. "The problem is, will these homes be available on the days and the months and the weeks that those kids from the neighborhood get removed?" says Patricia Rideout, the Annie E. Casey Foundation's technical assistance team leader for the Family to Family initiative in New York City, which is helping the city revamp its foster care services.

In fact, on any given night, ACS is likely to have children sleeping at the Children's Center, where it temporarily houses some of the kids entering foster care for whom it can't immediately find homes.

If ACS removes children who have qualities that make them tricky to place—for example, if they have especially challenging behavior, are an older teenager or are removed during the night or weekend—workers at ACS sometimes skip the computer matching system and instead call their regular contacts at foster care agencies, according to directors of these agencies. This happens regardless of whether those agencies are designated to serve the child's

community, and the placements that result are usually outside the neighborhood.

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If the city truly wants to boost the rate of children placed in their home communities, ACS needs to find a way to pay foster parents a "retention fee" that will keep them open and available for a local child, says Courtney. And it needs to make community-based placement a higher priority, especially for younger children.

He and others say the long-term benefits would outweigh the short-term inconvenience. "I think it's really shortsighted to say, 'We can prevent an overnight stay in the Children's Center by placing them out of their home borough now,'" says Mike Arsham, executive director of the Child Welfare Organizing Project. "We know that kind of decision making is likely to generate longer lengths of stays," he says, because children placed far from their parents are less likely to remain closely connected to their families.

In Highbridge, ACS has worked with the Bridge Builders project—with which Courtney and Arsham are involved—to launch a pilot program starting with five homes earmarked for Highbridge children only. When those are filled, ACS will reserve five more homes for neighborhood children. Bridge Builders staff hope this pilot will be the first step toward a systemwide practice.

Rideout has seen other cities try this method of recruiting and retaining homes specifically for neighborhood children with varying degrees of success. One of the challenges, she says, is finding enough foster families who are willing to wait however long it takes to shelter a child from their community. "That's tricky, because people who want to take children want to take children right away. They don't want to wait months," says Rideout.

"In order to place a kid in their own community, we need to have some exponentially larger number of homes that are willing to sit and wait to stay open," she adds. It's critical to have a surplus of foster homes so that the system can afford to have some sit empty while waiting to take in neighborhood children.

Another challenge is to find enough local foster parents willing to take teenagers or other special needs children. In fact, some observers say older teenagers are likely better off exempted from in-community placement goals, because they often prefer to live apart from friends or peers who have been the source of trouble in their lives.

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For now, Cynthia Garcia is puzzled by the fact that there are many foster children near her home, yet she has had to travel long distances to see her children in different neighborhoods and attend counseling sessions in Manhattan.

"It's hard," she says. "I'm just trying to keep it all together, to be honest with you." ❖

A Personal Mission

Agencies experiment with getting the community involved in foster care recruitment.

BY KENDRA HURLEY

MINISTER ANDRÉ BROADY, a large man with spectacles and a trim moustache, booms the opening lines of a spiritual. “This is the day that God has made!” he sings, clapping, smiling, shaking his head.

The dozen women and handful of men milling about the room form a circle with Broady and his wife, Helen, who is also a minister. They clap along with the singing, then join hands as Helen gives thanks for the group’s “nine weeks of preparation for your children.”

She is referring to the nine previous Friday evenings this group has met as part of their training to become foster parents. While the Broadys have followed a curriculum that is used to train many prospective foster parents across the country, just about everything else about tonight is an experiment created by the couple and leaders of Forestdale, Inc., a Queens-based foster care agency. It’s part of an effort to find new foster homes in the New York City neighborhoods with the highest concentrations of kids taken into foster care.

Finding, training and licensing new foster parents is a costly, time-consuming and necessary task for foster care agencies. For at least the last six years, the city’s foster care system has lost more homes than it has recruited. This is in part because the number of children in foster care has declined sharply. In March 2002, there were 27,981 children living in foster care. That number had fallen to 16,982 by March 2008, a 40 percent decrease. Over that same period, dozens of agencies have ceased to provide foster care services for New York City—and thousands of foster parents have left the system.

Following the January 2006 murder of Nixzmary Brown, agency directors say, the system came under intense pressure to find new homes as the number of children placed in foster care grew again. In 2007, the nonprofit agencies that run the city’s foster care system opened 1,515 new foster homes and closed 1,617.

Forestdale, Inc. staff members note that allowing a church congregation to recruit and train its own foster parents is an unconventional way of finding new foster homes. Usually foster care agency staff or their hired professional consultants manage training and recruitment. And while

most trainings occur at agencies’ offices, tonight’s is held at Greater Allen A.M.E. Cathedral, which takes up an entire block on Merrick Avenue in Jamaica, Queens.

In some ways, giving the Broadys charge of the training is also risky—traditionally, training is a chance for foster parents to get to know an agency and for an agency to get to know the strengths and weaknesses of its new parents, says Tony Augustine, who recruits and trains foster parents at Forestdale. But like many other agencies, Forestdale is testing out the idea that enlisting help from leaders in communities with high rates of children in foster care will help establish greater trust between child welfare agencies and the communities they serve.

For at least the last six years, the city has lost more foster homes than it has recruited.

In the Highbridge section of the Bronx, a coalition of agencies is forging connections with parent leaders for the same purpose. Jewish Child Care Association (JCCA) throws “Foster Ware” parties—modeled after the parties originally invented to sell Tupperware. And the Highbridge coalition held a community art contest to help design a marketing campaign intended to clear up local “misconceptions” about foster care, says Maria Taveras, a JCCA recruiter and trainer. “Like the idea that foster care is all about adoptions, when really it’s about reunification,” she says.

Many agencies serving Highbridge have also brought local foster parents on staff to help recruit and support their peers. Research has shown that current foster parents are often the best at recruiting new ones.

Neighborhood residents “become the best guide to the strengths of their neighborhood, and if they don’t recruit (foster parents) directly, they help identify who are the leaders who might be interested in becoming resource families,” says Patricia Rideout, technical assistance team leader for the Annie E. Casey Foundation’s Family to Family initiative in New York City.

So far, at Greater Allen Cathedral, that is exactly what’s been happening. Helen and André Broady now consider finding and training new foster parents their personal mission. They’re hopeful that tonight’s graduation for potential foster parents—which Forestdale expects will lead to about eight new foster homes—will be the first of many to come for their congregation.

“A church with the magnitude of Allen could reach out to other churches,” says André Broady. “We pray this is just the beginning.” ✕

Behind Closed Doors

Diaries of three foster moms



OVER FIVE WEEKS in early 2008, three New York City women shared with reporter Kendra Hurley the ups and downs of their day-to-day lives as foster moms. Through weekly phone interviews, these women spoke frankly, revealing not only the compassion and generosity behind their decision to take on the all-consuming task of foster parenting, but also the frustrations, struggles and self-doubt that come with the territory. Following are their stories, in their words, providing an uncensored glimpse into the homes of women looking after children whose parents have been accused of abuse and neglect. In these stories, we have changed the names of all of the children, as well as the foster parents, in order to protect the children's privacy.

Like all of the city's foster parents, these three women work with the nonprofit foster care agencies that are responsible for housing children sent to them by the Administration for Children's Services (ACS). It is the agencies' responsibility to oversee these foster homes and manage the children's cases, including, whenever possible, keeping the children involved with their parents and planning for their return home. But in many cases, long-term foster care or adoption are the only choices available.



FEBRUARY 25: HAZEL DAVIS

EASTCHESTER, THE BRONX: Today Ruby wrote on the school wall that she wanted to kill the teacher. The school said they're not suspending her, but there would be a meeting. You have to wait for Ruby to calm down to talk to her, so I waited before asking, "Ruby, did you write on that wall?"

She said, "I wasn't the only one."

"But did you write on that wall?"

And she said yes. I said, "I'm glad you told me the truth, but you're responsible for Ruby. I don't want to know what anyone else did. You're smart enough to know better."

I said that because I believe you have to give these children something positive. I know, because when I was young, it was very negative. People told me, "You're dumb and stupid," and I don't believe in that.

I've been 20 years a foster parent, but when I got Ruby it'd been many years since I'd taken in new kids. I raised the seven I had before taking more. Then, about three months ago, I took in three kids: abandoned baby girl Josephine—I'm planning on adopting her; Ruby, who's 11; and Ruby's foster sister from her last home, Gina, who's 2.

Ruby and Gina were in a foster home where there were

six of them, and the father was accused of raping two of Ruby's foster sisters. The school said the kids were coming to class with no coat on and smelling like cat feces. The cops came over and said the house was disgusting, unlivable.

Ruby lived in that home nine years. She says that her foster mother started beating her all the time. She stopped when Ruby was 11, and then the foster father picked up there.

Now I've been having to restrain Ruby. She acts like a savage. Gina is only 2 years old but she has tantrums too. Still, she's a little easier than Ruby.

When Ruby came to me, she was ripping up the room, yelling and screaming, "You're not my mother! You don't tell me what to do! You're nothing!"

The social worker said to me, "You do what you got to do. What you do behind closed doors is your business." This came from a social worker!

I said, "But you are telling me what to do. You're telling me to slap her up. I don't put my hands on no kids."

That first week I took Ruby to the mall. In the parking lot she started yelling, claiming I was abducting her. A white lady called security. That was the most embarrassing thing. Thank God I had the papers from the agency to prove Ruby was a foster child! When the security guard left, Ruby started kicking my van. She yelled, "Fuck you! If you put your hands

Ruby tells me she has a lot of secrets, and I say, “I know you do, Ruby. And I know when you’re ready to tell me you will.”

on me you’re going to jail! You’re going down!” When she screams like that, it’s like a whole different personality, like a man’s voice.

Now Ruby talks to me. She tells me she has a lot of secrets, and I say, “I know you do, Ruby. And I know when you’re ready to tell me you will.” A lot of foster parents, they force these children to talk, but I won’t.

Ruby tells me, “You’re going to put me in the hospital if I tell you the truth. You’re going to put me away.”

I say, “I can’t help you if you don’t tell me the truth.”

Today I think I got a breakthrough, because when I asked her if she wrote on the wall at school, she told me the truth.



FEBRUARY 26: GABRIELA GUZMAN

DOWNTOWN BROOKLYN: I grew up with foster children in the house, and now I’ve been a foster parent myself for 19 years. I usually do the little ones. I like ages 3 to 10, and boys. The agency says, “You got a bad little boy, give him to Gabriela. She can handle it.”

But now I also have two teens in my home. Anthony, the 18-year-old, I’ve had since October. He’s been in the system a long time. His parents are deceased. Anthony doesn’t give me too much of a problem. He’s just home most of the day on the damn computer.

But Greg, my 20-year-old, now he’s a problem. I’ve had him since October as well. He’s been in care since he was little. He opens stuff up in the kitchen—fine, the food is there, eat it—but he leaves it out. I put things in zippy bags so it don’t get stale, but he opens them and leaves them there. He eats like there’s no tomorrow.

I just redid my bathroom and he started messing it up. When he showers, he steams the bathroom so there’s mildew coming out of the ceiling, and I be telling him, “You don’t need to steam the bathroom like that. What is wrong with you? You have to redo my bathroom if you fuck it up.”

Then he answers me back: “I can do what I want. I’m a man and I’m mature.”

I tell him, “You’re a boy here. You’re a young man and this is my house, and no one is the boss but me here. If I wanted a man here, I would have a man here.”

We have arguments like this all the time. I’m tired. So a few days ago I called his worker and said, “You have to get him out of here.” Since I’ve been going through this for so long, the worker said they’d send him to a group home, but it’ll take some time before they find an opening. They don’t want to put him in a foster home because of the way he is.

When I told Greg he was going to a group home, he said, “They can’t do that. I’ll sign myself out of the system.”

I said, “The world is not a pretty place. If you sign yourself out, you’re going to be all on your own without anyone to count on.”

He said, “I’m going to be fine. I’m going to be happy.” That’s how these kids think. He’s going to be 21 in October, when he’ll age out anyway. I don’t know what he plans to do with himself then.

Greg has a 43-year-old girlfriend he met on MySpace. She’s old enough to be his mama. I knew he wasn’t all there since I got him, but he’s gotten worse since he’s been with this woman. He used to go to church. He used to go to therapy. Now he’s stopped and has been smoking weed. He lost his job at McDonald’s because of her. He jumps hoops for this woman. This kid has literally gotten up at 1 o’clock in the morning, arguing on the phone with her, and put on his coat to go to New Jersey where she lives. I tell him to wait until morning and he says, “No, I got to fix it now. She’s mad at me.” And he goes all the way to New Jersey after her ass.

Teens, they’re all lost souls. They don’t care about going to school, and you have 18- and 19-year-olds and they have not finished ninth grade. And it’s a more dangerous situation for them now with the drugs, and they’re having sex left and right and not protecting themselves.

When I was a teen, we went to school. There wasn’t people getting into gangs. And if there was a fight, it was punches. Now everyone has a gun. Your kids aren’t even safe in school.



MARCH 3: RUTH DIXON

EAST NEW YORK, BROOKLYN: Jason is a beautiful, beautiful, beautiful baby. I couldn’t ask for more. He doesn’t fuss. He’s always smiling and laughing. He is just a pleasure. I’m looking at him now and I’m seeing him growing, and he’s doing all the things that a child needs to do at six months.

I decided to be a foster parent because I don’t have any kids and I wanted to give back to the community. I am 47 years old with a home with three bedrooms and two were empty, so I thought, “Why not?” But I wasn’t interested in changing diapers or pushing strollers or the sleepless nights, the whole thing. I wanted a child who was in school, who would fit into my lifestyle instead of me fitting into theirs. But the social worker who trained me asked me to take an

infant. She said, “You’re a great person and you have a great home.” She saw something in me that she thought that I needed, and she turned out to be right.

Jason was a week old when he came to me. The agency gave me papers for the WIC food program and that was it, nothing else. I decided I’d take a week of vacation to be with the baby. Then I realized he needed more of my time, so I took family care leave, for which the company has to let you take off unpaid time to care, not just for your newborn, but for a child in foster care. My friend, thank God, filled in my work slot for me, and he gave me money every single week to help me afford it. That allowed me to stay home with Jason for two months.

Jason took a lot of getting used to. He wanted food every three hours. I learned how to care for him by trial and error, and I made some calls to my girlfriends. They were very supportive.

But when those two months were almost up, no one could tell me how to get Jason daycare. The daycare centers I called were booked, and most can’t take young babies. The caseworker knew absolutely nothing. She had no suggestions at all. I was so irate with ACS and the agency that I almost thought of giving Jason up. The only way I found daycare was by going to a Web site I found about Circle of Support, a support group for foster parents. I attended one of the meetings, and in that meeting there was a representative from ACS who helped me, and I was able to get child care and go back to work.

When I got back to work, I rearranged my schedule to make sure I pick up Jason from daycare by 6 o’clock. After that, the daycare starts charging something like \$5 a minute, so I’m always hustling to get there on time. I also switched things around to make sure he has visits with his mother and father. We do two every week. On Tuesdays and Thursdays I leave my job in Manhattan early to be in Brooklyn at 5 o’clock for the two-hour visits. I leave work two hours early those days and I do not get paid for that time, so I’ve taken a pay cut.

The mother comes to the visits more often than not, but the father very rarely shows up. Some days no one shows up, and I don’t find out until I get to the agency. Both the mother and father live in the Bronx, so it’s really difficult for them to come to Brooklyn, and they complain about that all the time. I gave them my cell phone number and have asked them repeatedly, “If you’re not going to make these visits, please call me so I don’t need to leave work early.” But yesterday no one called to tell me they weren’t coming, so I missed two hours of pay to go to Brooklyn, for nothing.

One thing the agency is trying to do, but that hasn’t happened, is have a meeting to discuss how well the parents are doing. The first time we were supposed to have that discussion was in October. It still hasn’t happened, and it’s March. But we really need to talk because everyone is now so attached to this child, and my thing is I really want to adopt him. I am so attached to him, it’s like he’s my own child. I’m talking about it now and I’m tearing up, and if he can’t be with me, it is going to hurt tremendously. You look at Jason

and you fall in love. And I just want the agency to let me know what to expect.



MARCH 5: GABRIELA GUZMAN

This week Anthony, my 18-year-old, the one who’s usually good, got out of control. He was doing laundry and the machine got off track because it was too heavy. So I took out his jeans. On the way to my foster parent support group, I told him that when the machine is done, take out the clothes and put the jeans back in. Then I’m at the meeting and he calls me on my cell phone. He said, “What the fuck? You took my pants out of the machine! They’ll shrink!”

I told him it would be fine, but he starts saying, “Nobody touches my fucking pants!” Then he tells me he punched a hole in the dresser.

When I get home, I tell him, “Listen, you have no business breaking anything. Everything in the house I work for.” I clean apartments for a living. And he starts yelling about his pants. So I said, “Who the hell do you think you are, yelling and screaming at me? I don’t need foster kids in my house! This is a favor out of my heart!” Then I told him that since he broke my property, he won’t get his allowance from the agency.

He said, “Oh, no! No one takes my money! Do you want to get your face busted?”

I said, “Come on, let’s get it on,” because I don’t back down.

“Oh, why? You’re going to put your sons after me?”

I said, “I don’t have to call my sons. You have to go.”

The next day I saw his caseworker and signed the 30-day notice to get him out of my house along with Greg. The worker told me that next time I feel threatened by him to just have him arrested. She said, “If he’s really ballistic, we’ll just lock his ass up in Kings County.” He’s been hospitalized there before.

That happened on Wednesday and Anthony didn’t talk to me until the next Monday. I didn’t talk to him either. The only reason he talked to me Monday was because he wanted his allowance. I said, “Here you are, asking for money after what you did to me. You didn’t respect me, and you broke my property.”

He said, “Yeah, I’m sorry.”

Things are better now, but I’m still having him moved because one thing I’ve learned is if they do it to you once, they do it to you again. But I have mixed feelings about it ’cause I really like the kid. He suffers from depression and he won’t take medication. He is supposed to go to therapy, but he won’t. So I’m letting him stay until they find him a home.

I don’t like getting rid of kids, but there’s little things they do that I’ve been telling them not to since October. And here we are in March.

I’m not a tape recorder. My rules are clear. I don’t make a fuss when they stay out too late or don’t come home. I just say, “Let me know where you’re staying.” Sometimes they

My rules are clear. I don't make a fuss when they stay out too late or don't come home. What I don't tolerate is: don't break my property, don't disrespect me, don't threaten me.

come home drunk, and I won't make a fuss about that either. What I don't tolerate is: don't break my property, don't disrespect me, don't threaten me.

I feel bad for them, but like I tell them, there's consequences to everything you do.



MARCH 11: HAZEL DAVIS

You can't go day by day with Ruby. She goes hour by hour, and she doesn't stay steady.

Today Ruby's teacher said Ruby might get suspended for walking out of the classroom. The agency told me, "Don't get upset. It might get Ruby in a class where she gets more attention." But probably not until fall.

At home, Ruby is doing pretty good, but she's wanting to be a baby again. She says she doesn't think it's fair that when you're a baby everyone takes care of you. Sometimes Ruby regresses to a 3-year-old, and she doesn't remember how to bathe or feed herself.

I say, "You are going on 12 years old, and you're starting to be a teenager, and that's the way God wants it."

Ruby says, "God made a mistake."

You can tell that in her old foster home Ruby was the one taking care of Gina. When they first came here, Ruby said, "I'll change her Pampers. I'll wipe her. I'll feed her." She was the little mother and didn't want no one else taking care of Gina. I let it go for a little while, 'cause you can't do too much at one time with Ruby. You have to slide your way in or all she'll do is rebel, so I just took my time.

Then Ruby and I took care of Gina together. I'd say, "Sometimes you need a little help." Soon I told Ruby, "I'm the mother, you just be the child."

Now Ruby don't want to be bothered with Gina. But Gina, she's so attached to Ruby, she cries for her. But now Ruby runs around saying, "I'm not your mother! I'm not your mother!"

Today I was going to give Ruby an iPod because she loves music. But after the school called, I told Ruby I'm not going to reward her with it yet. I told her that if she stays in her classroom for a week, then I will give it to her.

She told me I'm not being fair. "But Mommy!" she said. That's her favorite thing to say: "But Mommy!"

"Why not three days?" she asked.

I said, "I think you could do better and I'm going to push

you. You can walk around the classroom, but don't walk out the door."

When Ruby gets angry, it's big fears that come up, and she gets scared I won't keep her. She'll say to me, "You're going to put me away. You'll get rid of me!"

I tell her, "I'm going to keep you. I'm going to adopt you, but you gotta help me. I can't get in your brain."

Ruby wants to change her name to mine. She knows that all the kids I raised were adopted, except for Cassandra, who didn't want her name changed because she was looking for her father, but he turned out to be dead. Now my kids talk to Ruby about how when they first came to me they felt they didn't belong, too. One, Jenna, calls from Fordham University every night. She says, "I know how you feel, Ruby, but Mommy has your back." And I tell Ruby I was a foster child too. I let her know my parents were alcoholics and I was in and out of homes, back and forth. You didn't know how long you would be there. That's why I said I'd never make a child feel uncomfortable, like they don't belong. That's why I won't lay a hand on a child. Now my parents live in the house next door. At least, that's the mother I chose.



MARCH 11: GABRIELA GUZMAN

They still haven't found a group home for Greg, the 20-year-old, and this week when I moved his dirty sneakers from the radiator cover I had started painting white, he yelled, "Don't touch my fucking things!"

The sneakers are a gift from his girlfriend, so he thinks they're made of gold.

When we have our arguments like that, I don't feel threatened that he's going to hit me, but I do feel threatened that I'll hit him and he'll hit me back. So I said, "Go to your girlfriend's 'cause I can't deal with you."

But he wouldn't. So I called the police. When the police came, I said to Greg, "I'm not having you arrested. You just have to leave."

The cop looks at him and says, "Don't you have nowhere to go?"

Greg says no. This doesn't make sense since he spent most of last week at his girlfriend's. So I said, "What's happening at your girlfriend's house that you can't stay there? She have the next man with her?" That's when Greg came at me screaming



and yelling, and the police officer restrained him.

Eventually my neighbor told Greg he could sleep on her sofa. She feels sorry for him. But Greg just left. Two days later he shows up at my door late at night with the police, saying I have to let him in because I'm getting paid to look after him and he's not officially discharged from my home. Then Greg tells me there's a law that if you let someone stay in your house for 30 days, you can't throw them out, and if you do throw them out, the cops could arrest you.

Now it's the weekend, so there's no one to call at the agency for help. All you can do is call the hotline and complain. So I said Greg could stay the night. The cop says to him, "Don't look at her, don't talk to her, just go to your room and sleep."

Greg left in the morning. He was supposed to go to the agency so they could find him a new home, but he didn't, and no one knows where he is now. If he's in the street, it's because he wants to be there.



Baby Jason is just a joy to take care of. A friend and I went to see the play "Cat on a Hot Tin Roof," and the neighbor looked after Jason and said he was very good. Saturday I had

to make time up at work, so I left Jason at my mother's. When I picked him up, she seemed like she wanted him longer. She said, "You're already here?"

Every day Jason gets up at 4 o'clock in the morning. He drinks about four ounces. He plays in the crib and by 5 o'clock he's fussing, and that means I pick him up and bring him into my bed, and he goes back to sleep until 6 or 7 a.m. He is definitely up by 7 o'clock. That's when I give him a sponge bath and dress him, and we're out by 8 a.m. I bring him to daycare with my neighbor's son, then I drive to the subway and get to work between 9 and 9:15 a.m.

Last Thursday the mother didn't show up for Jason's visit and she didn't call. The father showed up but he only stayed there for 45 minutes of the two hours. He was in there and out. We don't really have a conversation when he's there. It's just, "Hi, how are you doing?"

He was happy to see Jason, but he really doesn't know what to do with his son. Sometimes he just plays his video games.

In that visiting room, the kids and the parents are there, but I don't see that one-on-one bonding much. I think a lot of them don't know how to bond, so they're yelling, going on and cursing, and no one is stopping them or trying to help.

Compared to Jason's father, the mother does more of the

bonding. But this Tuesday the mother called to say she was at another appointment for the agency in the Bronx, and wasn't going to make the visit. She called me at 3:05 p.m. and usually I'm on the train by then, so I told her I need a call at 3 p.m. so I don't miss work when I don't need to. She agreed. She's pretty good about that. I don't think the mother knows that I would love to adopt Jason. Her attitude toward me may change once she does.



MARCH 17: HAZEL DAVIS

This is the most difficult case I've had, but I'm going to beat this. I'm never going to turn a kid away.

We had to go to the agency this week, and Ruby always gets agitated when we go to the agency. Sometimes she won't even go into the building. So in the car I said to Ruby, "We are going to the agency. What do I not want you to do?"

Ruby said, "To show off and run around."

But the minute Ruby enters the building, she starts running and throwing her stuff. The security says, "She's really wilding out. You need to get her."

I pulled her aside and told her she could kiss her iPod and Chris Brown CD goodbye. Ruby said, "So what? I'm not going to do what you say, 'cause you're a bitch."

Now I'm always trying to understand Ruby, even through her mishaps. But I will not let her call me that. I won't allow that to happen.

I said, "I'm going to let you know, and I'll let the agency know, that you have one more time to call me a bitch and I will pack your stuff."

Whenever I get upset with her, she jumps like I'm going to slap her, and she says, "Sorry Mommy, sorry Mommy, sorry!" Gina, the 2-year-old, does it too. I tell them, "I'm never going to hit you. I promise you never have to worry about that." But they still jump.

Now Ruby said, "Oh no, Mommy. I love you. I'm sorry. This is the best house I've been in. You treat me real good."

But when we got home she started picking fights with the kids on the block. And then the school called and said she's in trouble again. She's only been there six weeks and she's already been suspended twice.

My kids and me hear Ruby talking to herself as a third party a lot. She says, "Ruby, you're stupid. Ruby, you're ugly. Ruby, nobody likes you. Ruby, you're never going to be nothing."

When my daughter Jenna hears her, she says, "Ruby, you're smart. Ruby, you're pretty. Ruby, we love you."

Sometimes I hear her sisters from her old foster home talking. Me and the foster mothers who have them get together so they can visit. The girls will say, "Remember when Ruby got peanut butter put in her eyes and ears for stealing it?"

Or Ruby will say something disrespectful, and they'll say, "If you was with that other mother, she would have knocked your teeth out of your mouth."

I don't understand how this lady got away with that. It hurts me that she was abusing these children.

Last Sunday I took Ruby to Target in Mt. Vernon, where her old foster parents live, and Ruby started to get agitated in the car. As we get closer to the store she says, "Ma, if someone snatches me, would you fight for me?" Then she started to have a panic attack. Ruby is always acting like she's real tough, but here she was sweating from the palm of her hand to her face. So I turned the car around.

Later I learned that Ruby's old foster mother shops there every Sunday, and Ruby was afraid she'd see her. Her therapist said I handled it right, but we need to let Ruby know what she should do if she does see her old foster parents. He says she knows we're going to bump into them sometime, and she's worried what will happen. He said that if there is security, she can say "hello," because even though they neglected her, it's all she knew. She still has a bond with them, and knowing she can say "hello" might make her feel better.



MARCH 20: RUTH DIXON

This week I had to take off Monday because Jason came down with a cold. He wasn't drinking and he was throwing up and everything. Now he's taking juice and milk.

We went for his visit at the agency on Tuesday. This time the father did not show and the mother only stayed an hour. I overheard a conversation she had with the caseworker. The mother had tested positive for cocaine and she was saying that she wants to give up her apartment and go into a treatment program. Whether she follows through remains to be seen, but it may delay the process of knowing whether Jason can be adopted.

The caseworker finally told me they're thinking of terminating her parental rights, but it's a wait and see how it goes, and we still haven't had an official meeting to discuss it. My heart tells me the mother won't follow through. When she's with Jason, she should be bonding with him, and there's not much of that going on anymore. Jason sits on her lap, but she's not talking or playing with him. She's there for that time and she's rushing to get out. She'll say to the caseworker, "Hurry up, I need my Metrocard."

Tuesday when I came into the room, Jason heard my voice and he started fussing. She said, "Look at him. All he hears is your voice and he starts to act up."

I said, "He just wants something to eat, is all."

She said, "You know that he's fussing for you."

That's the first time I saw a little bit of jealousy from her.

I basically feel that she is just waiting for the cause that will make her have to give Jason up. She's coming to visits, but she's just showing up. And she never asks me about Jason or for a picture. I'm waiting for her to ask me about whether he's crawling or turned over, but she doesn't.

I'm getting Jason baptized in April, and I asked for her

permission. The father didn't want me to, but the mother said fine. But she never says, "I would love to be there." I don't even know what her religion is, and she didn't ask me mine.

I want to get Jason circumcised, too, so I asked the caseworker whether I needed to get permission from the mother. She said, "Just go ahead and do it. What's beneficial to the child, you can just go ahead and do."



MARCH 20: GABRIELA GUZMAN

The agency had a meeting to discuss Greg's future. It was kind of tense. Greg's parents abandoned him when he was a baby, so he doesn't have family and he didn't bring anyone with him. All he would say was, "I don't have nothing to say. I just want to be left alone."

Once you're 18, you can sign yourself out of the system, and they want him to do that because he's wasting everyone's time. But he refuses. So they were going to place him in a group home, but he didn't want that either. He just left, and for days no one knew where he is. They told me that eventually he showed up at the agency, but I don't know what happened after that.

So he's out of my house, and I already have a new kid. They called me at 5:30 last night and he came at 10 o'clock. I don't know too much about his situation, but he's 8, and he's a handful. He's speech impaired, he has problems walking and he's not fully toilet trained. He and my other little one feed off each other. They argue all day long, fighting and throwing toys at each other.

Anthony, the 18-year-old, got arrested for getting in a fight and having a knife. He has to go to court and do community service. But we're getting along better. Now that he sees what happened to Greg, he's begging for me to let him stay. He's saying, "Please give me a chance. If I start over in a new house, I don't know what's going to happen."

I told him that since the other week was the first time I'd had problems with him, I'd let him stay. But I let him know that if he messes up again, he's leaving. So we'll just have to see what happens.



MARCH 26: HAZEL DAVIS

This was a very, very adventurous week. Ruby roamed the hallway at school and threatened to knock a teacher in the face. The teacher said she needed Ruby's caseworker's number because she would have to suspend her. I don't even know who Ruby's caseworker is. I've had three since Ruby's been with me.

Then Friday night I had friends over with their children and my grandson, Brian, who is 5 years old. Ruby came into the room where the adults were and said, "Brian touched all of our private parts."

So I called Miss May, the foster parent advocate, and she came over. She lives just blocks away. Then I called the girls in. When allegations happen, I like to clear it right there. Brian started crying hysterically and both girls said that he did not touch anyone. I told him, "Brian, to protect yourself, don't ever go into Ruby's room again."

Then, Saturday, my son, who's in his 20s, brought three friends over. Ruby put on tight, tight shorts to show her butt and tied up her shirt and pulled it down. Then she paraded in front of the boys. I said, "Go put clothes on. You don't parade in front of grown men like that."

Another day my friend and his wife visited. Ruby went into her room, then came out with less clothes on and her shirt tied in a knot. You should have seen the way she walked in front of the man! He left with his wife right then. He said, "I'm not going to be arrested for molestation."

Sunday night Ruby threatened my little sister who lives next door. She shook an umbrella at her and said, "I would kill you, you bitch! You don't know who you're fucking with!" She was screaming on the top of her lungs, so the neighbors came running. My son started crying. My daughter tried to calm Ruby down, but Ruby started yelling at her, too, saying, "Fuck you. Eat my pussy!"

I said, "That's it. I don't allow none of my kids to talk like that."

Ruby said, "Fuck you too!"

I said, "Time out!"

She started throwing things out of her dresser and screaming and hollering, "I hate you!" My other daughter, Jenna, put Ruby in a lock. Jenna said, "I love you, Ruby! It's going to be all right!" After about an hour Ruby calmed down.

That's when I said, "You know what, Ruby? I've had enough. Whenever you can't get your way you go into your rages, and I've been nothing but nice to you. Do you see anyone else talk to me this way?"

She said, "No."

I said, "You know what? I don't have to allow you to curse at me and tear everything up. I'd rather let you go."

The next day the school calls again. The teacher says something has to be done because Ruby is affecting all the kids. I said, "The same thing is going on here. The kids think Ruby is getting special treatment and is above the law."

Miss May said this girl has to be hospitalized so they can evaluate her and give her the right medicine, because this medicine she's on doesn't do crap.

So Ruby will have to leave my house. I'll take her back, but she's starting to stress me, and it's not fair to my children.

When Ruby came home today, I talked to her. I told her I love her very much but she needs special help that only a hospital can give. I told her I would take her back, but only after she gets the help she needs. She started crying. She said, "This is the best house I've ever been in."

After that I prayed. I said, "Please let me know what the



reason is, God. I know you don't make mistakes. I know you do everything for a reason."

MARCH 28: RUTH DIXON

This week is going very well. The mother didn't show up for any visits. At first, she showed up regularly. Then the visits got shorter. Now she's not showing up more than showing up. The caseworker says she's proceeding to separate their rights.

Jason is turning over now. He can really roll over, and he's trying to stand up in the crib and trying to walk. And this week he took his first step! It happened on Saturday—a baby step. He was with me and my mom, and I was holding his hand, and I said, "Come on, let's walk," and he stepped off. I was excited. I was very, very excited.

APRIL 2: HAZEL DAVIS

I went with Ruby to the hospital and stayed with her 'til 10 o'clock at night. Before I left she said, "Mommy, don't leave me. Don't give me up. Don't lie to me and tell me you will come and get me and then send me somewhere else."

It was hard. It was very hard.

The staff told me that the next day she had to be locked down about 10 times and she stole someone's stuff. Now she calls me about six times a day. She wants me to write a letter promising that she would come back home to live with me, and that I would adopt her. She leaves messages saying, "Mommy, I love you. Mommy, please let me come back home. Mommy, I miss you." I save those messages.

In some ways I feel like I failed her. Even my children are sad. But Gina is doing better. She's depending on us more, and she's talking more. So in some ways it's a good thing that Ruby is gone, 'cause I can deal with Gina now. And when Ruby comes back in a month or two, I can focus on Ruby. ❖

UPDATE: At the time this story went to press, Gabriela Guzman had not heard from Greg, but she and Anthony were getting along well. Despite Ruth Dixon's request, Jason's pediatrician would not perform a circumcision without the birth mother's permission. The city is pursuing the legal termination of parental rights against both Jason's mother and father, and Dixon plans to begin adoption proceedings as soon as possible.

Meanwhile, Hazel Davis recently met Gina's mother, who is 19 and in foster care herself. The young woman had begun visiting Gina, and planned to join Davis' family to celebrate the toddler's birthday in June. Ruby was scheduled to leave the hospital shortly, and Davis had begun legal proceedings to adopt her as her daughter.

For the Sake of Their Children

Foster parents and birth parents strive for better relationships.

BY HELAINE OLEN

ALLEN ROSE WAS WATCHING cartoons in the kitchen of his foster parents' Bedford-Stuyvesant brownstone when his father picked him up for the weekend. His dad leaned over and kissed his nose. "Mommy," the 3-year-old boy said, smiling.

"I'm not Mommy. I'm Daddy," said his father, Tom Rose.

Allen giggled and looked over at his foster mother, Allyson Green, the woman he knows as Mommy.

When Bruce Green, a car inspector for Metro-North Railroad, walked into the room a few minutes later, he picked Allen up and swung him over his shoulders. Allen screeched his pleasure.

Allen calls Bruce Green "Dad," too. "Sometimes when he says 'Daddy,' it's confusing," says Tom. "He has two dads and one mom."

The Greens, in turn, consider not only Allen, but Allen's father to be part of their extended clan, which includes numerous current and former foster children—and sometimes, their birth parents. "Tom and Allen found a new family," says Allyson Green, a petite woman whose voice still carries the lilt of her native Belize. "When they go home, I will still be a part of their life if they let me."

But in the meantime, before the two leave for the weekend, Allyson Green makes Tom take moisturizer for Allen's eczema. "The other day Tom didn't have the right lotion," she says.

• • •

This is the kind of foster parent/birth parent relationship—cooperative, loving, supportive—that child welfare officials in New York City would like to see develop with greater frequency.

Traditionally, foster parents and birth parents had very little to do with one another. Child welfare officials often assumed birth parents were potentially violent or threatening to foster parents, or were simply difficult to deal with, and agencies routinely advised there be only limited contact between the two families. That attitude changed about a decade ago, when New York City officials began following the lead of the Family to Family foster care model, developed by the Annie E. Casey Foundation.

The Baltimore-based foundation designed Family to Family to give children in foster care as much stability as possible and to help them find permanent homes quickly. A key principle of Family to Family is that when foster and birth parents cooperate, foster children can find permanent homes—be it through reunification or adoption—more speedily than they would have in traditional foster care arrangements.

To that end, several cities and states around the country now encourage what was previously considered counterintuitive: close relationships between foster parents and birth parents. The new model asks that foster parents serve as "resource parents" who are there not only for the foster child, but for the child's family as well. Resource parents are a combination of parent, coach and cheerleader to both the foster child in their care and the child's parents.

Though in recent years resource parenting has become more widely used, both nationally and in New York City, empirical evidence that it accomplishes what it sets out to do is scant. No one knows for sure whether it truly gets children into permanent homes faster. "There is a dearth of research," concedes Denise Goodman, an independent trainer and national consultant on resource family issues.

But anecdotally, almost everyone agrees it makes for a less traumatic experience in foster care and helps ease a child's transition back to his or her family. "We can definitely see patterns when the birth parents and the foster parents work together," says Goodman. "We see far less conflict, but it is purely anecdotal at this time."

"If the parents are empowered, there is a much better chance of them staying involved with their children," says Mary Odom, assistant executive director for family foster care and adoption at SCO Family of Services. "We are all creatures of habit. If you have no input into your child's life except for visiting two hours and then you are gone, you are not the parent and you are not there."

An ongoing relationship with the foster family also gives parents somewhere to turn for advice and support when things get tough after the children return home. Numerous foster parents report providing babysitting and other assistance for their former foster kids.

The concept of resource parenting is now ingrained in the training foster parents receive in New York State, where the vast majority of agencies use the Model Approach to Partnerships in Parenting (MAPP) to certify foster parents. MAPP includes a segment on foster and birth parent cooperation.

In recent months, the city's Administration for Children's Services (ACS) has also unveiled new initiatives designed to improve relations between the two families, like parent-to-parent meetings. Several of the nonprofit agencies that manage foster care under contract with ACS are taking part. Caseworkers are expected to coordinate an "icebreaker" meeting within three to five days of a child's placement in foster care to help break down barriers between the two sides.

"It's an opportunity for the birth parent to share information such as 'She doesn't eat broccoli, she wets the bed at night, this is the name of her best friend at school,'" says Lorraine Stephens, ACS deputy commissioner for family planning services. "It's an opportunity to talk about the child."

"There is a magic moment when the child first comes into care, when the birth parent knows more than the foster family," says Michael Wagner, director of permanency at the Children's Aid Society. "This allows the birth parent to work in collaboration with the resource family instead of in competition, and the resource family gets to see the value of the birth family."

Also as part of a pilot initiative, ACS now expects birth and foster families to gather every three months at family team conferences to ensure that everyone involved in the care of a foster child has a chance to air their feelings and concerns and come to a consensus about the child's future.

Even so, implementation of and follow-up on resource parenting is difficult to track, and it can vary depending on which agency a foster parent works with. Some agency directors believe resource parenting is more of an aspiration than a reality in New York City's foster care system, where staff turnover is high and potential foster parents are in short supply. If a foster parent does not want to work cooperatively with a child's parents, caseworkers can have a hard time changing their minds. Some agency executives say they try to hold foster parents to the highest standards, but ultimately they don't want to drive people away if they are otherwise doing a good job caring for children.

It can be especially challenging to convince women and men who have been foster parenting for decades to change their stance toward the children's parents, says Wagner. When these people began in the field, they often saw themselves as providing the first stable homes these kids had ever known. "We were changing what they signed on to do," says Wagner.

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Achieving a positive relationship between parents and foster parents can be like setting up an arranged marriage—many end well, but some people are not meant to be together no matter what.

Most parents enter the relationship angry or at least resentful. After all, they've had their child taken from them by authorities who deemed them unfit. How foster parents deal with that anger can set the tone for months and years into the future.

Yet at the time of the initial placement, the question of how well parents and foster parents might get along is rarely considered. Many children come into foster care suddenly, sometimes in the middle of the night. With emergency placements, children generally go to whatever homes are immediately available. Agency officials say there is no time to carefully consider which foster parents will best mesh with birth families.

"It's not that fine of a system," acknowledges Allen Feltman, foster boarding home director at St. Dominic's Home, a Bronx-based foster care agency. "Ninety-nine percent of our placements are emergency. One hardly knows the children, much less how they are going to match up with a foster parent."

For Allen Rose and his father, it took four foster families to get the relationship right.

When Allen was born in the spring of 2005, he tested positive for exposure to drugs. The boy's mother was addicted to drugs, and when Allen was a few months old, she entered a rehabilitation program where she could be with her son. She quit the program, however, and Allen ended up in foster care. Allen's mother no longer sees her son. Tom Rose, who says he had been sober for nine years before these events, also relapsed, and eventually entered a rehabilitation program himself.

Allen arrived at the Green household at the age of 14 months, after other foster arrangements had collapsed. (Agency workers decided that in one of his foster homes Allen was not getting the care he needed. A different foster mother left the city for vacation.)

Tom Rose admits he initially bumped heads with the Greens. "The second time I visited, [Allen] had a shaved head and new clothes. I was cursing under my breath," Tom recalls. Other things got him angry too: Allen calling Allyson Green "Mommy," and food restrictions.

But Allyson Green would patiently explain to the boy's father that she wasn't putting Allen on a restricted diet arbitrarily, but because sugar and chocolate made the boy's moods and eczema worse.

"Tom complained about everything. He complained when I put jeans on Allen with a car on the pocket, saying I was raising a thug," she recalls. "I would tell Tom all the time, 'I'm here to help you with Allen. I love him, but I know you love him more because you are his parent.'"

Tom says a caseworker at the agency sat down with him and explained that the Greens were good people with an established record as successful foster parents. It would be easier, the official said, if he could work on letting his anger go.

Allyson Green worked on her issues, too. "I needed to pray a lot. I needed to learn to let him come around," she says.

And, in time, he did.

The Greens, who have a reputation at their foster care agency for being exceptional resource parents, make it a point to include mothers and fathers in their children's lives, if they are willing. They've taken middle-of-the-night phone calls from the mother of one of their foster children when she struggled with her recovery program. They've opened their home to Tom Rose for unstructured time with their family, and he frequently drops in for Sunday dinner.

"The secret is to be as natural and normal as possible," Bruce Green says. "If you are a family, you don't have to put on a show. We ask folks to go to the store and take out the garbage because that's what you ask family."

Many agency officials believe that the more flexible foster parents can be and the more informal contact the foster and birth family can manage, the better the outcome for children. This can mean allowing parents to call at will instead of only at specifically mandated times, allowing the children to see their parents outside of scheduled visitations, and including parents in important moments in a child's life such as school events and doctor visits, even without direct orders to do so from a caseworker or the courts.

"We have one foster mother who would tell her mothers, 'You can come and cook whatever you want, but you have to leave the kitchen the way you found it.' Many of the mothers would come and cook for their kids," says Odom of SCO Family of Services. "This same mother told another mother that she didn't do braids and made her come to the house every Saturday to braid the child's hair."

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There have always been foster parents who practiced resource parenting even if they didn't know it was officially encouraged. When Audrey Thompson, now a foster care advocate for SCO, took in her first foster child more than a decade ago, she did not expect to gain an entire family. But the day after Jonathan, then 8, arrived at the Thompson home, he accompanied the family to Coney Island—where they literally ran into the boy's mother on the street.

"We turned around and they were hugging each other and crying. We stood apart and looked on," Thompson recalls. "Finally, my husband told her, 'You can walk with us,' and she tagged along."

Jonathan was one of six siblings, spread out among several

continued on page 35



Three-year-old Allen Rose calls two men "Daddy"—his father, Tom Rose (right) and his foster father, Bruce Green (left). Bruce Green and his wife Allyson are parenting Allen collaboratively with Tom.

Learning to Love the "Other Family"

My son's foster mother came through for us both.

BY LYNNE MILLER

THE FIRST TIME I MET my son's foster mother, I was in no mood to be friendly. I met her at my first visit with my son. I noticed a tall, blonde woman with a kind but crooked face. Then a little short-haired blond boy ran past me. My caseworker said to me, "Aren't you going to say hello to your son?"

I said, "Where is he?"

She pointed to the kid. "Right there!"

Now, when they took my son from me he had long hair and a longer tail down his back and the little boy she pointed out had one of those ugly mushroom cuts. I called my son's name and the boy turned around—that was my son! I was furious.

Then I heard him call the blonde woman "Mom." I nearly lost my mind. After I calmed down somewhat, the caseworker explained to me that, since her other foster kids called her Mom, it made him feel comfortable to call her that too. Guess how much I liked that?!

After my son said a tearful goodbye, I asked the caseworker about the foster parent. I found out that she and her husband had been doing this for many years and they were in the process of adopting four sisters they had in their home. The father was a clerk in the Family Court and the mom had been a nurse, but was now a stay-at-home mom.

While I wasn't happy about my son being in the system, my impression was that he had people who fostered out of love and who would be consistent in his life. That was important to me because I knew my son would not be coming home too soon. I had been using drugs, and to get my son back I had to do a lot, including an 18-month outpatient drug rehab program.

From then on, when I visited my son, I greeted his foster mom and she would give me a progress report about how he was doing each week. As time went on we became friendlier, and I got to know her. I eventually found her and her whole family to be warm, caring, loving and patient.

My son told me he liked having a lot of kids to play with, and that the house was really nice and he had pets. I was very jealous, but in time came to realize I would be able to provide for my son again.

The only problem I had was I felt he was being spoiled. At every visit he had a new toy or a new outfit to show me. I

didn't know how I was going to keep up once I got him back. When I spoke to the foster mom about this, she said that she understood and scaled back on what she got him—or at least, what I saw of it.

At one very low point in my recovery, I spoke to the foster mother and the caseworker about surrendering my rights voluntarily. The foster mom looked startled and asked me why.

"You seem to be able to do so much more for my son than I can do," I said.

She said, "No matter what I do for him, no one can give him the love you can—so don't give up."

She started me thinking that my recovery was possible. I had someone who actually believed I could get him back! That meant a lot to me.

About a week before Christmas, the time finally came for me to get my son back. The day he came home, my son's foster mother did an unbelievably compassionate and astounding thing: she handed me a check.

"This is the rest of the foster care money for this month. I thought you would need it to help get him some Christmas gifts, since you're not working yet," she said.

Well, I gave that woman the biggest hug I could muster.

It's been almost 11 years now since my son has come home. There have been many changes in our lives, but one consistent thing for my son and me has been our relationship with his foster parents. When our lives were adrift, they were a stabilizing force for my son. Now we are as big a part of their lives as they are in ours.

My son has spent many nights and weekends at their house and gone on vacations with them. He's gone to family celebrations, ball games and more. And I have gone to some, too! I've also been able to help them out by babysitting their youngest daughter. That made me feel especially good, because they trusted me.

Packing up my son for a vacation or overnight with his "other family," I've felt grateful that my son has another family who enriches his life. I can appreciate that my son benefits from the caring of this family who took him into their hearts and home. ✕

Lynne Miller is a parent advocate at Seamen's Society for Children and Families. She wrote this story for Rise, a magazine by and for parents in the foster care system.

For the Sake of Their Children, continued from page 33

foster homes in Brooklyn and Queens. He visited his siblings and mother on Saturdays in alternate boroughs. Tired of all the traveling, Thompson asked if visits could take place at her Bedford-Stuyvesant home. “This was unusual at the time. But SCO embraced it,” she recalls.

Thompson became more and more involved in the life of her foster child’s family and, eventually, all six siblings became her foster children. She and her husband adopted the youngest two, and their mother remained involved in all of her children’s lives. The two families became so intertwined that Thompson’s husband helped the children’s mother obtain a job as a home attendant via his employer, New Parkway Hospital in Queens.

“We could see the kids loved her,” Thompson says.

Nonetheless, Thompson says she sometimes wonders if she should have been less accommodating with her foster children’s mother. Maybe then the woman would have summoned the wherewithal to regain custody of some of her children, she says. None of the six siblings ever returned to her.

“Sometimes I think we enabled her because we accepted her as part of the family,” Thompson says. “So I think she was quite content for us to raise the kids and for her to be there.”

Another foster mother, who requested anonymity for fear the foster care agency she works with would penalize her for being critical, said she generally supported the concept of resource parenting, but found it hard to carry out. “Many parents come in with a lot of luggage and a lot of attitude,” she says. “Advocates say we are a team, but sometimes that’s not true. Parents have to get to know you, and then they will feel comfortable with you. We foster parents put in a lot and we put up with a lot.”

With children currently in her care, this foster mother said she carefully monitors their contact with their mother. Negotiating boundaries was especially difficult because, at certain points in the case, the foster mother allowed the mother to speak with the children even when officials asked her not to. “She wasn’t supposed to call, but I told her to call because the kids missed her. If they don’t hear from her, it’s hard on me,” the woman says. She adds that she also speaks to the mom by phone when the children are not present, so they can share information.

Foster care agency officials say the best way to encourage resource parenting is to offer parents and foster parents greater training, counseling and support so they can focus more energy on forging collaborative relationships. Jewish Child Care Association of New York, for example, offers foster parents monthly support groups where they can share their struggles and victories working with foster children and their families. At Edwin Gould Services for Children and Families, foster and birth families have their own dedicated support personnel, and foster parents have their own crisis intervention unit.

Resource parenting often involves a great investment of time and emotional reserves, and not all foster parents are equipped to handle the increased demands.

Still, no amount of encouragement and sit-downs can mask the fact that resource parenting often involves a great investment of time and emotional reserves, and not all foster parents are equipped to handle the increased demands. “You need to remember these are volunteers,” says Wagner of Children’s Aid Society. “We try to make our families understand their roles with respect to the birth family, and to take on their roles as models for the birth family. But that’s sometimes not the role they were looking for.”

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Allyson and Bruce Green know it’s likely Allen will one day return to his father’s full-time custody. Tom Rose now has weekend visits with the boy, who turned 3 in May, and the two families are handling the pending change in the cooperative way they’ve always done.

Tom picks Allen up on Friday mornings—and if he needs parenting advice, he knows he can call Allyson for input. If Allen is having problems adjusting to being alone with his dad, Tom will bring him back to the Greens for the night and take him again the next morning. Tom will often snap pictures of the boy as he plays in the park and at the library and send them to Allyson’s cell phone. It’s his way of thanking her for all the times she would call him when the boy did something new or amusing.

Perhaps most important, Tom—a native of Washington Heights who was living in the Bronx when Allen went into foster care—has moved to Brooklyn to be near the Greens. He’s even named them the boy’s godparents. “The Greens are the closest thing to family my son has,” Tom says.

In turn, the Greens have now found another way to show their love for Allen: The boy’s mother recently gave birth to another boy, and they have agreed to be his foster parents. ✕

High-Risk, Low Priority

The needs of teen parents in foster homes are often unmet.

BY LAURA LONGHINE

WHEN MAYRA PACHECO became pregnant at 16, she knew she didn't want to have her baby in the foster home in Queens where she and her younger brother lived because she didn't get along with her foster mother. But she didn't know much else about what lay ahead.

"There were times I was very doubtful that I was actually pregnant," she says. "Like it was a dream."

Just before she gave birth, Pacheco moved in with a foster mother who owned a brownstone in Bedford-Stuyvesant, Brooklyn. Pacheco had two rooms, a bathroom and even a tiny kitchen for herself, her brother and her soon-to-arrive baby. What she didn't have was much guidance.

Arriving home from the hospital with her newborn daughter, Pacheco was terrified. An official at the hospital told her a nurse would stay with her the first two days to help out, but nobody came. "It was crazy," Pacheco, now 21, recalls. "It was very scary. I was so young. And I don't have any family members here. No mom, aunts or uncles, cousins."

Pacheco had found prenatal care for herself at a nearby hospital and took a birthing class there with her boyfriend. But she says her agency never referred her to parenting classes or groups where she could meet other teen moms. Her foster mother wasn't around much and did not offer any advice on how to care for a newborn.

Pacheco wishes someone had stepped forward to help. "After the baby was born, I felt very alone, very lonely, and just not sure if I was doing everything the right way," she remembers. She didn't understand why her baby was constantly crying, only later realizing that her daughter had probably needed to be fed more often.

As a group, teen mothers face many of the same daunting odds as teenagers in foster care. Research has shown that both groups are more likely than their peers to live in poverty and drop out of high school. And a study by the Robin Hood Foundation found that children of teen parents are twice as likely to be abused or neglected. Yet in New York City, pregnant and parenting teens are a group that has been largely overlooked by the foster care system.

Many teen moms in foster care are overwhelmed by the responsibility of caring for a newborn—like the 14-year-old

mother of baby Daniella, the infant who made the news in February after a cabbie brought her to a firehouse in a desperate abandonment scheme.

The city's Administration for Children's Services (ACS) does not provide the privately-run foster care agencies it oversees with guidelines defining the services they must provide to pregnant and parenting teens. Nor does it keep track of how many teens in the system are pregnant or parenting, despite calls to do so, including a 1995 report by the Youth Advocacy Center and a 2005 report by the city public advocate's office.

Experts say this dearth of data makes it difficult to assess whether young mothers and their children are receiving appropriate care. "We all are clear on how high-risk this population is," says Linda Lausell Bryant, executive director of Inwood House, the only city nonprofit that exclusively serves pregnant and parenting teens. "But we're really uneven in terms of a systemic response."

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There are far more pregnant and parenting teens in the foster care system than there are available slots in programs specifically intended for them. The 2005 public advocate's survey estimated there to be 437 pregnant and parenting teens in the system, and ACS itself offers a similar rough estimate. But there are only about 42 beds for pregnant teens in the city's maternity shelters and 157 beds for teen moms in residences created for mothers and their children.

This means most pregnant and parenting teens in foster care live in foster homes, a policy in keeping with the city's efforts to keep as many young people in family settings as possible. Indeed, ACS has been referring fewer and fewer pregnant teens to maternity shelters. Last year, The New York Foundling reduced the size of its maternity shelter, one of only three in the city, from 22 beds to eight.

"Many of the kids that ACS used to put in maternity shelters they're now putting in family settings with support services," says Sister Ellen Hunt, the assistant director of Rosalie Hall, a maternity shelter in the Bronx, who has worked with teen moms for two decades. "Which is okay—if it works."

For young mothers to successfully live with families, Hunt says, foster homes have to offer support and close supervision. Yet there are no citywide standards for how foster parents should be trained to help young mothers, and ACS does not systematically measure whether or not pregnant teens are getting the basics, such as prenatal care and parenting skills. The agency does conduct periodic random reviews to determine whether foster children—pregnant or not—are receiving appropriate medical care.

ACS encourages agencies to refer pregnant teens to the Nurse-Family Partnership, which provides intensive in-home support to new moms for two years. But teens have to be signed up by the third month of pregnancy. "At that stage, we don't often know yet that the girl is pregnant," says Mary-Ellen McLaughlin, executive director of foster care/adoptive



Mayra Pacheco was 16 years old when she gave birth to her daughter, Daniella. Though she was living in a foster home, she received little guidance on how to parent.

Foster parents must negotiate the particularly tricky role of caring for a teen who's in the foster care system and a baby who is not.

services at Good Shepherd Services. "It's a great program, but we generally haven't been able to qualify our youngsters."

In residences for pregnant and parenting young women, trained staff help teens find jobs and stay in school—an important goal, experts say, as one study found that an astonishing 70 percent of teen moms do not finish high school. They also help pregnant and parenting young women learn how to breast feed, bond with their babies and generally take on the responsibility of being a parent. At Inwood House, pregnant teens have "baby simulators" to care for—dolls that cry until their "mothers" take the appropriate steps to soothe them.

But for teens in foster homes, supervision and assistance falls to the foster parents, who must also negotiate the particularly tricky role of caring for a teen who's in the foster care system and a baby who is not.

"Some foster parents take over and try to parent the baby themselves," says Miranda Seaton, a caseworker at Good Shepherd Services. This can prevent the teen from stepping into the parenting role, she says. In the 2005 public advocate's survey, more than half of the 30 responding agencies reported they did not have specific training for foster parents on how to support pregnant and parenting teens.

In 1968, Inwood House created the city's only foster home program for young mothers, and it's now a national model. The agency recruits foster parents to work specifically with teen mothers, and has tailored the state-required foster parent training program to include topics like talking to teens about contraception and how to allow your teen to be a teen while teaching them to be a parent.

The agency also holds a monthly support group for all of its foster parents and provides them with lots of attention, says Norma Uriguen, director of teen family support services. "We're in the homes a lot more than in regular foster homes," she says.

Teens, too, get extra assistance. They're offered peer group meetings, parenting skills workshops, help completing their education and assistance finding daycare.

At 17, Melissa Cueves had a new baby who'd been born with disabilities, and was living in a kinship foster home with her aunt, who had four other kids. "I needed all the help I could get," she recalls.

When her foster care agency, Pius VII, closed just after her baby's birth, Cueves and her aunt switched to Inwood House's program. There, Cueves took classes on budgeting, domestic violence and parenting skills. Her social worker accompanied her on doctor's visits and taught her how to find and evaluate daycare centers. And Cueves met a group of

peers, some of whom she's still in touch with six years later. "Everyone was dealing with the same issues as me," she says.

Attracting foster parents willing to commit to supporting young mothers isn't easy. Inwood House is contracted to provide approximately 45 foster boarding homes in its program, but currently has only 16 open, with 12 more families still undergoing the orientation process. And while most of the city's other 35 agencies accept and serve pregnant and parenting teens in their foster homes, few offer such comprehensive support—though some have taken creative approaches to accommodating this group's special needs. At Good Shepherd Services, for example, a sudden increase last year in the number of pregnant and parenting teens led the agency to return to a previous practice of giving one social worker responsibility for all the parenting teens.

"Teen moms have very specific needs, so it seems to work better to have them all centralized," explains McLaughlin.

The New York Foundling runs a maternity shelter and several residences for mothers and their children, but does not provide specific services for its teen moms in foster homes. Agency caseworkers try to match teen moms with foster parents who have recent experience caring for babies, says Executive Director Bill Baccaglini. The agency also makes sure pregnant teens in foster homes receive prenatal care. But, as with most agencies, these teens are dealt with on a case-by-case basis.

"Agencies really strive to do the best they can," says Bryant, of Inwood House. "But these services shouldn't be optional or up to one's best judgment."

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Today Mayra Pacheco, has accomplished a lot—she received her GED and now has a full-time job doing administrative work at her former foster care agency—but she still considers her situation precarious. She's been able to stay in her foster mother's building since aging out of foster care last January, but the rent is high, amounting to more than half her monthly income. She dropped out of college, and may be facing probation at her job for missing too many days. Her daughter is sick a lot, Pacheco says, and finding someone to care for her is an ongoing struggle.

Her baby was her responsibility, Pacheco says, and she never expected the agency or her foster mother to take over. But she would have liked more support. "I could have used just a bit more care from them, for somebody to ask if I needed help," she says. "I was never offered that. I had to learn it on my own." ❖

A six-year statistical survey monitoring New York City's child welfare system

WATCHING THE NUMBERS

PROTECTIVE SERVICES

	FY 02	FY 03	FY 04	FY 05	FY 06	FY 07
REPORTS OF ABUSE AND NEGLECT	55,925	53,894	51,477	50,251	62,585	64,190

2008 numbers not shown here suggest hotline reports have stabilized two years after the 2006 Nixmary Brown murder.

PERCENTAGE OF REPORTS SUBSTANTIATED	33.6	33.6	33.7	32.6	36.7	39.8
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Investigators are deciding that more reports are valid than in past years.

PENDING RATE	5.4	5.2	5.9	6.1	7.5	6.0
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The monthly average of new cases per child protective worker has dropped due to new hires at ACS.

AVERAGE CHILD PROTECTIVE CASELOAD	11.6	11.2	12.1	12.1	16.5	15.1
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Not shown here are numbers for 2008, which reveal a substantial decline in caseloads.

FAMILIES RECEIVING ACS COURT-ORDERED SUPERVISION (ACTIVE, JUNE)	2,470	2,506	2,289	1,947	2,689	3,570
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Total families supervised by child protective services under court order rose 83 percent from June 2005 to June 2007.

CHILD FATALITIES IN CASES KNOWN TO ACS (PREVIOUS CALENDAR YEAR)	25	24	33	30	45	N/A
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PREVENTIVE SERVICES

FAMILIES RECEIVING ACS-CONTRACTED PREVENTIVE SERVICES (MONTHLY AVERAGE)	11,150	11,700	11,622	11,542	11,695	12,889
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Not included here are about 260 families in the ACS-run Family Preservation Program.

NUMBER OF CHILDREN IN PREVENTIVE CASES (ACTIVE, JUNE)	29,827	30,368	30,033	29,405	28,663	30,358
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Preventive programs were operating at full capacity throughout 2007.

PERCENT OF PREVENTIVE CASES REFERRED BY ACS	53	52	50	49	52	68
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More than two-thirds of all new cases referred to general preventive agencies were referred by ACS.

FOSTER CARE SERVICES

NUMBER OF CHILDREN ADMITTED TO FOSTER CARE	8,498	6,901	6,201	4,813	6,213	7,026
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The number of children in care rose steeply in 2007, but has flattened in 2008.

NUMBER OF CHILDREN DISCHARGED FROM FOSTER CARE	10,538	9,594	8,854	7,907	6,625	6,769
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There were fewer discharges than admissions for the first time in 15 years.

TOTAL FOSTER CARE POPULATION (ANNUAL AVERAGE)	28,215	25,701	22,082	18,968	16,805	17,005
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Even with an increase in placements, the foster care census rose only slightly.

MEDIAN LENGTH OF STAY FOR CHILDREN BEFORE RETURN TO PARENTS (MONTHS)	6.9	6.8	7.6	8.2	10.3	11.5
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Median length of stay has continued to rise for children entering foster care for the first time.

PERCENTAGE OF CHILDREN WITH REUNIFICATION GOAL (PREVIOUS CALENDAR YEAR)	46.3	43.8	44.0	44.3	45.5	55.3
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This number rose to its highest level since 2002.

PERCENTAGE OF SEPARATED SIBLINGS (PREVIOUS CALENDAR YEAR)	51.6	52.4	51.4	50.7	49.3	47
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The sibling separation rate continues to decline.

RECIDIVISM RATE (%) (PREVIOUS CALENDAR YEAR)	13.8	13.6	12.8	13.6	11.5	9.1
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The number of children who return to care within two years of discharge has fallen in the last two years.

PERCENTAGE OF FOSTER CHILDREN IN KINSHIP CARE	25.7	26.8	26.0	24.6	24.3	28.3
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In 2007 the proportion of children in kinship care rose to its highest level since 2000, but has risen only slightly in 2008.

PERCENTAGE OF FOSTER BOARDING HOME PLACEMENTS IN BOROUGH OF ORIGIN	64.6	74.9	72.0	76.0	72.8	65.7
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This percentage has continued to fall in 2008.

PERCENTAGE OF FOSTER BOARDING HOME PLACEMENTS IN COMMUNITY DISTRICT	18.2	22.1	23.0	21.1	17.3	13.4
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This rate has also dropped noticeably as placements increased.

ADOPTION SERVICES

PERCENTAGE OF CHILDREN WITH ADOPTION AS A GOAL (PREVIOUS CALENDAR YEAR)	40.3	39.4	38.8	39.8	38.0	30.4
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This number has fallen significantly, possibly due to the rush of new placements beginning in 2006.

NUMBER OF FINALIZED ADOPTIONS	2,694	2,849	2,735	2,364	1,831	1,562
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Finalized adoptions have declined by 45 percent since FY 2003.

AVERAGE TIME TO COMPLETE ADOPTIONS (YEARS)	3.6	3.6	3.6	3.4	3.5	3.4
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This number has remained fairly constant over the past six years.

CHILD WELFARE WATCH is a project of the Center for New York City Affairs at Milano The New School for Management and Urban Policy and the Center for an Urban Future.

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Graphic Design: Design Confederation

Photography: Arpan Munier

Child Welfare Watch is made possible thanks to the generous support of the Child Welfare Fund, the Ira W. DeCamp Foundation, the Viola W. Bernard Foundation and the Sirius Fund.

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