

Child Welfare Watch

ONE STEP BACK:

The delayed dream of community partnerships



HISTORICALLY, BUILDING trust with communities was not a high priority for child welfare systems. This began to change in the 1990s as innovators experimented with community-centered strategies to incorporate the voices of residents, parents and young people—engaging with them not just as subjects of the system, but as critical participants with input into how resources could be used and information shared.

When New York City's Administration for Children's Services (ACS) launched its Community Partnership Initiative in 2007, the move represented a view of child welfare's future. In 11 neighborhoods, ACS committed money and assistance to building networks of residents and organizations, oriented around the goal of supporting local families. The networks would be infused with the energy and knowledge of residents, parents, and people whose lives have been touched by foster care or child protection. Relationships between social services organizations, churches, youth programs and the like would be facilitated by partnership staff. The child welfare system would be more transparent and accountable to the communities it is designed to serve.

The idea was that these networks would make the system stronger, with neighbors and local organizations reaching out to struggling families before their children came to

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CENTER FOR NEW YORK CITY AFFAIRS
THE NEW SCHOOL

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- Foster care in NYC costs 42 percent less than in 2000, but the city has not stuck to its plan of reinvesting savings into services that help stabilize struggling families. (See "The Dream of Reinvestment," page 5.)
- In 2008, the city planned to double funding for each community partnership and to expand their reach. That plan never materialized. Total funding distributed to partnerships has remained static at \$1.65 million—barely more than .1 percent of child welfare spending. (See "No Easy Choices," page 16.)
- In 2010, ACS held 9,235 child safety conferences, allowing parents to meet with the workers who decided whether their children should be placed in foster care. Community partnerships sent representatives to 1,395 (15 percent) of these conferences, with the goal of helping parents participate in decisions about their families. (See "Shifting the Power Dynamic," page 8.)
- Each partnership is responsible for facilitating 40 visits per year, where kids in foster care can spend time in the community with their parents. Many of the partnerships' visiting services have been underutilized due to a lack of referrals from foster care agencies. (See "The Tricky Thing About Visits," page 26.)
- While nearly all of the partnerships are meeting goals set for them by ACS, few have been able to define independent, community-driven objectives. One exception is the partnership in East New York, which has developed a project to educate the community about mental illness. (See "Focused on Mental Health," page 19.)

be at risk of abuse or neglect. Collaboratively, they would also work—with ACS's help—to develop community-driven responses to endemic health problems, poor housing, addiction, or any of the other difficulties that can push families to the edge and tip them over.

In five years, the partnerships have made progress. They train community representatives to help parents navigate the child welfare system. They forge relationships between child care providers, who see families every day, and preventive service agencies who can help stabilize those families if they run into trouble. They have created invaluable opportunities for child protective services field office directors to meet with local people, share neighborhood data, and discuss what it means for government and communities to try to keep children safe.

Yet so far, these projects happen mostly on the margins of the system, improving the lives of only a small number of families. For those child welfare practitioners most deeply invested in the community partnerships, there is not a sense that they are emblematic of any larger shift in the way child welfare work gets done. Their original hopes have been pushed aside.

During the lifespan of the partnerships, ACS has seen fiscal tumult and administrative triage. Reform efforts have been slowed by budget cuts and crisis-driven work on improving child protective services and other programs. The city's investment has remained exceedingly modest—barely \$1.6 million per year across the 11 neighborhoods, in a child welfare system that spends more than \$1.4 billion each year on contracts, services and administration.

With limited funding and support, the partnerships often exhaust their resources scrambling to accomplish the several tasks assigned them by ACS. There is little capacity to pursue community-driven goals, or to track whether they are meaningfully impacting neighborhood cohesiveness or family stability.

Nonetheless, as we report in this issue of *Child Welfare Watch*, we see much to be hopeful about. There is ample evidence that the partnerships could be the basis for constructing far stronger relationships with community residents, local institutions and parents. These small but vital partnerships, along with local preventive agencies, foster care agencies based in communities, and even the ACS field offices, are all components of

something that could be much more ambitious if properly supported.

In the last year, partnerships have sent representatives to nearly 1,400 child safety conferences, where parents at immediate risk of losing their children to foster care met with the ACS workers who were making life-changing decisions about their families. Representatives helped to diminish the power imbalance of the conferences, assisting parents to participate in conversations about their families' future. We saw conferences that prompted ACS to place a child with relatives rather than in foster care, and others where community representatives helped muster neighborhood resources. Mostly, they encouraged parents to ask questions and better understand what was going on—the most fundamental steps toward finding solutions in a crisis.

The partnerships also recruit, train and deploy neighborhood residents to host visits between kids in foster care and their parents or guardians, allowing them to spend time together in parks, museums and libraries instead of overbearing foster care agency offices. In some cases, they employ visit coaches who provide parents individualized help during supervised visits, potentially speeding the process of family reunification.

Commissioner Ronald Richter of ACS says he intends to require more tightly measured outcomes from the partnerships and evidence that they are helping families and children. His agency is hiring outside researchers to determine if the city's investment in the partnerships pays off in the recruitment of foster parents, the hosting of family visits, and the coordination of community representatives to take part in child safety conferences.

It is true that city dollars should pay for meaningful, measurable improvements in child welfare. But the city needs to consider less tangible outcomes too, including the difficult-to-measure qualities of transparency, trust and collaboration that can strengthen neighborhoods and simplify the work of human services. This report reveals some of what's possible.

New York City still has an opportunity to make good on its vision of a child welfare system that's engaged with communities and accountable to them. But it will have to invest more resources to make that vision a reality. ✖

RECOMMENDATIONS AND SOLUTIONS

The nucleus of the child welfare system is, by definition, an intrusive bureaucracy responsible for investigating abuse and placing children in foster care. Yet it is also a system intended to help families overcome potentially crushing difficulties, connecting them to all kinds of supports and services. These dual purposes can succeed to their greatest potential only if those working in child welfare build a high degree of trust with communities and involve them in critical conversations about how resources are used.

The city's community partnership initiative can serve as a valuable tool for opening up the child welfare system, amplifying the voices of parents, young people and communities.

What follows are recommendations and solutions proposed by the *Child Welfare Watch* advisory board to strengthen the partnership initiative, advance greater community involvement in the system and improve the capacity of child welfare services to reflect the needs of the neighborhoods where they work.

THE ADMINISTRATION FOR CHILDREN'S SERVICES AND CITY HALL SHOULD COMMIT TO—AND INVEST IN—RESOURCES AND SUPERVISION THAT WILL ENABLE PARTNERSHIPS TO PRODUCE IMPRESSIVE RESULTS.

The current structure of community partnerships appears inadequate for the tasks at hand, despite the superhuman work of some liaisons and volunteers. Volunteer co-chairs and board members are essential—but they are working people who cannot be expected to staff programs that make a difference at a neighborhood-wide scale. Partnership liaisons are in many cases radically overstretched and limited in their capacity to achieve multiple goals.

A more effective structure would be based on adequate funding for small teams of skilled, focused staff who believe in and understand the mission of the partnerships—and can see its goals realized. If there were at least three staff members for each partnership, their team leader would be able to be more fully responsible for supervision, communications, community engagement and networking with local organizations, and for building ties with other government agencies in the neighborhoods. It takes a paid leader to act on opportunities and establish routines of engagement. The co-chairs, volunteers and partner organizations can initiate and guide neighborhood connections that bridge child welfare with legal services, mental health supports, education advocacy, youth development programs, the city's Young Men's Initiative, and other programs. But it takes staff to realize and sustain them. The other two staffers would manage specific projects and objectives. For example, developing the corps of community representatives for

child safety conferences through recruiting, training and supporting them. Also, recruiting and coordinating visit coaches.

Another option is a more flexible model for staffing each partnership that draws on the ACS field office, local foster care agencies and a lead community-based organization that represents and serves families. Each would assign a staff person to commit paid time to the partnership, with supervision varying according to the needs and strengths of organizations in each neighborhood.

Many frontline staff and supervisors at the ACS Division of Child Protection are invested in the child safety conferences as a valuable tool for working with parents and even preventing foster care placements. Supporting this work by substantially ramping up the use of trained community representatives could happen quickly with proper staffing of the partnerships; it's an opportunity that shouldn't be lost.

While ACS leadership has also sought to assign greater responsibilities for foster parent recruitment to the partnerships, this is a highly labor intensive task and shouldn't be cavalierly assigned to understaffed, overstretched partnerships. The surest way for partnerships to fail is to expect too much while providing too little funding and support.

THE ADMINISTRATION FOR CHILDREN'S SERVICES SHOULD BEGIN TRACKING OUTCOMES DATA THAT DEMONSTRATE THE PARTNERSHIPS' IMPACT ON FAMILY SUPPORT AND STABILITY.

Community partnerships are currently responsible for accomplishing five tasks, each of which is attached to a numeric goal. For example, partnerships are supposed to

facilitate 40 community visits between foster children and their parents or guardians each year. While these goals can help to keep the partnerships focused on tasks, they don't necessarily measure their impact on families.

A few of the partnerships have attempted to track outcomes data that demonstrate whether families they serve are reunifying more quickly than others in the system, but these attempts are haphazard. The desired outcomes should be achievable and measurable. Are child safety conferences leading to more placements of children with relatives, rather than strangers, when community representatives are present? Are parents participating more fully than in conferences without representatives? Did the parents feel supported and understand what was happening? Do foster care case planners see quicker progress toward reunification when visiting is supported by a visit coach?

Due to the limits of funding and staff, partnerships tend to exhaust their resources attempting to meet the tasks set for them by ACS. While they will have to participate in supplying data, ultimately it should be up to ACS to organize the legwork required to track outcomes.

THE ADMINISTRATION FOR CHILDREN'S SERVICES OFFICE OF COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS SHOULD PROVIDE MORE SKILLED EXPERTISE, GUIDANCE AND FACILITATION.

The ACS facilitators for the community partnerships should be a source of stronger support and technical guidance for all of the partnerships. These facilitators already have substantial knowledge about the neighborhoods where they work; they should be able to apply this knowledge for more

powerful results. For example, they should help partnership staff set up effective data gathering and reporting systems, set up and facilitate committee work, foster the community planning process and provide expertise that helps the partnerships achieve their objectives. Valuable technical assistance can also be provided by outside organizations (paid by ACS and private funders) in collaboration with local groups.

Similarly, the ACS Office of Family Visiting needs to provide more routine trainings to visit coaches, who are in short supply. These coaches are central to the partnerships' capacity to improve family visits for children in foster care.

THE ADMINISTRATION FOR CHILDREN'S SERVICES SHOULD HOLD FOSTER CARE AGENCIES ACCOUNTABLE FOR PARTICIPATING MEANINGFULLY IN COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS.

Partnerships have struggled to get many foster care agencies involved in their work. Even when agencies send staff members to participate in meetings and workgroups, buy-in does not necessarily filter up the ranks of the agency, or down through the frontline workers responsible for connecting families to partnership resources.

The result is that valuable programs are underutilized: Very few foster care agencies invite the partnerships' community representatives to family-team conferences, where they might be able to help parents participate more fully in making the decisions that impact their families. And partnerships often struggle to find families to participate in their visit coaching services, which allow kids and their parents to spend time together in community places like parks and libraries rather than antiseptic agency offices.

A more forceful commitment from foster care agency leadership is needed. They could designate a single person or position to coordinate referrals to partnerships. Agency participation in partnership programs should be incorporated in the ACS scoring system for evaluating agencies and determining their future funding.

PARTNERSHIPS SHOULD RECRUIT COMMUNITY RESIDENTS WITH EXPERIENCE OF THE CHILD WELFARE SYSTEM.

A defining characteristic of the community partnerships is that some of their work

is guided and carried out by people who live in the neighborhoods the partnerships serve. Partnerships recruit, train and pay residents to attend conferences between ACS and families at risk of losing their children to foster care, and to host visits between children in foster care and their parents. These residents come from a variety of backgrounds and provide many different types of helpful support and expertise.

Community representatives with personal experience of the child welfare system can be powerful assets to the partnerships. Leaders of community organizations and agency caseworkers should help partnerships recruit potential new community representatives by identifying parents who have dealt with preventive services and foster care and who exemplify personal strength and a capacity for leadership. Parent-led organizations like CWOP have shown that they are invaluable in identifying, training and supporting community representatives who can stand on equal footing with professionals and demand that the premise of partnership be honored in practice.

NEW YORK CITY FAMILY COURT SHOULD CREATE DESIGNATED COURT PARTS FOR NEIGHBORHOODS WITH WELL-DEVELOPED COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS.

One of the New York City models for a comprehensive community partnership focused on child welfare was the Bridge Builders project in the Highbridge neighborhood of the Bronx. For several years, Bridge Builders was associated with a special part in the Bronx Family Court, where a judge and his staff were devoted, three afternoons per week, to child welfare cases involving Highbridge families.

Attorneys, advocates and service providers say the designated court part facilitated families' progress through the system, because it created an infrastructure for a consistent set of attorneys and others to work together on a regular basis. It also allowed for regular contact between the court and Bridge Builders staff, who provided insight into families' circumstances and programs.

The Bronx Family Court has agreed to re-establish the special part for Highbridge. The Office of Court Administration should pursue similar initiatives in the other boroughs.

CITY HALL AND THE ADMINISTRATION FOR CHILDREN'S SERVICES SHOULD DEVELOP FORMAL, STRUCTURED MECHANISMS FOR OTHER CITY PROGRAMS AND AGENCIES TO PLAY A ROLE IN COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS.

Part of the original vision for community partnerships was that they would engage in foster care prevention, organizing communities to support struggling families long before child protection investigators showed up at their doors. In order to do this deep prevention work, partnerships need the active participation of other city-funded programs (including those within ACS) as well as other government agencies that come into contact with families every day—not only daycare and early education providers, but schools, drug treatment programs, after-school services, domestic violence counselors and so on.

The city should look to previous models of inter-agency collaborations, such as the Bloomberg Administration's early "One City / One Community" project, to create infrastructures for collaboration at all levels, from frontline staff to policymakers. In the long term, agencies that contribute from their budgets to the partnerships should recoup the savings garnered from efficiencies created by the partnerships.

COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS MUST HAVE ROOM TO DEVELOP THEIR OWN AGENDAS AND PURSUE GOALS THAT STRENGTHEN AND EXPAND NEIGHBORHOOD RESOURCES.

In the many neighborhoods where child welfare services are most pervasive, community partners are clear that their greatest passion is for strengthening services that will help struggling families be stable and safe. In East New York, for example, the local ACS-funded community partnership saw that many immigrant families were unaware of mental health services and resistant to discussing mental illness. The partnership not only produced workshops for residents and professionals, they also developed a booklet about mental health that has been distributed widely throughout the community. But with few resources and strong mandates from ACS about specific, targeted goals, such entrepreneurial initiatives are a strain. As the partnerships grow to more fully represent their original vision, they will be forceful advocates for the neighborhood resources that help keep families whole.

The Dream of Reinvestment

The foster care system is a fraction of the size it used to be. Yet billions of dollars saved since 2000 haven't been shifted into preventive family support programs.

BY ANDREW WHITE

THE IDEA OF REINVESTING savings from one part of the child welfare system into another sounded perfectly logical when it was first proposed in a city strategy paper in 2001—especially to anyone unfamiliar with the vagaries of government social services funding.

More than a decade ago, before Michael Bloomberg became mayor, New York City policymakers saw a huge trend in the making: The number of children in foster care was tumbling downward, alongside crime rates and the once epidemic use of crack cocaine. Of course, there were other factors: Families were helped by great improvements in the city's economy, for example, and there was also a growing realization in the child welfare field that placing 10,000 or more children in foster care each year was no panacea for what ails troubled families living in severe poverty.

So in 2001, the Administration for Children's Services (ACS) established a goal of reinvesting savings from the shrinking foster care system into social services, including case management, drug treatment, counseling, benefits advocacy, homemaking and more—all designed to help families, keep children safe and prevent placements in foster care.

Did it happen? Not so much. The charts below show there was very little reinvestment despite a huge, 40 percent decline in overall government spending on New York City foster care between 2000 and 2010. Remarkably, the number of foster children continues to fall. As of September 2011 there were 14,178 foster children, down 58 percent since 2000. And yet, this year, New York City taxpayers' contribution to preventive family support services is almost exactly the same as it was 12 years ago.

With the help of the NYC Independent Budget Office (IBO), *Child Welfare Watch* mapped the impact of the last dozen years in budget and spending trends on ACS-funded services. The charts below show what we've found. Some of this analysis is found in a report published by the IBO in October. But with that agency's assistance, we chose a very different—and we think very useful—way to report and understand the numbers. (And we've included some data here that are not in the IBO report.)

Most importantly, in all but the final two charts that follow, dollar figures are adjusted for the impact of inflation. In buying power, a dollar in 2010 had much less value than a dollar in 2000. Year after year, inflation wears away at the dollar's value. Inflation-adjusted dollars are a logical way of

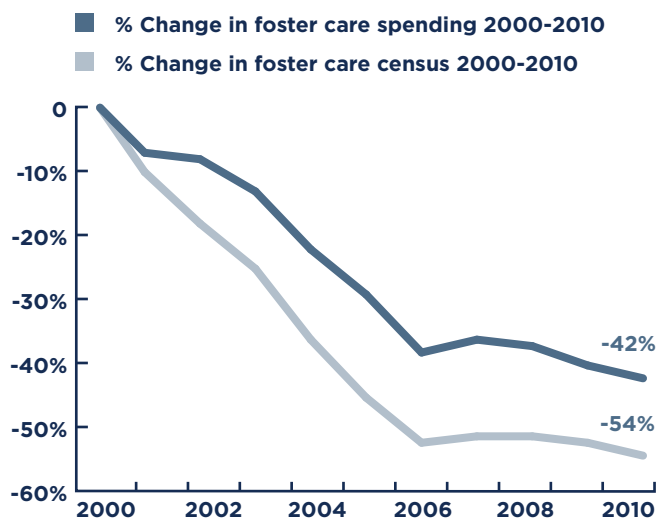
comparing government spending over the years, as compared to simply listing the actual (or "nominal") dollars spent each year. Why? Because the cup of coffee I bought at the deli for \$1.45 this morning cost me just 65 cents in 2000. Much the same is true for the cost of salaries, benefits, office leases and all the other expenses that go into providing city-funded services.

The city spent \$782 million on its foster care system in fiscal year 2010. That's not small change, but it's a half-billion dollars less than it would have spent if there were as many foster children in 2010 as there were in 2000. In fact, thanks to the smaller foster care system, savings totals more than \$3 billion over the last decade. The cumulative increase in preventive services spending over the same period? About \$380 million.

THE SHARP DROP

Foster care spending in New York City fell 42 percent from 2000 to 2010. Over the same period, the number of children in foster care declined by more than half. Foster care dollars go mostly to foster parents and to the nonprofit agencies that work with them, the children and their parents. (In all of these charts, we use the city fiscal year, which begins on July 1 and ends on June 30.)

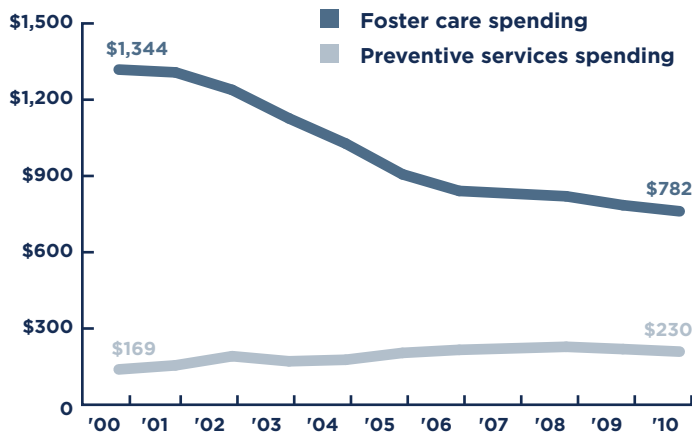
Percentage Change in Foster Care Spending and Census 2000-2010. *Figures adjusted to 2010 dollars.*



HUNDREDS OF MILLIONS OF DOLLARS SAVED

As the overall cost of foster care plummeted, the corresponding increase in preventive family support services was relatively modest.

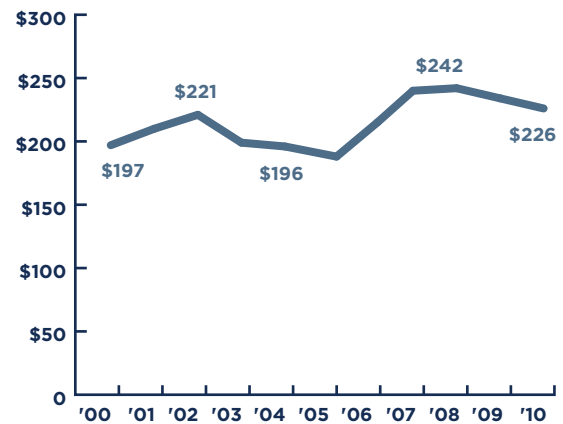
Preventive and Foster Care Spending: 2000-2010
Figures adjusted to 2010 dollars. \$s in millions.



CHILD PROTECTIVE SERVICES GROWS

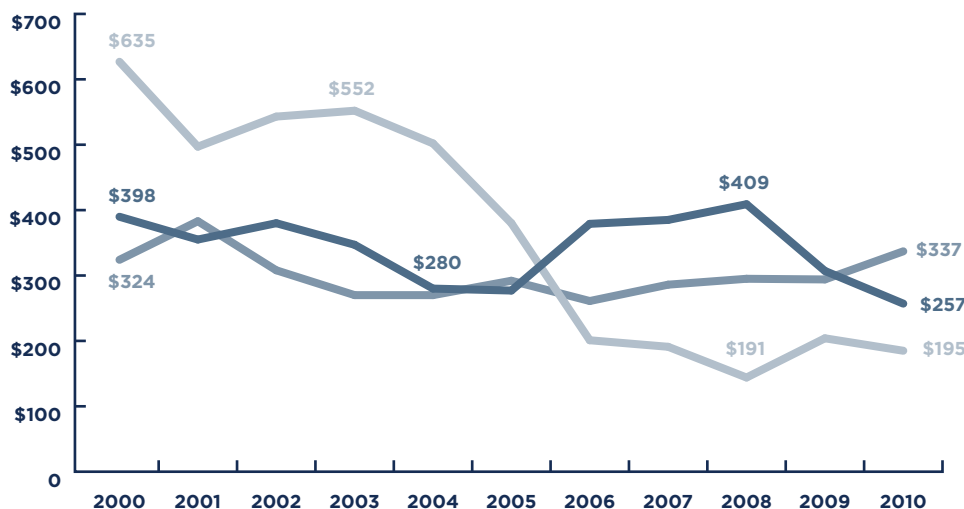
Spending on child protective services—that is, the ACS division that investigates abuse and neglect reports—increased in the years following the murder of Nixzmary Brown in January 2006.

Protective Services Spending: FY 2000-2010
Figures adjusted to 2010 dollars. \$s in millions.



THE LOSS OF FEDERAL FUNDS

Foster care is paid for with city, state and federal government dollars. The federal contribution collapsed in the middle part of the decade, when city officials acknowledged problems with the way they had been documenting claims for foster children's eligibility for funding under Title IV-E of the Social Security Act. The contribution to foster care from state coffers changed only modestly over these years. And the contribution from city taxpayers was volatile, mostly plugging the huge hole opened up by the loss of federal funds. City officials say that today, their recovery of federal Title IV-E funding is back nearly to the maximum possible in the current, much smaller system.

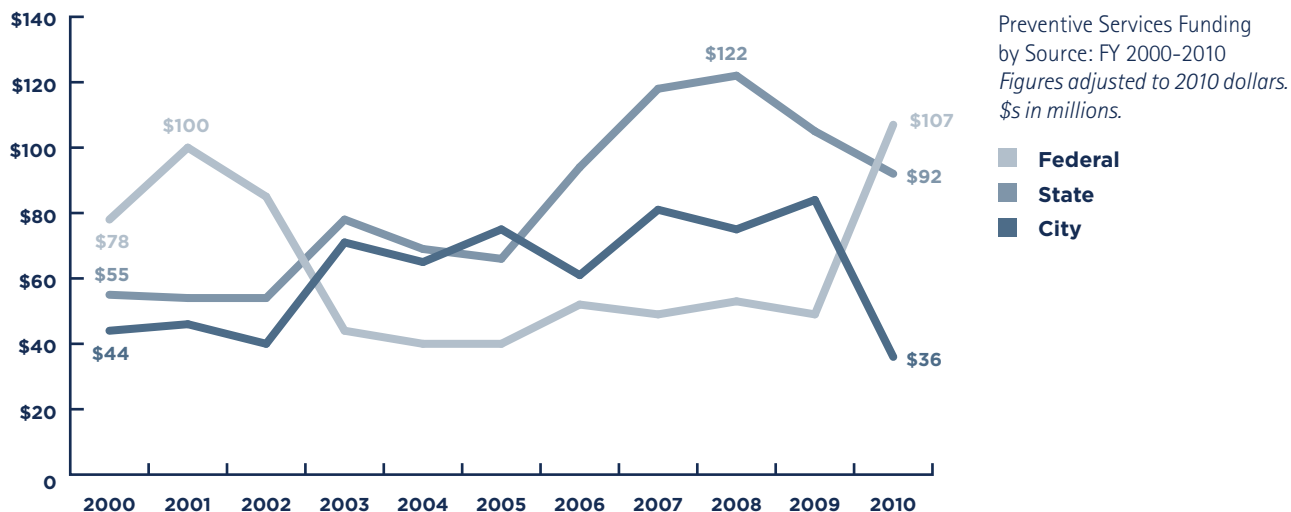


Foster Care Funding
by Source: FY 2000-2010
Figures adjusted to 2010 dollars.
\$s in millions.

■ Federal
■ City
■ State

WHO PAYS FOR PREVENTIVE PROGRAMS?

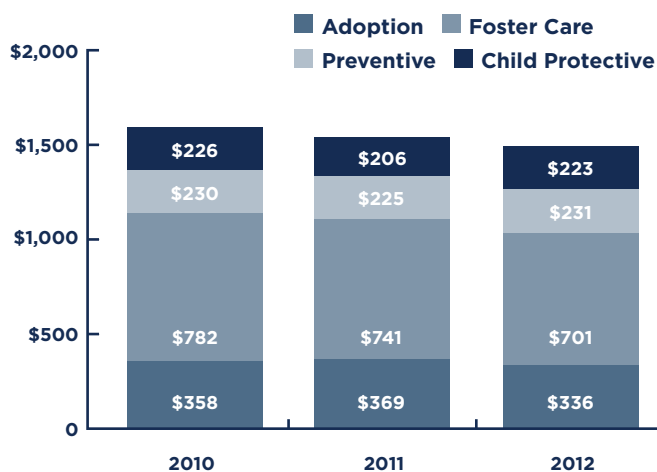
As with foster care, funding for ACS preventive family support services comes from the city, state and federal governments. The portion paid for by the city was lower in 2010 than in 2000. Since an agreement reached in 2006, any increase or decrease in city tax levy funds spent on preventive services is amplified by the state, because Albany matches local dollars spent on these services with a formula of its own.



FOSTER CARE AND ADOPTION ALMOST BELOW \$1 BILLION

This chart shows the four major areas of child welfare funding in New York City, excluding core administrative services since 2010. The "Adoption" category is mostly made up of subsidies provided to adoptive families. (Nearly 80 percent of the city's adoption budget comes from the state and federal governments.) One interesting note: In Fiscal Year 2012, for the first time in decades, the combined budget of New York City foster care and adoption services is close to falling below \$1 billion. If current trends continue, that may indeed happen in 2013.

Child Welfare Funding, FY 2010-2012
Unadjusted figures. \$s in millions.



PREVENTIVE SERVICES FUNDING TODAY

In June 2011, the Bloomberg administration agreed to "baseline" ACS preventive family support services into the city budget at \$230 million. This means the City Council may not have to fight to restore funding for preventive services every year. Dollars from the city cover a modest 20 percent of the preventive budget, but the mayor has committed \$10 million more than last year, in effect making up for state cuts. (The figures in these final two charts are not adjusted for inflation, because they are so recent. The 2010 amount is actual expenditures. The 2011 and 2012 figures reflect what the city budgeted for these services.)

Preventive Family Support Services Funding, FY 2010-2012
Unadjusted figures, \$s in millions

	CITY	STATE	FEDERAL	TOTAL
2010	\$35.8	\$92.0	\$107.2	\$235.0
2011	\$35.8	\$83.0	\$105.6	\$224.4
2012	\$45.4	\$80.6	\$104.7	\$230.6

Shifting the Power Dynamic

"Community Reps" from neighborhood partnerships guide parents through moments of extreme crisis, as child protective services decides whether or not to remove their children.

BY KENDRA HURLEY

"I'M NOT ACS. I'm a community representative," says Ed Parker, as he hands a business card to an anxious mother and her slouching 16-year-old daughter. The mother, her daughter, three city child protection workers and Parker, a retired accountant neatly dressed in a suit and tie, are seated in a sparse conference room at the Jamaica, Queens field office of the New York City Administration for Children's Services (ACS). They are gathered for what's known as a "child safety conference," where ACS will make the weighty decision of whether the mother's two teenagers will be safe at home or need to be placed in foster care.

This meeting is one of about 10,000 such conferences that will take place this year in child protection offices across New York City. These sessions are part of a Bloomberg administration effort to transform the adversarial nature of the child welfare system, giving parents a voice in discussions about what will happen to their kids.

Until very recently, ACS front-line workers and a city attorney would huddle together behind closed doors to decide if they should remove a child from his home. They would seek a judge's approval either before or afterwards—but for most parents, the moment of removal remained thick with confusion and distrust.

In New York today, more often than not, parents are brought into this momentous discussion and encouraged to talk about themselves and their children, and to learn more about the allegations against them. Sometimes they are able to make a successful case for why their children should stay home and out of foster care. But even when not, the conferences provide them a window into how ACS makes decisions about their kids. Officials believe this is an effective way to establish a more productive relationship with parents. And sometimes, thanks to the city's community partnership initiative, these parents have help, with community representatives like Parker on hand to ensure their voices are heard.

Parents are often angry and fearful when they arrive at a child safety conference, certain the odds are already stacked against them. "Let's get this over with, I have somewhere to

be!" the mother had said, just moments earlier.

Parker's neutral presence is intended to help parents feel more comfortable. "You aren't on trial," he often tells them. "Speak freely." He knows it's something they desperately need to hear. To parents, these conferences can feel an awful lot like judgment day.

Now both the mother and her daughter sit tensely at the table, staring down.

"Tell us what brought you here," says the ACS conference facilitator.

"You brought me here!" the mother says. "You tell me why I'm here."

And so the conference begins. An ACS caseworker recounts the family's history: The mother recently became guardian to her oldest daughter's two children. As part of the guardianship process, ACS asked her to take a drug test because she had a history of cocaine addiction that, long ago, had drawn the agency's attention. In fact, the city had once placed two of her children in foster care.


"But you refused," the worker tells the mother. Instead of taking the drug test, the mother vanished with the grandchildren. When she later emerged, she tested positive for marijuana. The city immediately placed the grandchildren in foster care.

"I've been clean of crack cocaine for 18 years!" the mother interjects. She speaks not to the ACS workers, but to Parker, the community representative, as though he's the only one who could possibly understand. She talks about her struggles with drugs, how she fought her addiction, won her children back in the late 1990s. She is proud to be clean from crack and to have a healthy home for her family.

"Things are not good at home all the time," she tells Parker, her voice crackling with emotion. "But no children were hurt, no children were in danger."

Parker nods, his face registering concern and understanding.

The mother says she cared for her grandchildren informally for years, walking her granddaughter to school each



“Knowing a representative from their own community is there as a witness breaks down barriers, makes them feel heard. There are certain things they’ll tell us that they won’t tell ACS.”

Ed Parker and Shirley Symonette of the partnership in Jamaica, Queens support parents at child safety conferences.

Parents are often angry and fearful when they arrive at a child safety conference, certain the odds are already stacked against them. To parents, these conferences can feel an awful lot like judgment day.

morning. When she applied for guardianship and ACS asked her to take a drug test, she couldn't stop thinking about all the difficulties the agency put her through, years ago. So she left town with the grandkids for a vacation. And she'd stayed longer than she'd told a caseworker she would.

"I extended it because I'm so tired of ACS! And I shouldn't have done that. But no one was in danger. And then the children were taken for marijuana! Marijuana!" she shouts. "When I need to pay a bill, ACS is not there! But when they think they can snatch your kids, they're there, snatching at everything, snatching, snatching, like pit bulls!" Both she and her daughter are crying. Parker places a box of tissues between them.

"Let me ask a question then," Parker addresses the ACS workers. "You mention the 1990s. But why are we here today?"

It's a simple question, but it reminds everyone of the purpose of the conference: dealing with the current situation. It also signals to the mother that she may ask questions, too. For the first time during the meeting, the mother addresses the caseworker directly. "Why would you go straight for the jugular and remove the kids when there is no reason?"

Although she is still angry, something critical in the room has shifted. For the first time since she walked in, the mother appears to sense that the ACS workers might have brought her here to have a genuine conversation, rather than to tell her what they've already decided.

Parker says he has seen this pivotal moment occur dozens

of times in the nearly two and a half years he has taken part in child safety conferences as a community representative for the community partnership in Jamaica, Queens.

From the minute Parker tells parents he's from the neighborhood, not ACS, he says he can sense a subtle change.

"When people come here, they have such a fear of ACS," says Parker. "They can't bring an attorney and they feel their rights aren't going to be respected." Knowing a representative from their own community is there as a witness, says Parker, "breaks down barriers, makes them feel heard." It also lets parents see the conferences as a chance to talk with ACS about planning for their children.

"Community reps," as they are known in the agency field offices, translate jargon that ACS workers use instinctively, like "MGM" for "maternal grandmother." They encourage parents to offer their own ideas for keeping their children safe at home. Because they are from the same neighborhood as the parents, they may connect parents to local resources that ACS caseworkers don't necessarily know about, such as the young moms' group at the church on the corner. They're in the ideal position to gently press a mother to see the possible consequences of her actions, both good and bad.

In at least one case, having a rep at the conference may have saved a child's life. One mother who had hit her child had been temporarily ordered to stay away from home. At her child safety conference, the mom confided to community rep Shirley Symonette, a colleague of Parker, that her baby had a blood-clotting disorder and his life depended on shots to his stomach that she administered every 12 hours. Nearly 24 hours had passed since she'd been able to give him the shot. Her husband, who had remained home, could not administer the medication because he could not read—but he was too embarrassed to tell the ACS workers. Symonette encouraged the mother to quickly explain all of this to ACS workers. They promptly stopped the conference and made sure the child got medical attention before it was too late.

"They were scared to tell ACS," remembers Symonette, a retired nurse who has expressive eyes and short, curly gray-white hair. "There are certain things they'll tell us that they won't tell ACS."

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In the past, neither parents nor anyone else outside ACS and the Family Court was included in the decision-making about how to keep children safe. "We would interview the family, we would assess what we thought was going on, and we would make a decision and execute that decision," remembers Jan Flory, until recently the deputy commissioner in charge of the ACS Division of Child Protection.

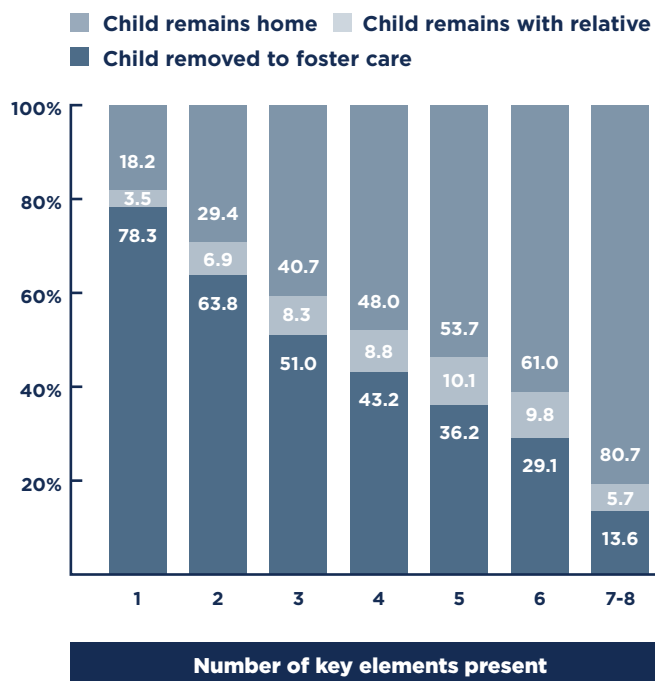
Nor did parents with children in foster care have much say in determining what kind of supports and services they needed in order to be able to take care of their kids.

During the 1990s, child welfare experts began to chal-

WHAT MAKES FAMILY TEAM CONFERENCES WORK?

Researchers hired by the Annie E. Casey Foundation evaluated the impact of eight key elements of effective team conferences held between 2002 and 2008 at sites in Cleveland, Denver, Phoenix, North Carolina, and Kentucky. The more key elements present in a meeting, the more likely the recommendation was for a child to remain home or stay with a relative. In meetings that had just one key element present, 78 percent of children were removed from home. But when seven or eight key elements were in place, the opposite was true: 70 percent of children remained at home. The eight key elements evaluated include:

- The conference is held before the child's move occurs, or in cases of imminent risk, by the next working day, and always before the initial court hearing in cases of removal.
- The parent participates in the meeting.
- The meeting is led by a skilled, immediately accessible internal facilitator, who is not a case-carrying social worker or line supervisor.
- Two or more child welfare staff members who are involved with the case participate in the meeting.
- One or more community representatives participate in the meeting.
- Family and friends of the parents participate in the meeting.
- The meeting is held in a community location away from the public child welfare offices.
- Service providers participate in the meeting.



Source: Judith Bres Wildfire, Patricia Rideout and David Crampton, "Transforming Child Welfare, One Team Decisionmaking Meeting at a time," *Protecting Children*, Vol. 25, No. 2 (2010) pp. 40-50.

lenge this routine by arguing that the exclusion of parents was counterproductive. "Telling someone you have to do this and that—without telling them they have a voice in what they need—is not going to have as great an impact as asking families what they need, and trying to respond to those needs," explains Susan Notkin, associate director at the Center for the Study of Social Policy. "When people are trying to change behavior they need to be invested in the change."

In the mid-90s, Notkin was a program officer at the Edna McConnell Foundation and helped introduce a model of family team conferences to human service practitioners in communities in Iowa, Florida, Kentucky, and Missouri. The idea was to support families at critical transitions—when a child was born, when a father returned home from prison, or when a family moved. Team leaders encouraged the family to bring to the meeting anyone who they thought would be helpful—relatives, neighbors, teachers, and religious leaders. They hoped to recreate a time when families naturally had extended families, religious communities, and other support systems nearby and on-call for help as needed. One study found that mothers who received family team meetings re-

ported feeling less depression and stress. In some of the communities, child welfare agencies also used the model to give parents a stronger voice in their own foster care and child protection cases.

Around the same time, child welfare officials in Cleveland, Ohio, introduced a similar approach to that city's foster care system. Child welfare workers began calling team meetings that revolutionized the way they made decisions about how to protect children. These meetings engaged parents as partners in making decisions about children's safety, including the critical decision of whether a child should be removed from home.

The Annie E. Casey Foundation introduced the Ohio team conferencing model to nearly 20 states and New York City as part of a national effort to reform foster care. It wasn't an entirely original idea. In fact, New Zealand had already been doing this for several years. By law, New Zealand requires that a child's family be invited to a group conference whenever a child is at-risk of entering foster care. But it had never been used consistently in the United States.

"The foundation realized that if you want to reform one

Social Workers? No. Advocates? Sort of.

ONE IDEA UNDERLYING the community partnerships is that they can strengthen support networks for families in crisis. At the partnership in Jamaica, Queens, the three community reps do their best, even after the child safety conferences, to provide help to many of the parents they meet there. In other cities, such as Fresno, California, community partnerships organize retirees and other residents to help stressed-out parents in their neighborhood with volunteer services like respite child care. By linking together religious congregations, child care programs, groups of retired professionals and other resourceful people and institutions, partnerships try to establish new, informal arrangements that can step in to protect children and support parents.

But most of the community partnerships in New York are leery of allowing community reps to get too close to the parents they meet in child safety conferences. Generally, once the conference is over, their involvement with the family ends. "They're not social workers. They're not family therapists. We encourage the reps to find them resources, but the family should lean on someone more consistent to help them out," says Ronica Webb, liaison for the Bedford-Stuyvesant partnership.

Community rep training prepares reps only for their role in conferences—not in parent advocacy or support. It's a quick education: Volunteers begin working as reps after taking part in one half-day training at the Administration for Children's Services (ACS) and either participating in a mock child safety conference or observing an actual one. They receive additional training from the Community Partnerships during their first six months of becoming a rep.

"The concept of children's services funding a partnership is not to have a community partner at a conference to advocate for a parent, but to provide comfort and support so the parent doesn't feel alone," says Commissioner Ron Richter of ACS. "And to have a partner there who, maybe in the best case scenario, has been through a child welfare experience, and can say here are some questions that you are entitled to ask and that you should be asking."

The East Harlem Community Partnership has resolved these concerns using a very different model. Beginning in 2007, the partnership was the first to place outside representatives in the ACS child safety conferences as part of a pilot project. They outsourced the community rep program to the Child Welfare Organizing Project (CWOP), which trained and coordinated a team of community reps to support parents in the conferences. The reps are CWOP parent advocates who have taken part in the organization's six-month parent leadership training, which covers the history of the child welfare system, how to navigate the foster care system and Family Court, where to find resources in the neighborhood, and much more. Prospective reps receive a stipend for attending the training and, if they become reps, are paid not only for conferences they attend, but also for time spent debriefing with a CWOP support group—something Allison Brown of CWOP

says is important for quality control.

Two other points stand out about CWOP. First of all, its community reps have their own personal experience of the foster care system. Most have at one time or another been investigated by ACS and many have had their children placed in foster care. They've learned how to channel that experience into their advocacy work. Secondly, the organization manages a number of programs, all designed to integrate parent advocates into the child welfare system, so it has the critical mass of government and foundation funding necessary to provide its comprehensive training and peer support.

"They say to parents, 'I was [where you were] ten years ago, and I know how you feel,'" explains Brown. "They're able to personally relate to parents, and parents look at themselves differently because of that. They say, 'Ok, this doesn't have to be the end of my life.'"

With a phone call made directly from the conference table, one CWOP rep was able to use her connections from the time she had spent in a mother-child drug treatment program to negotiate a spot in the same program for another mom. But generally, CWOP reps don't work directly with the parents they meet at conferences. Instead, they refer parents to the organization itself, connecting parents to a large network of parent advocates and to the information resources and other supports that define CWOP as a unique parent organization.

CWOP estimates about 30 percent of the parents its reps meet in child safety conferences stay connected to CWOP after the conference. At the organization's office tucked on the first floor of a housing development in East Harlem, parents can attend support groups and consult with advocates who have been through the parent leadership training. These consultants help parents find resources, connect with attorneys, and learn how to advocate on their own behalf.

"Once they get here and they see there are so many of us doing the work, they see, 'Not only can I talk to Sabra, but Carmen can look at my case and help me navigate the services I need,' because we all understand the process," says Sabra Jackson, a CWOP community rep who coordinates a citywide network of parent advocates.

Having community reps backed by a larger advocacy and support organization has other advantages. The majority of parents surveyed by CWOP following conferences have said they were satisfied with the support they received from their CWOP community rep. But for Antoinette Robinson, the child safety conference held when her four children were placed in foster care remains a bleak memory. She believed the cards were stacked against her before she entered the conference room, and she says her community rep did not stand up for her the way she would have liked. Her children remain in foster care. Nonetheless, Robinson is grateful the rep introduced her to CWOP; she now participates in the organization's leadership training, which she says is helping her to advocate for her children's return. "I'm appreciative to have met her," she says about the rep. "She got me in CWOP." —Kendra Hurley

The Bloomberg administration has credited child safety conferences with contributing to a recent drop in the number of young people entering the city's foster care system.

part of the system, you have to look at the whole system, including how to get families involved in decisions about their children, because better decisions get made when families are involved," remembers Suzanne Barnard, associate director of the child welfare strategy group at Annie E. Casey.

In the Annie E. Casey model, child welfare workers hold team conferences to plan for a child's move to a new foster home, a return home, or adoption. But most importantly, they hold child safety conferences at the key moment of crisis, when a family first learns the government is considering taking the children out of their home.

These conferences aim to remove the bureaucratic secrecy and, ideally, make child protection systems more transparent to the people they serve and the communities where they operate. In turn, child welfare workers use them to gain a better sense of a family's dynamics, including its core strengths, and to build relationships with parents.

"That sets up the relationship to be developed in a very, very different way when the parent is sitting there as the decision and the various pieces about their family are being discussed," explains Flory. "It helps the beginning of the relationship of whatever agency is going to pick this up afterwards."

Since New York City introduced child safety conferences in 2007, a growing number of children have been placed in kinship foster homes, with relatives rather than with strangers, which Flory attributes partly to the conferences. "When you're sitting at the table, and you're asking Mom, 'Is there anyone in your family or anyone you know who could take your children if we have to come to this conclusion?' you get a very different response than in the heat of the moment when the worker arrives to remove your children and asks you that," says Flory. "It's a very different dynamic."

Family and other community members provide checks and balances that weren't there when caseworkers operated in isolation. The Bloomberg administration has credited child safety conferences with contributing to a recent drop in the number of young people entering the city's foster care system. There's an internal benefit for the agency as well: Now, Flory says, ACS attorneys and social workers are more likely to agree about placement decisions, because everyone is more thoroughly prepared.

In 2009, a team of independent researchers with fund-

ing from the Annie E. Casey Foundation evaluated eight elements of effective team conferences held between 2002 and 2008 at sites in Cleveland, Denver, Phoenix, North Carolina and Kentucky, such as whether the conferences included the parent, an experienced child welfare worker, and a community representative. (See chart, page 11.) The findings were remarkable. When a meeting had only one of the key elements present, 78 percent of children were removed from home. But when seven or eight key elements were in place, the opposite was true: 70 percent of children remained at home. Most significantly, children who remained home did not have higher rates of being abused or neglected later on.

Having someone present to help the parent advocate for herself was clearly important. "It can be pretty daunting if you as the parent are coming into the conference, and there's four or five or six professionals sitting around," says Flory. "The community reps bring an element of reality and support to the parents."

In East Harlem, ACS contracts with the Child Welfare Organizing Project (CWOP) to provide a different form of community representation in the field office's child safety conferences: Here, the person at the table is a parent advocate—someone who has substantial, personal experience of the child welfare system, often because he or she was investigated by ACS, and who is trained to help other parents advocate for themselves. (See sidebar on page 12.)

"With an authentic voice from the community rep present at the conferences, you're making these decisions with members of the community. You're inviting the community into these discussions," says Michael Arsham, executive director of CWOP, who also describes this as "accountable child protective practice." He adds that data are beginning to prove that the involvement of parent advocates directly leads to fewer children being placed in strangers' homes. In 2009, of the 154 child safety conferences attended by community reps East Harlem, only 39 resulted in a child being placed in the home of someone who was not a relative, says Arsham. The National Resource Center for Permanency and Family Connection is currently studying whether this rate is significantly different from that occurring at child safety conferences without community reps, and expects to have answers within the year.

Citywide, in 2010, ACS organized 9,235 child safety

conferences involving cases with more than 17,835 children, the agency reports. Of these, community reps or parent advocates took part in 1,395, or about 15 percent of the total. Currently, the community reps participate in conferences only in the 11 neighborhoods where community partnerships are available to coordinate the program.

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Recruiting, managing, and supporting community volunteers to attend these conferences is difficult. Of the nearly 20 sites around the country where Annie E. Casey introduced team conferencing, only a few have implemented community rep programs. In New York, budget constraints have meant that ACS and the partnerships have not been able to expand their community rep programs into other neighborhoods with high rates of foster care. ACS has no plans to expand the programs citywide.

While running the community rep program is labor intensive, it is also one of the community partnerships' most clear-cut, collective successes.

Nearly all of the partnerships have found word-of-mouth to be the most effective way to recruit reps. Some community reps are retired teachers, social workers, and policemen. Others are between jobs. A number were in foster care as children, have had their own children in foster care, or are foster parents themselves. Most do it out of a sense of caring and obligation to their neighbors. "Me being a family man, I don't want to see children in foster care," one rep explained.

Sitting in a child safety conference can be an intensely emotional experience, and many reps report blinking back tears as they hear details of a family's struggles. At least one of the partnerships hired a consulting therapist to help the reps process what they hear at conferences. "Sometimes the kids get removed right there and you hear their yelling and screaming," says Symonette. "It hurts."

In general, the longer a rep stays, the more effective he or she becomes. Their techniques vary, but they lean toward what's known in the social work world as a strengths-based approach, keeping a steady focus on what's working well in a family rather than what's gone wrong. Asked to identify their strengths, many parents are at a loss for words. It's the rep's job to help the family find the words—starting with the fact that showing up for the conference shows they care.

At a training for community reps in East New York, Merle Daniel-Shymanski, who was a social worker in Trinidad and exudes a warm sense of competency, explained to new reps her methods for winning trust quickly—an essential skill, as reps must get a parent's permission before attending a conference.

Rule number one, says Daniel-Shymanski: First impressions matter. Never overdress for a conference, which can intimidate a parent, nor dress too casually, which might communicate disrespect. When you first walk into an office, she tells the small group, have a pleasant expression.

And then she shares what reps from across the partnerships relay to be the key ingredient in gaining trust: Tell parents, as many times as they need to hear, "I'm not ACS. I'm not ACS. I'm not ACS."

Only once that's very clear will parents be open to hearing what reps' role is. "We are from the community," Daniel-Shymanski tells her families. "We encourage families to speak up for themselves and ask for help. You want to make sure that the decision that comes out of the conference is one you contribute to, rather than one that's made to you."

Sometimes parents reveal something they're ashamed of. In that case, she says, "What happened already happened, we cannot change the past." She encourages them to talk about all of the good things they've done for their family. "Believe it or not, with that approach, when a family goes in the conference, they're open," shrugs Daniel-Shymanski, smiling.

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Other community partnerships would be hard-pressed to replicate the success of Jamaica's community rep program, which hinges on the dedication, skill, and force of personality of its small team of three. It is not easy to find many volunteers willing and able to give as much time and energy as do the Jamaica reps, who, like most reps, get paid \$15 an hour only for time they spend in conferences.

On an unusually slow Friday at the ACS field office in Jamaica, Queens, Parker and Symonette parked themselves at their usual spot at a table on the second floor, the area ACS workers gave them so they could have a space to work and wait while staying on-call for last minute conferences. Parker was busy fielding calls from parents he's met through earlier conferences, nodding empathetically into his cell phone, scribbling notes, marking meetings with them in his date book. Symonette, whom families call Ms. Shirley, greeted everyone who passed. All seemed happy to see her. The two of them, along with Symonette's sister, Emily Francis, make up the Jamaica partnership's small and dedicated team of reps who have become an integral part of the Jamaica ACS field office, and who do things radically differently from those at other partnerships.

Most partnerships have around 10 reps who take turns attending conferences coordinated through a partnership liaison, who sets tight boundaries around the work, limiting the reps' direct involvement with parents and warning them not to give out their phone numbers for fear they might find themselves overwhelmed. (See sidebar on page 12.) But the three Jamaica reps operate more like freelance consultants, floating about the ACS field office, setting their own schedules, consulting directly with ACS staff, and continuing their work with parents far beyond the conference room. Brady Funn, the partnership's liaison, said community reps attend nearly 70 percent of all child safety conferences in the neighborhood. They also go to court with families, testify to judges, and work with ACS and the

community partnership to help families get anger management classes, drug rehab, or extra food and clothing. Symonette and Parker pooled resources at the ACS office to help a grieving couple pay for the funeral of their infant son.

Parents and ACS caseworkers alike have come to depend on the Jamaica reps, and call them frequently. Parker estimates that he and Symonette help around nine families outside of conferences at any given time. Though they meet most through conferences, sometimes other parents or caseworkers will refer families to them. The ACS workers at the Jamaica field office have come to know their community's three reps so well, they even know which type of conference each rep has a particular knack for.

Parker's specialty is calming men who are "very adamant, very belligerent," says ACS deputy director Taryen Davidson, who summons Parker for conferences involving domestic violence.

At one conference, Davidson remembers, when the facilitator wrote on a white board ideas that one possible outcome of the conference was that a man's son would be moved to a foster home, the man stood, stormed angrily toward the facilitator, and started wiping her words from the board. Parker sprang to action, wrapping an arm around the father and bringing him out of the room. He walked the halls with him until the father calmed down and felt ready to return. The conference continued.

Because Emily Francis worked in a hospital, she frequently gets called for cases involving medical issues. In one particularly perplexing conference in Jamaica, ACS had removed a newborn baby from her mother because the baby had tested positive for cocaine and heroin. When Francis learned the mother had not tested positive for any drug, she suspected an error. She'd seen firsthand how easy it is for hospitals to mix up blood samples. She urged that both mother and baby be retested. ACS workers listened. Both tests turned up negative, and the baby went home with his mother.

"If Emily was not there, we would have gone into court, and the situation for this family would be totally different," said an ACS worker on the case. "Instead, the mom took home a newborn."

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Beneath the fluorescent lights of the Jamaica field office, as the child safety conference goes on, the mother who tested positive for marijuana seems ready to regard the ACS workers in an entirely new light: as people who can help her family. She begins sharing pain from her life, tearfully telling of her many brothers who have passed, as one of the ACS workers shakes her head. "I'm hearing loss, loss, loss," the worker says kindly.

When the conference facilitator gently shifts the discussion to ideas for helping the family, the mother seems hopeful. "I need help as far as individual counseling," she says. "My daughter's back in school. She's doing really good. She's

a brilliant girl. Very smart," she looks proudly at her daughter. "My son does need help. He went through more. I'm too young to bury a son."

She turns to Mr. Parker. "Maybe you can be a mentor," she says. "I can bring him to your office. I think you'd be good for him."

"Of course," Parker nods. He says he'll help connect the boy to job programs and more.

The mother is so excited she interrupts the conference to

"If Emily was not there, we would have gone into court," said an ACS worker on the case. "Instead, the mom took home a newborn."

call her son on her cell phone. "There's a man here who wants to talk to you," she's gushing. "He's a good guy. He says he wants to help you."

The mother hands Parker the phone, and he heads out in the hall, animatedly talking to her son. Moments later he returns, hands the mother cell phone with her son still on it, and assures her that they'll soon be in touch again.

And suddenly everyone seems to be talking at once, throwing out ideas for how to support the family, the mother leading the discussion. In the end, the mother is happy with what ACS decides: her two teenage children will stay home, and she will submit to random drug testing. The mother will receive counseling and encourage her children to come with her too. ACS, in turn, will see to it that she gets visits with her grandchildren, and, assuming all goes well, begin taking steps to return them to her care. Mr. Parker will work with her son to connect him to a vocational training program.

The only person displeased with the outcome is the daughter, who is annoyed that she will be required to receive tutoring, despite the fact that she's back in school regularly.

Before the room empties, Parker turns to the mother.

"This went very well because you were very honest and open," he says. "My role now is to work with them to work with you. I tell every family, 'Do what you gotta do to get ACS out of your life.'" ❀

No Easy Choices

The city's Community Partnership Initiative represents New York's vision for catalyzing neighborhood action in support of families, but it has taken hold only on the margins. Is it a step back to trade a grand vision for less ambitious, more measurable goals?

BY ABIGAIL KRAMER

HIGH ON A HILL in the Bronx, in an office cluttered with particleboard desks and a grumpy air conditioner, Tracey Carter starts the day with three problems. First, there's a mother named Loretta who wants her daughter back. Under instruction from the child's foster care agency, she's taken four parenting classes, undergone counseling for domestic violence victims, demonstrated her knowledge of cleaning an apartment and practiced making a grocery budget. Six months ago, they told her she also needed to take a class on caring for kids with special needs, but the referral that would get her into such a class seems to have disappeared down a bureaucratic rabbit hole. No one at the agency can tell Loretta where to find the class, or how to sign up, she says. Nor can they say how it's any different from the classes she's already taken.





Tracey Carter outside the Bridge Builders storefront office, where parents can get help navigating the child welfare system.

THE SECOND PROBLEM is easier: a mother with a big-eyed boy in tow, unsure how to complete a form for her son's Family Court judge. She grips Carter's arm as they fill in a series of much-Xeroxed blanks, murmuring, "I don't want to mess this up."

The third problem is an iceberg, the tip of which Tracey Carter spends an increasing portion of her time attempting to navigate. More than a year ago, the network of city-funded preventive services programs meant to help families in crisis spiraled into its own crisis. There were threatened budget cuts, flawed contract renewals and staff reductions, and Carter saw waiting lists for services in her neighborhood grow to as long as six months. It used to be that, when a family got a visit from the city's Administration for Children's Services (ACS) and was told there might be a problem with the way they were caring for their kids, Carter could set them up with a preventive service provider within a couple of weeks. Now, she says, she's got a growing list of frightened parents and a shrinking list of places to send them for help.

Carter's job is to help families navigate the labyrinth of services, meetings and court cases that surround the world of foster care in New York City. For parents in Bronx Community District 4, which centers around the neighborhood of Highbridge, she serves as an all-purpose child-welfare fix-it woman: part case manager for families that need services, fast; part ombudsman for parents who feel they're being treated unfairly; part interlocutor, mediating a long-contentious relationship between the child welfare system and a neighborhood where more kids are removed from their parents' custody than nearly any other in the city. (Highbridge ranked third in 2010, behind Bedford-Stuyvesant and the northern end of Staten Island.)

On a given day, Carter's to-do list might look a lot like that of a social worker at a foster care agency, but she occupies a position that's relatively new to the infrastructure of child welfare in New York City. Her organization, Bridge Builders, is part of a still nascent network of neighborhood-based coalitions, "partnerships" designed to give communities a central role in one of the city's most basic tasks: keeping children safe and, whenever possible, out of foster care.

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To understand the story of Bridge Builders and why it matters, you have to reach back nearly two decades, to a time when the world of child welfare was desperate for new ideas. Traditionally, the architecture of foster care systems had been top-down and city-wide. Local geography didn't factor into decisions about administration or practice, so children were routinely placed in foster homes far from their schools and communities. A parent from the Bronx, whose life was already likely to contain a fair measure of chaos, might have to travel to Brooklyn to visit her kids, Manhattan for a parenting class and Queens for substance abuse counseling. The

city didn't track numbers or divvy up resources according to neighborhood, so the system ignored a reality that was obvious to anyone who lived in the places where ACS did most of its work: Child welfare crises are concentrated in particular neighborhoods, and they're intimately connected to a host of other challenges and needs.

"These are the neighborhoods where unemployment is the highest, where demand for food assistance is equally high, where there's homelessness and risk of eviction," says Patricia White, a senior program officer at the New York Community Trust, which was involved in the original planning and funding of Bridge Builders. "Unless we're talking about this issue of poverty... we're not really addressing the root issues of child welfare."

By the mid-1990s, a critical mass of researchers and advocates had begun to argue for a more holistic approach: If child welfare services could be more effectively integrated into neighborhoods, the thinking went, they'd be better equipped to address forces that erode parents' ability to take care of their kids. Services could be kept closer to home; parents could get support to participate in making decisions that determine the fates of their families; communities could be brought into the work of keeping children safe; and the city could grow into its vision of a more family-friendly, community-building child welfare system.

It's a way of thinking that led to child welfare reforms in many cities and states, including New York City. But here, the development of a more formidable community-centered infrastructure to involve residents, parents and neighborhood institutions in the hard work of helping families has moved slowly, if at all. The effort has been buffeted by funding cuts like those that have hit the city's social service agencies repeatedly since 2008, and by the crises that invariably reshape the child protection agenda, like the murder of Nixxmary Brown in 2006. In many ways, Bridge Builders, and a number of other community-focused partnerships created in its image, have come to exemplify the marginalization of a vision. "While we have talked the talk, the investment of resources has been nowhere near what is needed to make what we're trying to do meaningful," says White.

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Starting in the 1980s, foster care systems in the United States operated on the front lines of the crack wars, and policy was shaped according to a kind of battle-zone logic. Children were lifted from impoverished communities like evacuees, often to return as teenagers—and current or future parents—with severely disrupted educational and life histories. Child welfare systems were dealing with multi-generational cycles of children, placed in foster care from neighborhoods where caseworkers were perceived as enemies, people who took kids, rather than people who protected them.

In a 1997 paper, Frank Farrow, the director of the Center

for the Study of Social Policy, describes the history of foster care as a process of ossification: “To maintain some semblance of quality control,” he writes, child welfare systems “became highly centralized.... [Child protective] caseworkers were grouped as specialty units within central offices, often far from the communities they served, and rarely teamed with other child welfare staff. Administrative and legal pressures on the system meant that every action and decision had to be documented; paperwork accounted for an increasing amount of time for everyone in the system.”

Farrow’s organization, along with the Annie E. Casey Foundation in Baltimore and the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation in New York, led the way to the new model. Each in their own way, they helped child welfare agencies in cities around the country develop structured partnerships with residents, community organizations, congregations, tenant associations, schools and other government agencies—all in neighborhoods deeply involved in the system. The hope was that, if residents thought of themselves as part of a network responsible for keeping kids safe, they would identify families who were running into trouble and get them help—preferably long before a child welfare investigator showed up at the door. If a daycare provider were linked to a preventive service agency, for example, she could sit down with a struggling mom and tell her where to go for help. A nurse who’d discharged a medically fragile child to her parents could call a child welfare worker who had the power to get the family in-home care.

The idea was to blend a government-led model of human service delivery with a more traditional idea about communities’ responsibility to look out for their own children—to identify the proverbial village and give it an infrastructure. The kickback, it was hoped, would be healthier neighborhoods: Not only would local collaboratives be lithier and more responsive than a monolithic city agency, but tightly linked networks would turn neighborhoods into better places to live. “The vision was premised on the belief that safe children require strong families and strong families require being a part of healthy and robust communities,” says Susan Notkin, associate director of the Center for the Study of Social Policy.

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In New York City, the community partnership model began to set down roots thanks to the work of Agenda for Children Tomorrow, a collaboration of city government and private funders originally based in the mayor’s office. Its organizers pulled together local networks of social service providers and community groups scattered around the five boroughs. Then, in 2003, a group of local funders and child welfare advocates designed an experiment with a high-stakes mission: Enter a neighborhood with epidemic rates of child welfare involvement and equip it to keep kids safe at home.

Focused on Mental Health

WHEN MEMBERS OF the East New York Community Partnership Program (CPP) learned that their community had the third highest rate of mental health hospitalizations in Brooklyn, they felt compelled to respond. They set a goal: to raise awareness of mental illness in their neighborhood. “If you have symptoms of mental illness, and you don’t know what to do with the symptoms, you are more likely to end up in the hospital,” explains Cruz Fuksman, co-chair of the East New York CPP. “Awareness can prevent hospitalization.”

It’s one example of the community-driven goals that some partnerships have added to the list of objectives assigned them by the Administration for Children’s Services (ACS). The East New York partnership now hosts several neighborhood workshops each month on topics like domestic violence, anger management, bullying, and the difference between discipline and punishment. At one conference on the face of mental illness, says Fuksman, a young woman

One example of a community driven goal.

who was being battered by her partner sought help for the first time. “She opened up that evening and said, ‘No more,’” Fuksman remembers. “It was great.”

Most of the workshops are held in schools and libraries to attract community residents, but some are geared for teachers and service providers. “You would be surprised how many professionals themselves don’t believe in mental health. They might think that a child just needs a spanking,” says Fuksman.

A number of residents from the neighborhood are Caribbean and Latino, two cultures that frequently regard mental illness as a taboo topic and are unlikely to attend the workshops, says Fuksman. So the partnership spent many months creating a booklet that explains in clear, friendly terms what mental illness is, how to recognize its symptoms, and where to get help close to home. All of the partnership’s members hand out copies of the booklet in their programs. They also distribute them in neighborhood beauty salons, barber shops, libraries, schools and community centers.

Setting a goal driven by community need has had its drawbacks. The partnership spends close to \$4,000 annually on printing the booklet, taking valuable resources away from its other priorities. “The idea of creating the community partnership is to meet community needs, so of course ACS is always going to be open and supportive of the idea of creating subgroups that meet needs,” says Fuksman. “However, the budget is the same as when we had four goals, and now we have six.” —Kendra Hurley

A Short Guide to the Partnerships

NEW YORK CITY'S 11 community partnerships are coalitions of local organizations and residents organized to improve child welfare outcomes in specific neighborhoods. Their structures vary, but most are headed by volunteer chairs or co-chairs who are chosen by the coalition to supervise staff and help ensure the partnership remains focused on achieving its goals. The member organizations range from large, citywide foster care agencies to very small membership associations and religious congregations.

Each partnership receives \$150,000 per year from ACS, funneled through a nonprofit fiscal sponsor and dispensed by the partnership's full-time staff person, who carries the title of liaison. Liaisons are responsible for recruiting community organizations and neighborhood residents to participate in meetings and do the work of the partnership. Much of the work is accomplished by workgroups, also chaired by volunteers. Each partnership receives guidance and technical assistance from ACS's Office of Community Partnerships, which provides facilitators to each of the communities. The fiscal sponsors—a mix of foster care, preventive and community-based organizations—receive up to 10 percent of the ACS funding to pay for administrative expenses.

Under their contracts with ACS, partnerships are responsible for five tasks, each attached to numerical benchmarks:

- **Preventive referrals:** Partnerships facilitate relationships and referrals between daycare and Head Start providers, who might know if a family is having trouble, and ACS-funded preventive services agencies, which may be able to help.
- **School truancy:** Each partnership is to build relationships with schools that have high rates of chronic truancy, and educate administrators and parents about resources that can help families.
- **Foster parent recruitment:** Partnerships educate local residents about becoming foster families, so that kids have a better chance of finding homes in their own neighborhoods.
- **Family visits:** Partnerships train and supervise community residents to host visits between kids in foster care and their parents, so they can spend time together outside of antiseptic agency offices.
- **Family conferences:** Partnerships send community representatives to conferences with ACS and families at high risk of having children placed in foster care, in the hope that a neutral party can make the process less alienating for parents.

Currently the partnerships are active in Bedford Stuyvesant, Bushwick and East New York in Brooklyn; Highbridge, Soundview, and Mott Haven in the Bronx; Elmhurst and Jamaica in Queens; East Harlem and the Lower East Side in Manhattan; and on Staten Island.

The project brought together eight community organizations which provided services ranging from legal assistance to housing help to parenting classes. Under the umbrella name of Bridge Builders, the organizations shared funding, clients, an administrative team and a neighborhood storefront, where residents could walk in and get help. The goal was to create a one-stop shop, where families who were caught in—or at risk of entering—the child welfare system could get whatever support they might need to get on their feet and take care of their kids.

The project worked closely with the Administration for Children's Services (ACS), collaborating with that agency's Bronx borough office on cases from the neighborhood. Eventually, ACS joined as a formal partner, dedicating a full-time staff person to help coordinate Bridge Builders.

Meanwhile, in an unprecedented move in the Bronx Family Court, a judge and his staff dedicated three days each week to work only on cases from Highbridge. This allowed for a singular level of consistency for families in the city's notoriously changeable Family Court system. It meant that a small team of lawyers representing the city, the families and the children were regularly in one room together, able to troubleshoot problems and to quickly glean information from the Bridge Builders service providers who worked directly with families.

"It worked because all the players knew each other," says Kara Finck, a managing attorney at Bronx Defenders who represented Highbridge parents. "You could get people into a service quickly, and you knew all along the way that you would get those cases. Court is where you hear that a referral was made badly or not made at all. When you're dealing with the same people every day, it's easy to make sure [appropriate referrals] are happening."

Finck says this level of consistency changed the courtroom experience for families. "For parents it feels community-based, less disrespectful, less demeaning... It makes so much common sense to work with the same people every day."

In the end, the value of most child welfare reform is judged on whether kids are safer and better-nurtured in their homes—and when they go into foster care, whether or not they are getting out more quickly, into a more permanent home. But the nature of child welfare data makes those questions tricky to answer. The number of maltreatment reports called into the state child abuse hotline—and the percentage of those reports that child protective specialists consider justified—fluctuate in response to a variety of social triggers. When there's been a tragedy involving child abuse in the news, for example, the number of reports goes up and investigators become more likely to substantiate neglect or abuse. During periods of calm, the pendulum tends to swing the other way.

Nonetheless, numbers from the early years of Bridge Builders suggest the project had a measurable impact. Each

year of the project, researchers at the University of Chicago's Chapin Hall research center compared outcome data between Highbridge and three other Bronx neighborhoods with similar demographics and high rates of child welfare involvement. By year four, the numbers in Highbridge had begun to look notably different: Not only had there been a decline in the number and rate of child maltreatment reports, but the percentage of reports found to be substantiated had gone down as well—a sign that case workers may have felt safer leaving kids in their homes, knowing that families would receive support. Averaged over the years of the project, Highbridge saw children leaving foster care to return to their families at a higher rate than the other sites.

In 2006, when child abuse reports shot up all over the city, Highbridge numbers stayed more stable than the comparison sites. David Tobis, the president of the Fund for Social Change and one of the original Bridge Builders planners, posits that the difference amounted, at least in part, to the strong relationships between ACS, Family Court and the Bridge Builders service providers. “Rather than remove a child, ACS would come to us first and say, ‘This family is having trouble, can you do anything?’ We’d get somebody in there to help them. When cases were brought to court by ACS, we would know the family. We could recommend that the child should not be placed and ACS would listen.”

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In the fall of 2006, ACS announced a plan to take a version of the Bridge Builders model citywide, rolling out a network of community partnerships that would be funded by ACS but operated by community organizations and residents. Then-Commissioner John Mattingly had promoted neighborhood-based services in his prior job at the Annie E. Casey Foundation, and he spoke of the partnerships as having the potential to transform the administration's relationships with communities. “I made a promise to build a formal, structured way for the system to ask for help, support and guidance, and that’s why we’re here,” he said at the launch of ACS’s Community Partnership Initiative. “In the next two to three years, we’ll make major changes to the way we operate... It’s a commitment to move into the future with us in a very different way than ACS may have been involved in the past. As a partner.”

Through 2007 and 2008, the city launched 11 partnerships in neighborhoods where disproportionate numbers of children go into foster care. Each partnership was granted a modest \$150,000 budget, part of which was to pay one full-time staff person, or liaison, who would recruit local organizations and residents to work together to improve child welfare outcomes in the neighborhood.

Three years in, nearly all of the city’s partnerships have reached the point where they’re accomplishing tasks that ACS assigned them, at or above the numbers the city requires. They are recruiting families to at least consider becoming

foster parents. They are sending members of the community to take part in ACS child safety conferences, which bring together parents and child protective workers to discuss what to do next, whenever a child is either removed from home or at risk of being removed. (See “Shifting the Power Dynamic,” page 8.) And they are creating opportunities for children in foster care to visit with their parents in neighborhood spaces rather than antiseptic agency offices. (See “The Tricky Thing About Visits,” page 26.)

On a more basic, if less tangible level, they’re bringing together community organizations that might never have considered child safety a part of their missions and, to a limited extent, incorporating neighborhood residents into their meetings and projects. Under the auspices of the partnerships, officials from the ACS Division of Child Protection are meeting with community leaders to share data and discuss policies. At the very least, it is a successful public engagement strategy for the agency.

“Many more people in these eleven communities have a better understanding of ACS because the coalitions exist,” says Deborah Rubien, director of community planning at Agenda for Children Tomorrow, an organization funded by government and foundations that pioneered the partnership model in New York and helped staff Bridge Builders for several years. “It’s moved ACS beyond being seen as the ‘baby snatcher.’”

The plan, at the beginning, was to treat these first 11 partnerships as pilot programs and then expand across the city. In 2008, ACS put out a call for contract proposals that promised to double each of the existing partnership’s funding to \$300,000 per year. Eventually, officials said, every neighborhood in New York would be covered by a partnership, and the nonprofit agencies that run foster care services would be required to participate in them.

The partnerships began planning new projects, imagining they’d soon have the funds to reach beyond the tasks ACS required of them and develop broader community agendas. In the Bronx, Bridge Builders had begun a transition that was intended from the project’s beginning: Private funders were pulling back after several years of support, with the hope that community partnership funding from the city would make the organization sustainable for the long haul.

Then the economy imploded. Mayor Bloomberg ordered the first of a multi-year succession of budget slash-backs at ACS, which then scrapped its plan to expand community partnerships. Over the past three years, the administration has directed much of its shrinking pool of resources toward its primary mandate of child protective services, at the expense of the reform initiatives that were central to the early years of Mattingly’s administration—including the partnerships, which have remained static at \$150,000 per year.

If you talk with people who helped conceive the partnerships’ original vision, you’ll find a sense of deflated hopes. The dream was never that community partnerships would

The Busy Life of a Partnership Liaison

THE DAY MAYOR MICHAEL BLOOMBERG announces he might have to slash child care for 16,000 children, Eva Gordon, a calmly energetic young woman with rectangular-rimmed glasses, moves deliberately through the bedding aisles of Target, notebook in hand. She pauses periodically to prod at packages of twin sheet sets, then scribbles in her notebook.

Gordon is pricing sheets for a local foster home. The foster mother is slated to take in a brother and sister who will arrive any day. The home is ready for the siblings except for sheets for their beds. Gordon knows that sheets can make the difference between whether the children feel the home is welcoming or not; they can help set the tone for their time in foster care.

As the community liaison of the East New York Community Partnership, which encompasses Brownsville, a large part of Gordon's job is tending to minutiae like this. In a typical day, Gordon might distribute pamphlets about mental illness at laundromats and libraries, hang fliers to attract volunteers, relay phone messages between a social worker and school staff, or pester Home Depot's corporate office to encourage them to donate, say, a radiator cover to help a potential foster parent get her license to take in children. While many of the tasks sound mundane, she hopes they add up to something substantial: She is trying her best to tie together a stronger network of service providers and residents to support families in East New York and Brownsville, two neighborhoods where nearly 30 percent of all Brooklyn foster children originated in 2009. At times this work can seem, from the outside at least, a little like digging a ditch with a spoon.

Gordon, who grew up visiting her grandmother and other family in East New York, has a near encyclopedic knowledge of every block in the area and can rattle off all the defunct or soon-to-be-defunct neighborhood resources: Howard Houses has a health clinic run by Health Hospital Corp that's about to close; Big Brothers Big Sisters and the New York Urban League both moved over a year ago; and now the Paul J. Cooper drug treatment center—the go-to place for anyone in the area fighting to shake addiction—has moved from Brownsville to Bedford-Stuyvesant.

These losses hit the neighborhood hard, Gordon says. The same issues that push children toward foster care—poverty, addiction, violence—are prevalent here. Twenty-eight percent of residents in East New York's community district live below the federal poverty line, as do 36 percent in Brownsville. Local schools have permanent metal detectors and high dropout rates. When the newspapers mention the area, it's to report on its stubbornly high rates of violent crime or the police's zealous stopping and frisking of young African-American men.

"Hopelessness is really rampant here," Gordon tells a group of caseworkers at one partnership meeting. "It's hard to help someone when they don't see a tomorrow. They just see a today. So how do you instill hope?"

"As a worker it's not only them who lose hope," a caseworker adds. "We lose hope too."

The Administration for Children's Services (ACS) formed the East New York Partnership and the city's other 10 community partnerships with the lofty idea of enlisting communities with high rates of foster care placement to help keep kids safe and out of foster care, rather than having a distant city agency shoulder that responsibility alone. This ambitious vision hinges on the community liaison—the partnership's only paid staff member—whose job it is to get local residents, social service providers, schools and foster care agencies connected and working together in ways they haven't before. "You want the group to counsel itself," Gordon says. "They become each other's providers. You're in the background. And you want the community to be like that. To be empowered. And then we as providers can step back."

For Gordon, this means leading countless meetings where service providers and a few residents brainstorm ways they can accomplish goals set by ACS. Some of these goals are as vague as collaborating with neighborhood schools, or connecting staff at Head Start and day care programs to workers at organizations that help prevent children from entering foster care. Others are as pleasantly concrete as helping foster care agencies recruit local foster homes. Making sure the partnership pursues these goals on a modest budget is a constant balancing act for Gordon. Focus too much on one area and another is neglected; fret too much about details, and the partnership's overall mission to enlist the community in reaching a large number of families fades in the background. As Gordon watches the neighborhood's resources shift shape, and as she juggles the ever-increasing number of tasks on her to-do list, it's the smaller details of the job that vie for her attention.

Driving back to the office from Target, Gordon slows down outside the Paul J. Cooper treatment center, which sits on Rockaway Avenue alongside the vast cluster of Brownsville public housing projects. It looks busy, with people standing out front, smoking cigarettes. Thinking about it moving to Bedford-Stuyvesant, Gordon shakes her head. "It's moving, that's what's significant," she sighs. "It's not closing down. It's simply moving to Bedford-Stuyvesant."

To Gordon, this means another provider is giving up on the neighborhood. But she also knows there's nothing she can do about it, so she quickly refocuses on a task she can control: tonight's event. As part of the partnership's ACS-prescribed goal to collaborate with schools, in about an hour one of Gordon's volunteers will lead a workshop about bullying for parents at a local school. Gordon has no idea how many parents will actually show up for it, but as long as the workshop happens, she will be satisfied. It's the concrete, modest achievements like hosting this workshop or providing a foster home with a much-needed set of sheets that keep her feeling on-track and inspired.

"To refer a family for services is very important to me, and to hold community workshops, whether it's five people or 50 who show up," she says. "This work never ends. There's always something more to do. Always something going on." —Kendra Hurley

provide alternative child welfare practices for a few hundred families; they were intended to shift the center of gravity of the whole system—to pull it out of its centralized remove and into the orbit of people's communities.

John Courtney, a co-director at the Fund for Social Change, describes the partnerships as “sort of a tease. We're involved, we're out there recruiting foster homes, we're out there setting up visits, working with ACS. But you don't have enough money to do it right. If it doesn't change, I feel it will become another underfunded, poorly staffed aspect of child welfare services here in New York City.”

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Before Tracey Carter was an advocate, solving problems for other people's families, she was an addict, making a mess of her own. Carter discovered crack cocaine when she was 25 and it ruled her life for nearly 15 years, during which she gave birth to 11 kids. The first five grew up with their aunt. Four more went into foster care as babies and Carter lost her legal rights to them not long after. She got cleaned up by the time number 10 was born but relapsed before having the eleventh, just a year later. ACS took the baby from the hospital and removed the one-year-old from Carter's home, which, she says, was when she got serious.

Carter and her husband went into treatment programs and got their youngest children back after two years, while both were still toddlers. They got an apartment and jobs, and demonstrated to ACS that they could safely care for their kids, who are teenagers now. Carter's daughter calls her at work to talk about end-of-summer plans and back-to-school shopping. Her husband calls to say that he loves her.

Carter has been stationed at Bridge Builders since the project started, but she's paid and supervised by the Child Welfare Organizing Project (CWOP), an advocacy group that supports, trains—and employs—people who've had kids in the child welfare system. She says that her own history makes her better at working with Bridge Builders clients. “I use my experience to help the next person. I can't judge somebody or look down on them because whatever it is they're going through, I've been there.”

CWOP was one of the first organizations to join Bridge Builders, and its role as a partner is one of the things that made the project different from anything that had been tried before in New York City. It meant that parents who'd once been subject to the system, living at the mercy of case workers and family court judges, were working as professional partners with ACS staff—not just as frontline greeters and service providers, but as participants in case conferences and co-planners of where the network should go.

When ACS took on community partnerships as a city-sponsored initiative, CWOP maintained its relationship with Bridge Builders and also started working with the East Harlem partnership, which contracts with CWOP to provide

community representatives to child safety conferences, and to help with family visiting services. CWOP has pushed hard for the city to involve people in the other partnerships who have their own, personal child welfare experiences. A few have recruited community reps and visit hosts who were once involved in the system, but there's no formal rule. At most partnerships, community rep positions are filled by retired or aspiring social workers, church volunteers or foster parents.

Michael Arsham, CWOP's executive director, argues that without an explicit requirement, the partnerships' tendency is to hire people who make service providers and ACS work-

Is a project that's funded, defined and monitored by a city agency truly able to transfer meaningful power to communities and their residents?

ers comfortable; not people who bring a different perspective into the room. “If you're going to improve child welfare practice in communities where ACS's presence is most pervasive,” he asks, “how are you going to do that without involving people who are most directly impacted by the system?”

“Have some integrity,” he adds. “If you really are committed to improving practice through community involvement then you need to be at the table with the community members who feel most aggrieved and marginalized by the system as it exists. It's as though [ACS is] saying, ‘We want to involve the community but not to the extent that it makes things too difficult for us. We want different perspectives at the table, but not to the point where it creates tension.’ Well, what can you create that's new without tension?”

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His question begs another: Is a project that's funded, defined and monitored by a city agency truly able to transfer meaningful power to communities and their residents?

Child welfare is explosive because it's a place where the state holds extreme control over one of the most intimate aspects of a person's life. Behind the daily bureaucracy of paperwork, service plans and court delays, the brute reality

is that the government can take away your children, and it exercises that power almost exclusively in the country's poorest, most politically and socially marginalized communities.

While the day-to-day work of Bridge Builders and other partnerships is to create neighborhood-sized safety nets, they also make a radical proposition about communities' potential for self-determination. By investing neighborhoods with responsibility for the kids and families who live there, and by offering resources to help exercise that responsibility, the partnerships suggest that communities should have a say in policies and practices that impact people's lives—and that residents should be part of identifying their own community's problems and making its solutions.

One of the original principles of Bridge Builders was that it should ultimately be planned and run, at least in part, by people who lived in Highbridge—not only service providers who worked there. To that end, each decision-making body had spaces reserved for community residents, including one of the two co-chair positions of the project's executive committee. There were mini-grants for projects organized by residents and leadership trainings for community members who wanted to move up in the project's ranks.

Whether that potential for community control can survive in the city's iteration of community partnership is a question that remains to be answered. Given the limits on budgets and staffing, it's inevitable that the partnerships spend much of their time scrambling to meet the deliverables set for them by ACS, with little left over to make their own goals or agendas. "The whole notion is to be responsive to city agencies but also independent of them. It's the independence that we have yet to see," says Patricia White of the New York Community Trust.

There is often a split between advocates who focus on safety nets—providing better, more coordinated services to struggling individuals—and those who emphasize community empowerment efforts that involve residents in the planning and execution of projects that impact their lives. The thing about the partnerships is that they have the potential to do both. In White's view, they're failing that potential and, in the process, missing an opportunity to make communities stronger, better places for families and their kids.

"What we have is a social service model. We have yet to see a community partnership where the goal is about building sustainable communities," she says. "Too often, we say we have to start at what's doable. Every time we say that it becomes the excuse to never do the heavy lifting. So we don't achieve what we wanted and when it comes time to evaluate, we assume that the model didn't work."

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With the beginning of a new administration at ACS, the immediate question facing community partnerships is how—or maybe even whether—to move forward.

"It's time to take stock," says Bill Baccaglini, executive

director of the New York Foundling, a foster care agency that collaborates with several of the city's partnerships. "Let's face it: the city has pulled back on these. If we're committed, let's be committed; not one foot in, one foot out."

Baccaglini contends that, in order to have a real impact on communities, the partnerships should be reoriented toward preventive services, pulling together neighborhood resources that can keep kids from ending up in the child welfare system in the first place. "The city needs to move this thing closer to the front door," he says. "That requires a different set of players at the table."

The "players" argument is one that's made frequently, among the small world of people who've thought a lot about the city's partnerships. It rests on the idea that the partnerships would have a much deeper impact if they could pull in city agencies beyond ACS, including the Department of Education, the Department of Homeless Services, the New York City Housing Authority, the Department of Youth and Community Development and the mayor's office, among others. Not only do these agencies manage the contractors and service providers who come into contact with families every day, the logic goes, but collectively, they have a far broader scope than ACS alone to change the conditions under which parents care for their kids.

Back when the Center for the Study of Social Policy evaluated its first series of community partnerships (which now exist in more than 50 places across the country), it identified interagency collaboration as a crucial factor in making the efforts successful: "Experience suggests that localities will have trouble protecting children more effectively without dramatically expanding the participation of five key partners in a safety agenda: schools, substance abuse prevention and treatment providers, the police, domestic violence service providers, and economic/welfare services," wrote Frank Farrow, the center's director, in a paper on lessons learned.

New York City has experimented with interagency family-service collaborations before: From 2004 to 2007, the Bloomberg administration sponsored a project called 'One City/One Community,' which targeted Bedford-Stuyvesant families receiving services from three or more city agencies. The project included ACS, and it ended up working with many families at risk of losing their kids.

A Brandeis University evaluation of the project describes two examples. In the first, a family faced eviction from public housing after one of the parents was released from prison. Under the rules of the Department of Probation, the returning parent needed stable housing. NYCHA forbids ex-felons from living in public housing, and ACS was concerned that the family would become unstable.

In the second case, a single mother who'd recently aged out of foster care was living with two young children in an apartment with peeling lead paint and no gas or electricity. Her landlord refused to clean up the lead, but he wouldn't

Are partnerships aimed at making children safer by strengthening and empowering communities? Or are they aimed at better utilizing neighborhood resources to make the city's child welfare system stronger?

give her the lease release that would allow her to use her housing subsidy to look for a new apartment. If she stayed where she was, the young mother would become vulnerable to a charge of neglecting her kids.

In each case, the One City/One Community staff were able to pull together case workers from all of the relevant city agencies and figure out solutions, allowing these families to continue caring for their children. Then, through the mechanism of the project, the cases were integrated into conversations between high-level decision makers at each relevant agency, so that policy could be shaped to make services better.

According to the Brandeis University study, one of the most important lessons learned from the project was that structured, top-level buy-in is crucial to making collaborative policy-reform projects work. One City was effective, its participants said, because it garnered the active support of commissioners and their deputies, as well as the mayor's office.

It remains unclear whether ACS's community partnerships will get that kind of buy-in—or, if they continue to exist, whether they'll gain the infrastructure they'd need to meaningfully change communities' relationships with the child welfare system. As ACS determines how the projects move forward, it will be making a fundamental decision about direction and purpose: Are partnerships aimed at making children safer by strengthening and empowering communities? Or are they aimed at better utilizing neighborhood resources to make the city's child welfare system stronger?

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ACS's recently appointed commissioner, Ronald Richter, agrees that it's time to assess. "There are neighborhoods where our support is important... where we have to develop better relationships with the community," he says. "I don't know that the kind of investment that we are able to make can do that. I don't know if the investment that we've been making is necessarily the best way."

In the interest of making that decision, ACS has hired the University of Chicago's Chapin Hall Center—the same re-

searchers that conducted early evaluations of Bridge Builders—to measure the partnerships' ability to make a difference. Rather than looking at broader questions about the partnerships' potential to catalyze community networks, they will assess specific tasks that directly affect families and children involved with ACS and foster care agencies: the community representatives who take part in child safety conferences; the partnerships' efforts to host family visits in communities; and their success at recruiting foster families in their neighborhoods.

For Richter, it's a way of making the work of the partnerships more concrete—and of determining the measurable value of the city's investment. Until now, he says, "we haven't asked our community partners to come up with outcomes. They've sort of done what we asked them. We didn't ask them to do anything terribly rigorous."

Whatever the evaluation's results, Richter is clear that they will be considered in the context of tough financial realities. "I really have to make hard decisions," he says. "You can't do everything. We're focusing on a limited set of resources. So we're trying to figure out... What does it make the most sense to identify as ways in which the community partners can help advance what we think is our agenda going forward?"

"Conferencing is something we want to do well as an agency because it gets families involved in decision making in child welfare early and is very important to avoid removals of children," Richter adds. "We also really want good foster homes in communities where children come into our system. And we think good community partners can help us do that, which means children will go to the same school, children will be near home, so that if there has to be a temporary entry into foster care, kids will be near home and near to their familiar surroundings. That's a good use of community partners."

"Do I think it's my job as commissioner to not do everything I would like to do because this is 2011 and there are very hard decisions to make for every city agency? Yes. ... We want to make our communities stronger. Find foster homes in our community. Get partners in our conferences so the parents are supported there. They are not easy choices." ❖



The Tricky Thing About Visits

Partnerships can transform parent-child visiting and speed up family reunifications—but the barriers remain high.

BY ABIGAIL KRAMER

Thanks to the Lower East Side Community Partnership's family visiting program, the Children's Museum of the Arts has become a place where foster children can spend time with their parents.

IT'S NEARLY 2PM and Adriana isn't late; this is how she always walks—fast, with her head down, as though she's perpetually ducking something. Twenty-five years old and slight, there's something breakable about her, with pretty, fragile features curtained by hair that swings most of the way down her back. An impassive expression and slow, meticulous attention to detail hint at a mild cognitive disability, but her hands are quick and nervous, fidgeting with a book of stickers.

She's been making this trip twice a week for the past five months, ever since she moved into a transitional housing program near Morningside Heights. It's an hour by subway from the Lower East Side, where she gets to spend about 16 hours a month with her 3-year-old daughter, Jenny.

The stickers are a present, and Adriana already knows that her daughter's foster mother will object. A few weeks ago, on another visit, she and Jenny bought a goldfish together. The foster mother gave it away, sending a message through Adriana's lawyer that she doesn't want Jenny coming home with unapproved gifts.

Still, Adriana doesn't like to turn up empty-handed. These visits are the central events of her week and she wants Jenny to remember them afterward, like she does. After 12 months without missing a visit, Adriana feels like they're finally making progress along the slow, cautiously monitored path that's typical for families in foster care who are expected, eventually, to reunify: From one visit per week to two; two hours to four; supervised to unsupervised to the occasional overnight; and finally, with the permission of a Family Court judge, a trial reunification.

By court order, one of Adriana's two visits per week must be supervised. Normally, that would mean it has to happen where it's convenient for her caseworker—in an office at her daughter's foster care agency. The caseworker or an aide would watch and keep notes, which would later end up in a report to Jenny's family court judge, along with recommendations on whether Adriana should move to the next stage in the process of getting Jenny back.

But this isn't a typical case. Early on, Jenny's foster care agency, Catholic Guardian Society and Home Bureau, referred Adriana and Jenny to the Lower East Side Community Partnership, which is tasked with running a program that allows families to have their visits in public places, facilitated and supervised by trained members of the community.

Visit programs are a singularly concrete manifestation of the partnerships' mission, moving the work of child welfare out of foster care agency offices and into communities. But they've also proven, in many cases, to be among the most difficult tasks to accomplish. The partnerships' visiting services depend on voluntary cooperation between foster care agencies, which have to refer families to them, and community members who may have no background in child welfare. Their successes and failures serve, in some ways, as a test of the projects' basic philosophy of collaboration, tangled

in the complicated and sometimes contentious relationships between community partnerships and the more formal institutions of the foster care system.

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Kids who have regular family visits tend to have shorter stays in foster care, easier adjustments to placements and more successful permanency plans. In one study of nearly 1,000 foster children in San Diego, families who had frequent visits were 10 times likelier to reunify than those that didn't. After the often traumatic experience of separation, visits are a moment when kids get to see and touch their parents, to know that they're alive and still love them.

For parents, visiting can make or break their chances of getting their kids back. "If you're not having good, consistent visits, children are not going to go home," says Paula Fendall,

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who directs the Office of Family Visiting at the Administration for Children's Services (ACS). Unlike drug treatment programs or parenting classes, family visits are where foster care case workers see parents' progress with their own eyes. "Workers need to know that visits are improving with each visit, that parents are engaging better, meeting the needs of their children, having happy visits," says Fendall. "That's the only way they can move forward to reunification."

But while everyone agrees that visiting is important, there's less consensus that it gets done often enough or well. "Child welfare is a crisis-oriented, resource-scarce system," says Tanya Krupat, program director for the NY Initiative for Children of Incarcerated Parents at the Osborne Association. "The reality of a case worker's life is they have to focus on what they're going to be evaluated on, which isn't visiting."

More than a decade ago, Krupat headed up an initiative at ACS to investigate and overhaul family visiting in New

York City foster care. The city had been sued over several aspects of its child welfare system, and part of the settlement required that ACS set up an advisory board to find out what was going wrong with visiting programs.

"It was a mess," says Krupat. As head of the board, she went to foster care agencies to see where visits were held. "There were a few that had wonderful spaces," she says, "but some were really terrible. Dirty rooms with broken chairs—things that just conveyed disrespect. I talked to parents who told me, 'You removed my kid from me because of neglect; now I'm visiting with them in a space that I would remove a child from.'"

The standard practice was to allow families a one-hour visit, every two weeks. Krupat remembers a 13-year-old boy who added that up. "He said, 'I get to see my parents and my siblings for two hours a month. That's one day a year with my family,'" she recalls. "That stopped people in their tracks. Unfortunately, the only ones who had been doing the math were parents and kids."

Even that single day per year often failed to happen. In 1999, the state conducted a case-record review of families in the New York City system, finding that only one-third of them received their mandated minimum number of visits. "We did a training exercise where we had caseworkers role-play being a parent or a child getting ready for a visit," says Krupat. "They'd get really into it, and then two-thirds would be told to sit down, their visit was cancelled. We asked them to imagine being a parent and getting that call at the last minute. You could trigger a relapse. You've got parents missing meetings and showing up to court angry. Well, maybe they have some good reasons to be angry."

Krupat's goal was to convince foster care workers that regular visits were crucial to kids' emotional wellbeing—and that their emotional security was as important as their physical safety. In 2000, she and other members of the advisory board came across an idea that they hoped would turn family visits into a key piece of foster care agencies' mission to get kids home. A child welfare researcher named Marty Beyer had developed a model called Visit Coaching, based on the premise that each visit is an opportunity to move families closer to reunification.

Under Beyer's model, visits are supervised by trained coaches, who conduct them as something like a cross between a family therapy session and a real-time parenting class. Rather than sitting and watching—what Beyer describes as a 'surveillance' model—the coach meets with parents before and after visits to set goals and give feedback. During the visits, the coach steps in with suggestions and support, demonstrating how to play with an infant or calm down a toddler having a tantrum.

Krupat and her advisory board convinced ACS to hire Beyer as a consultant. Under Beyer's direction, the administration created a visit coaching team which lent itself out to foster care agencies, and opened the Richmond Hill Family Center in Queens, where parents could spend time with their children in a setting that looked and felt like a home, super-

vised entirely by visit coaches. ACS changed its mandates, increasing visits from biweekly to once or twice a week for most families, and encouraged more agencies to designate private rooms for family visits, stocked with books and toys. "It was never enough," says Krupat. "But some exciting things did happen. There was a shift in culture."

And then, as with so many of the past decade's practice improvements at ACS, visiting reforms got derailed by the economic crash and a prolonged succession of budget cuts. The administration closed the Richmond Hill Family Center and eliminated the visit coaching team. Until June 2011, ACS hadn't conducted a visit-coach training in over a year.

Everyone agrees that visits happen more consistently than they did a decade ago. But much of the progressive thinking on how visits should be done—or how foster care agency case workers should be trained to do them—has been lost. "I'm afraid they're not going through any kind of training on visiting at all," says Fendall of the ACS Office of Family Visiting. "Most likely they're not really interacting with them or helping them when they see a problem but, rather, jotting it down so the first time a parent hears about it is in court."

Michael Arsham, the executive director of the Child Welfare Organizing Project (CWOP), puts it like this: "You're sitting in a cubicle with your child and a case worker who is writing notes on you, which often say that your interactions with your child seem strained. Well, you're sitting in a freaking cubicle with somebody writing notes on you. If that's not strained, you're not human."

• • •

Everything in the Children's Museum of the Arts is knee-high, so walking through is like getting an aerial view of a splatter-painted war zone. Tables are spaced around a large room, each hosting its own small explosion of crayons, clay and cut-up paper. One is given over to an electric green goop called flubber. Another hosts children bent over squares of cardboard, industriously lacing them with tentacles of yarn.

With its sense of controlled chaos, the museum is, in many ways, an ideal place to attempt the mighty feat of making an experience as contrived as a supervised child welfare visit into something that resembles normal. Kids run around the room when they've been told to walk. They concentrate on their projects or they don't, hopping from table to table like small, mad scientists conducting a dozen experiments at once. Parents praise their kids' efforts at play dough and pasta sculptures. They also lose their tempers, providing an extemporaneous variety show on the do's and don'ts of child discipline. When Adriana and Jenny arrive, a mother is putting her son in what she announces to everyone in hearing range to be his FOURTH time-out of the afternoon. Another pries shoes on her kicking, screaming toddler, who wants to stay in the ball pit *forever*.

Adriana and Jenny are accompanied by Adinah Ben-Yahuda. Ben-Yahuda's day job is as the liaison (or coordinator)

of the Stapleton Community Partnership on Staten Island, but she's also certified as a visit coach—a qualification so rare, these days, that she hires herself out to community partnerships in other boroughs that are desperate for coaches.

While Jenny delves into the joys of flubber, Ben-Yahuda and Adriana talk. As expected, the stickers had caused a problem. Jenny's foster mother had tried to refuse them, relenting only when the little girl hugged them to her chest. Adriana is frustrated and flustered. She tells Ben-Yahuda that she doesn't think the foster mother understands that Jenny will eventually come home.

After Jenny was born, she and Adriana lived with Adriana's mother, who helped take care of Jenny, and Adriana's father, who had been beating his own kids for as long as Adriana remembers. She isn't sure how many times she went in and out of foster care as a child, but she remembers social workers asking her to lift up her shirt. "My front and back would be covered with bruises," she says, and she'd be removed from the home.

More than a year ago, Adriana's father attacked her with a metal pipe. She left her parents' home without Jenny, cycling through short stays at two boyfriends' apartments, one who forbade her from going outside without permission and the other who, she says, allowed a friend to rape her. Then she got a bed in a homeless shelter. She says she saw Jenny all the time and planned to take her back as soon as she found permanent housing. But a neighbor called in an abuse report on Adriana's mother, saying she had seen her slap Jenny across the face. The city placed the child in foster care.

After a cognitive evaluation, Jenny's family court judge decided that Adriana needed significant support before she could care for Jenny on her own, including a place in a supportive housing program, where she could have her own apartment and a social worker would check up on her every week or so. The court also required her to take classes in basic skills like cooking and cleaning, and to get counseling to understand the cycles of domestic violence.

Visit coaches are trained to understand that parents and kids show up for visits with a lot of complicated feelings, and that it's hard to comfort your child if you're still in shock that she's been taken from you. The coach's job is to hear a parent out, and then help her refocus on what her child needs during the two hours they'll be together. In the manual she wrote for ACS on visit coaching, Marty Beyer sets the expectations low: "Visits do not make most parents feel better," she writes. "Coaches help make the pain of visits tolerable for parents so they will return."

One of the trickiest things about visits is the complicated problem of who's in charge. In order for a visit to be considered 'successful,' a parent has to demonstrate that he or she can exercise authority, meting out discipline in ways that are developmentally appropriate and show a grasp of parenting skills—all within the context of a situation over which they

have fantastically little power.

Minus the 25 other kids in the room and the ball pit, Ben-Yahuda takes an approach that could be photocopied from the case-study section of the visit coaching handbook, listening to Adriana's concern, validating a strength, and then asking her to take an authoritative role in her visit with Jenny. She tells Adriana that she's proud of her for working cooperatively with the foster mother when they're in front of Jenny. She reassures her that there's no reason, at this point, to worry about her parental rights being terminated. And then she asks her what she'd like to work on with Jenny during the visit.

Adriana says she wants Jenny to share, and she follows Jenny to the painting table, tying a tiny apron around her daughter's back. Ten minutes later, they've created a splodgy series of purple and brown watercolors, as well as the lopsided foundation of what was, for a moment, intended to become a

"Visits do not make
parents feel better.
Coaches help make
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clay house. Jenny sits down in front of a bead maze and asks her mommy if she wants to do a race. Heads bent so they're nearly touching, they do.

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Like many things to do with the partnerships, the reality of community visiting programs is somewhat less grand than the original vision. Four years ago, according to a few of the partnerships' liaisons, the goal was for each partnership to have a team of ACS-trained visit coaches, complimented by less intensively trained visit hosts. Coaches would work with families seen as needing clinical intervention to make their visits successful, while hosts serve as something more like community tour guides, meeting with families who are ready to transition to unsupervised visits and introducing them to neighborhood resources like libraries and museums. Each partnership is expected to facilitate 40 visits per year, with the freedom to decide how hosts and coaches are compensated. Most pay stipends of \$20 to \$45 per visit—cumulatively offering a cost-effective way to preserve the visiting reforms that happened over the previous decade.

The plan began to derail early, when the ACS Office of

In order for partnerships to provide visiting services, foster care agencies need to refer families. And while the referral can ease a worker's load, it also requires a willingness to give up control.

Family Visiting lost most of its staff and cut back visit-coach trainings, ultimately stopping them altogether for more than a year. Without visit coaches, the majority of the partnerships were left without the capacity to serve any but the most stable families—those that were already close to reunification.

But the most intractable problem arose as the projects moved forward: In order for partnerships to provide visiting services (and thereby meet the minimum number of contacts required by their contracts with ACS), case workers at foster care agencies need to refer families. And while the referral can ease a worker's load, it also requires a willingness to give up control.

It's instructive to look at the one partnership where getting referrals has never been a problem: Staten Island is a small place, and Ben-Yahuda, who runs the Stapleton Community Partnership, has worked in foster care offices and social service agencies there for more than a dozen years. She knew much of the staff of the island's foster care agencies before she joined the partnership, and her relationships got stronger when she moved into an office in the Staten Island branch of New York Foundling, a foster care agency.

In Ben-Yahuda's view, strong relationships with foster care agencies are what give her the leverage to carry out the partnerships' mission. "You look at how, by working in the system, you can improve things for families," she says. "But also you can step out and get a lot of perspective on what needs to change."

Ben-Yahuda says she's been flooded with visiting referrals from the beginning, and the Stapleton partnership hosts and coaches about 20 of New York Foundling's family visits per month. The result, according to Jacqueline Sanders, the Foundling's director of social services for Staten Island, is that her agency has had unprecedented success at meeting its mandates from the city and state. "We had 100 percent child-family visitation last quarter. That never happens," she says.

The story at other partnerships is very different. Liaisons describe doing intensive outreach to let agencies know about their visiting services, making presentations at staff meetings, following up with phone calls and fliers and tweaking their documentation systems so that caseworkers would get stuck with as little paperwork as possible. But the referrals didn't come.

If you ask the staff of foster care agencies why they don't

send families to community visiting programs, you're likely to hear a list of logistical glitches that sent this or that referral off-track: A supervisor who started organizing referrals but then left the agency; an elderly foster parent who couldn't transport her grandson to the library where he was supposed to meet his dad; a mom who relapsed and had to go back to supervised visits. The defining fact of the community partnerships is that they're ad-hoc and small-scale, and there's no infrastructure to ensure that foster care agencies consistently collaborate with them. Combine that with the frenetic nature of case workers' jobs, and it's easy for things to get lost in the chaotic lives and bureaucratic crises that make the daily work of child welfare so complicated.

But if you keep asking questions, you'll encounter a deeper suspicion, one that goes beyond logistics and is collectively harbored by many of the partnership liaisons and the advocates who work with them. They see the problem as a lack of trust, a missing piece of the massive cultural shift that happens when communities ask foster care agencies to open their doors to outsiders. "They don't want to be on watch," says Flora Huang, the liaison for the Lower East Side Community Partnership. "Having a visit host means one more person who's privy to information about the case and the parents' complaints and opinions. Agencies aren't comfortable with that." She says this is one reason why the Lower East Side partnership failed to meet its visiting goal in its first year and barely reached it in its second.

"My theory is that we're in communities with high needs, and there's a bad name attached to these neighborhoods," says Eva Gordon, who runs the community partnership in East New York, which has only gotten five successful referrals for visit hosting since 2007. "I think the agencies don't trust the communities."

Janet Greaves sits on the board of the East New York Community Partnership, as well as its subcommittee on visiting. She's also an assistant executive director at Little Flower Children and Family Services—one of the agencies that could, in theory, reduce its workload by referring families for visiting services at the partnership. Greaves says she talks to her caseworkers regularly about referring families for visit hosting—in part because she believes in the partnership,

and in part because the Little Flower office is overcrowded with visiting families. But she says she can see that they are leery. “It’s an ownership type of thing,” says Greaves. “You’ve worked with a family for a while, you don’t want to turn the case over to someone else.”

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Last year, the East Harlem Community Partnership got a family visiting case that tested everyone’s theories about why it’s so hard to make partnerships work.

After a period of trying—and failing—to get referrals directly from foster care agencies, East Harlem found a work-around in the form of Isabel Malavet, a long-time social worker at an organization called Sinergia, which serves developmentally disabled parents. Because she’s been lending her own visit coaching services to foster care agencies for years, and because case workers call her looking for spots in her parenting classes, Malavet finds that she’s able to broker referrals between foster care agencies and the partnership—which, as a result, has developed a specialty and reputation for serving disabled parents.

The case in question came from the foster care agency Catholic Guardian Society and Home Bureau. Both parents had developmental disabilities and their two children—a two-year-old girl and a three-year-old boy—had been placed together in a foster home. The plan was for the family to reunify, and the kids’ family court judge had requested that they have two coached visits with their parents every week.

The East Harlem partnership assigned Malavet to the case as a visit coach, along with Damaris Figueroa, a parent advocate from CWOP, which trains and hires parents who have their own past experiences with the child welfare system. This was Figueroa’s first visit coaching case, though she’d been a visit host and worked as a community representative at ACS’s child safety conferences for close to five years.

Everyone agrees on three basic facts of what happened next: First, that there was at least one verbal altercation between Figueroa and the kids’ foster mom. Second, that Malavet reported the foster mom to the state, on the suspicion that she was neglecting the two children. And third, that Catholic Guardian and ACS joined together to have Figueroa and Malavet removed from the family’s case.

How the conflict started—and more importantly, what it means—is more contentious.

According to Figueroa, the foster mom cancelled 11 visits in the first three months that she and Malavet had the case. They would travel with the kids’ parents for more than an hour each way, she says, from upper Manhattan to Catholic Guardian’s offices in the Bronx, only to discover that the foster mother had called off the visit just before they arrived. “I thought the foster mom was taking advantage of the parents,” says Figueroa. She said as much to the foster mother—at one point, she says, telling her on the phone that she was “tired of this shit.”

In Figueroa’s view, the parents rights were being violated

and her role required her to stick up for them when no one else—neither the foster care agency, nor ACS—seemed willing to do so. “Once they [foster care agencies] see a voice there they get nervous,” she says. “They know we know our rights. They don’t like when somebody else is involved from the outside because they can’t do what they want to do to parents.”

Catholic Guardian won’t make an official comment on specific families, but a child welfare professional with knowledge of the case described the agency’s complaint as focusing on questions of professionalism. “The host was not being neutral. She pretty much sided with the parents, not trying to form a relationship with the foster parent. That’s not professional behavior,” she says.

It’s a point that speaks to one of the thorniest questions of community partnership: How do you define, much less regulate, the relationships between families and members of the community who are invited to play a formal role in the work of child welfare, but aren’t supervised or extensively trained by any of the formal institutions of the system?

One of Catholic Guardian’s complaints was that Figueroa had become Facebook friends with the parents in the case. To the agency, it was an egregious example of bias and unprofessional behavior. To Figueroa, it’s what neighbors do. “They added me so I added them,” she says. “I’m supposed to be part of their community. That’s protocol. That’s why it works.”

And there does seem to have been a period of general consensus that the visit coaching was, indeed, working. When she first started seeing them, says Figueroa, the parents had a practice of bringing large quantities of food to each visit, which the children would eat until they were sick. She talked to them about nutrition and portion control and says that, by the end, they’d arrive with one or two snacks for each child. At the beginning, says Figueroa, the little girl in the case would have nothing to do with her mother. Figueroa and Malavet worked with the mother on gentle ways to insert herself into the girl’s interactions with her father, and on sharing her attention more evenly between the two kids. By the end, they say, the mother was able to hold and kiss her daughter. The initial court referral, which recommended 12 weeks of visit coaching, was extended over a period of seven months—with the approval of the children’s family court judge and the foster care agency.

However, Figueroa and Malavet continued to have concerns about the children’s foster mother. They say the kids often showed up for visits dirty and inappropriately dressed for the weather, with holes in their clothes and shoes. Both claim they tried to talk to the case supervisor at Catholic Guardian, with no success, and so Malavet called in a report to the abuse and neglect hotline, citing her concern that the kids were being neglected by the foster mother.

ACS investigated the report and found it to be unsubstantiated, and it was at the next family court hearing that the administration sent lawyers to join Catholic Guardian in requesting that both Malavet and Figueroa be removed

from the case. “This was a situation where ACS and the foster care agency found that the person who was responsible for maintaining a positive and supportive visiting environment was acting inappropriately and the family court judge supported that decision,” says a spokesperson for ACS. “It was conflicting with the intent of the visits.”

The bottom-line reality, for ACS, is that the agency bears ultimate responsibility for the wellbeing of children who’ve been removed from their families. It’s a system where mistakes can be disastrous and the stakes are always high. One of the hopes behind partnerships is that involving community members can bridge the often-contentious professional distance between families and child welfare workers, but the space that those community members are expected to fill—somewhere between professional and neighbor—has yet to be fully negotiated.

Like Catholic Guardian, ACS won’t go into further detail about an individual family’s circumstances, but the administration spokesperson says the case is neither representative of ACS’s relationships to the community partnerships, nor indicative of its commitment to community involvement.

To the East Harlem Community Partnership, however, ACS’s decision to step into the courtroom represented a betrayal of faith in the partnerships’ mission. “How do you ask the community to get involved, and then go to court and argue that people are too community?” asks Eric Canales, the East Harlem partnership liaison.

Damaris Figueroa continues to see the children’s parents when they come in for a support group at CWOP. It’s been eight months since she and Malavet were removed from the case, and she says that no one has found replacement visit coaches. The family’s visits have been reduced to once every two weeks, and Figueroa no longer thinks they’re working toward reunification. “It’s sad,” she says. “They’re not going to get their children back. There’s nobody there to help them and to back them up.”

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A few months ago, the Office of Community Partnerships at ACS convened an ad-hoc committee on family visiting programs, with representatives from the community partnerships, foster care agencies and ACS’s Office of Family Visiting. In the abstract, everyone agrees that visit hosts and coaches can make foster care better for families, fundamentally changing the way kids spend time with their parents. The committee’s job is to figure out what’s stopping the programs from growing, and to think about what it would take to bring them to scale.

Some advocates argue that ACS should take direct action to speed up the process, holding foster care agencies accountable for working with the partnerships and possibly penalizing their funding if they don’t. “If you don’t make it attractive for people to step beyond what they’re already doing, then why should they?” asks Eric Canales of the East Harlem partnership.

But that’s not the way the Community Partnership office understands its mission. “We’re trying to build stronger com-

munities,” says Nigel Nathaniel, a director at the office. “It’s community organizing. We want this process to be less top-down and more inclusive. We don’t want to have something being held over people’s heads.”

Dale Joseph, who heads the partnership office, agrees that relationships shouldn’t be forced. “At the end of the day, it comes down to an agency’s comfort level,” she says. “How comfortable are you quote-unquote giving a family to someone you may not know that well? Getting to know people and building trust takes time.”

It’s that focus on consensus and relationship-building that makes the community partnership program different from the rest of the child welfare system—and, arguably, that gives it the potential to create meaningful change. But it’s just as arguably the thing that keeps it slow and small. Decision by committee is a clumsy process, especially in the context of a mammoth bureaucracy. One of the first tasks the ad-hoc family visiting committee set itself was to make a flyer to distribute to case workers, explaining the roles of visit hosts and coaches. “We wrote the text and everyone was okay with it,” says Shmika Risher, who represents the foster care agency New Alternatives for Children on the visiting committee. “But then someone raised an issue with the pictures so it didn’t get finalized. Now it’s been two months and I guess we still haven’t been able to agree on the pictures.”

Risher doesn’t work directly with family visiting at New Alternatives for Children. She was hired to coordinate family-team conferences, a role that was created back when ACS mandated that foster care agencies hold regular meetings with families, where parents and older kids could participate in making the decisions that affect their lives. The mandate marked a major change in the way foster care agencies do their jobs, and ACS backed it up with money: Agencies were funded and required to hire coordinators who would make sure that conferences happened as they were supposed to.

Bill Baccaglini is the executive director of the New York Foundling, which operates one of the city’s largest foster care agencies. He argues that a similar kind of infrastructural change would need to happen if the city hopes to institutionalize the practice of community visits. Changing culture within a foster care agency requires “constant coaching,” he says. “There has to be vigilance on our part to keep extolling the value of involving folks who are seen by [families and foster care agencies] as honest arbiters of our relationships.”

But that cultural change needs to be backed up by practical systems that embed new practice into institutions—otherwise, it’s simply too easy for progress to get lost. Baccaglini suggests, for example, that agencies should funnel referrals to visiting programs through a single point of entry, rather than letting them happen—or not—according to the haphazard circumstances of individual case workers. “The decision needs to be made by a role, as opposed to a person,” he says. “It has to be built into the structure of an agency.” ❖

Corps Strength

Transferring the
Teach for America strategy
to child welfare casework.

BY LINDSEY McCORMACK

FRONTLINE CASEWORK is a notoriously stressful job, and child welfare workers have long suffered from high rates of burnout and turnover. Now, a new project seeks to replicate the success of Teach for America in bringing fresh energy to the field of child welfare.

Like Teach for America, Children's Corps recruits graduates from top universities who may not have otherwise decided to work in human services. Corps members commit to serving two years as a frontline caseworker, with the expectation that they will go on to be leaders in their field. This fall, 23 recent grads began their term of service at eight New York City foster care agencies.

Children's Corps is the brainchild of two child welfare veterans, Barry Chaffkin and Viviane deMilly. DeMilly is a former ACS administrator. Chaffkin, a former caseworker and supervisor, now provides social work trainings through his nonprofit, Fostering Change for Children. Both have seen first-hand the rapid churning of frontline workers—foster care agencies lose between 20 and 40 percent of their caseworkers every year, according to national studies.

Changing this pattern means not only attracting the right people to the human services profession, but giving them the support they need to do their job. Children's Corps pre-service training uses role play and case studies to teach basic casework skills. Corps members not only receive the same salary and supervision as other beginning caseworkers, but the support of mentors outside their agency.

"If we can decrease turnover, that's going to impact kids," says Michael MacKenzie, a professor at Columbia University and co-head of the Children's Corps training committee. "They'll be reunited with their families sooner if their caseworker isn't turning over every few months."

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Teach for America follows a model of "recruit, train and support"—a fast-track into the classroom for young, idealistic people eager for real-world experience. A 2009 white paper from the Center for the Study of Social Policy promoted

the model for child welfare work, an idea that Chaffkin and deMilly were quick to develop.

The project started with a simple question: What makes a great caseworker? Chaffkin and deMilly spent a year reviewing research papers and hearing the opinions of birth parents, foster parents and children. They then created a psychometric tool that evaluates potential corps members on such qualities as humility, curiosity, listening skills, patience and critical thinking. The most important quality, according to deMilly, is passion.

Over 200 people applied for the first Children's Corps class, which was publicized on college career sites and Idealist.org. The interview process was part conversation, part reality check. "It's a complicated job. We want our candidates to understand it's not just touchy-feely stuff," says deMilly. "In many exercises we try to dissuade them. We think the ones who came through are the ones who will make it."

Janine Cheng, who studied philosophy at Brown University, is one of the 23 who made it through the interview process. She started college on a pre-law track but later learned

The project started with a simple question: What makes a great caseworker?

that a close friend was a survivor of child abuse, a revelation that prompted her to seek out work at a child advocacy center and in a psychology research lab. By senior year, Cheng had found her calling, if not her exact career path. "I so much believe in a child's right to a happy, healthy, stable childhood," she says. "That's something I hold very close."

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Chaffkin and deMilly are eager to avoid the perception that corps members are an elite, privileged group, a criticism that has plagued Teach for America. Children's Corps provides in-service training not just for its members, but for all the caseworkers and supervisors in their units. The class includes alumni of Ivy League schools as well as Queens College, SUNY-Binghamton and the University of Wisconsin.

Another critique of Teach for America is that its recruits are less experienced, and therefore less effective, than certified teachers. In child welfare, however, the bar is low. "If you're in a profession with 40 percent turnover every year, some of the downsides of Teach for America don't exist," says MacKenzie. "By the end of a two-year commitment, you're going to be one of the senior members of your team."

Demographics are also a challenge. Like Teach for America, Children's Corp has struggled to find recruits who mirror the racial and economic background of the young people they'll serve. Of the 23 members of the inaugural Corps, 17 are white. (All but two of the members are women, an imbalance that reflects the demographics of social work in general.) More than 90 percent of New York City children in foster care are black or Latino. Corps members also stand out from their fellow caseworkers. "Frontline caseworkers are often not credentialed social workers, and they are mostly people of color," says Robert Schachter, Executive Director of the NYC chapter of the National Association of Social Workers. "In most agencies there's racial disparity as you go up the hierarchy."

Chaffkin says that the Children's Corps members were selected for their capacity to respect difference, be nonjudgmental and aware of their own biases—all characteristics that equip them to deal with families from different cultural backgrounds. At the same time, the second year's recruitment efforts have sought to increase black and Latino representation in the corps, with recruitment drives at CUNY campuses and historically black colleges like Howard and Morehouse.

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Chaffkin and deMilley hope that of the first corps group, 85 percent will stay for the full two years. In the longer term, they plan to show that an influx of passionate young workers will have a direct impact on children in foster care, who will either return to their families or be adopted more quickly.

Children's Corps is already stoking excitement among researchers like MacKenzie, who describes it as one of the most exciting ideas he's seen in social work. He and his colleagues at Columbia are considering how the model could be scaled to other states, including rural areas. If all goes well, Children's Corps will also expand beyond foster care to preventive programs.

As for the young corps members, the hope is that they will be transformed and inspired by the experience. Chaffkin and deMilley have already mapped out six career paths for Corps members, including law, social entrepreneurship and academia. "We're hoping to build future leaders of child welfare," says Chaffkin. "We want to get fresh people at this level, then encourage them to go back for advanced degrees. You're not going to be a caseworker forever." ✕

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FURTHER READING

These articles and reports include a wealth of information about topics discussed in this issue of *Child Welfare Watch*. Some have been cited in the text of this report.

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

WATCHING THE NUMBERS

PROTECTIVE SERVICES

	FY 06	FY 07	FY 08	FY 09	FY10	FY11
REPORTS OF ABUSE AND NEGLECT:	62,585	64,190	64,572	64,748	65,114	65,731
Hotline reports increased sharply in 2006 and have remained high ever since.						
PERCENTAGE OF REPORTS SUBSTANTIATED:	36.7	40.0	39.9	42.0	41.9	40.1
Child protective workers found reason to suspect abuse or neglect in two-fifths of all reports.						
PENDING RATE:	7.5	6.0	5.4	4.8	4.5	4.8
The monthly average of new cases per child protective worker remained near record lows last year.						
AVERAGE CHILD PROTECTIVE CASELOAD:	16.5	14.9	11.0	9.3	9.1	9.4
Caseloads in the child protection workforce remained near record lows.						
ACS SUPERVISION ORDERED BY FAMILY COURT (PREVIOUS CALENDAR YEAR)	N/A	5,598	6,177	5,556	5,822	4,913
The total number and rate of court-ordered supervision cases as an outcome of Article 10 filings declined 15% last year.						
CHILD FATALITIES IN CASES KNOWN TO ACS (PREVIOUS CALENDAR YEAR):	30	44	41	49	39	46
The latest number is preliminary, according to ACS.						

PREVENTIVE SERVICES

FAMILIES RECEIVING ACS-CONTRACTED PREVENTIVE SERVICES (ANNUAL, CUMULATIVE):	N/A	22,912	23,809	24,788	23,063	21,535
The number of families in preventive programs declined as agency contracts were changed.						
NUMBER OF CHILDREN IN PREVENTIVE CASES (ACTIVE, JUNE):	28,663	30,358	33,022	31,584	27,532	23,294
The number of children and families in support services was at a longtime low in June 2011.						
PERCENT OF PREVENTIVE CASES REFERRED BY ACS:	52	68	76	68	64	71
More than two-thirds of new cases referred to general preventive agencies came from ACS.						

FOSTER CARE SERVICES

NUMBER OF CHILDREN ADMITTED TO FOSTER CARE:	6,213	7,072	7,401	7,406	7,108	6,313
Preliminary data from ACS show a 15 percent decline in placements since 2009.						
NUMBER OF CHILDREN DISCHARGED FROM FOSTER CARE:	6,625	7,219	7,587	7,557	7,181	7,055
Discharges substantially outpaced admissions last year.						
TOTAL FOSTER CARE POPULATION (ANNUAL AVERAGE):	16,645	16,854	16,701	16,439	15,895	14,843
The number of children in foster care continued to decline.						
MEDIAN LENGTH OF STAY FOR CHILDREN BEFORE RETURN TO PARENTS (MONTHS):	10.3	11.5	9.3	8.3	5.3	6.4
Children entering foster care for the first time took about one month longer to return home.						
PERCENTAGE OF CHILDREN WITH REUNIFICATION GOAL (PREVIOUS CALENDAR YEAR):	45.5	55.3	51.3	51.6	51.1	51.5
The city expected more than half of the children in foster care in December 2010 to eventually return home.						
PERCENTAGE OF SEPARATED SIBLINGS (PREVIOUS CALENDAR YEAR):	49.3	47	48.3	44.2	48.1	47.4
Almost half of siblings in foster care were living apart from one another in 2010.						
RECIDIVISM RATE (%) (PREVIOUS CALENDAR YEAR):	11.5	9.1	10.0	12.3	11.3	12.6
This is the percentage of children returning to foster care within two years of discharge.						
PERCENTAGE OF FOSTER CHILDREN IN KINSHIP CARE:	24.3	28.3	32.3	33.9	35.0	34.9
About one third of foster children are living with kin.						
PERCENTAGE OF FOSTER BOARDING HOME PLACEMENTS IN BOROUGH OF ORIGIN:	74.1	65.7	54.0	57.8	58.8	60.5
Placements outside the borough of origin include kinship homes.						
PERCENTAGE OF FOSTER BOARDING HOME PLACEMENTS IN COMMUNITY DISTRICT:	17.8	13.5	11.2	11.2	10.5	13.7
This is no longer an official target for placement. Today the city aims to place children in contiguous districts.						

ADOPTION SERVICES

PERCENTAGE OF CHILDREN WITH ADOPTION AS A GOAL (PREVIOUS CALENDAR YEAR):	37.4	31.0	29.2	28.0	30.3	31.1
Fewer than one-third of foster children were moving toward adoption in 2010.						
NUMBER OF FINALIZED ADOPTIONS:	1,831	1,562	1,472	1,344	1,165	1,186
Finalized adoptions are stable in proportion to the number of children in foster care.						
AVERAGE TIME TO COMPLETE ADOPTIONS (YEARS):	3.5	3.4	3.4	3.2	3.2	3.0
The pace of adoptions has modestly improved in recent years.						

All numbers above reported in NYC fiscal years unless otherwise indicated. Sources: NYC Mayor's Management Report, NY State Office of Children and Family Services Monitoring and Analysis Profiles, NYC Administration for Children's Services Monthly Flash and data requests.

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

Editor: Andrew White

Associate Editors: Kendra Hurley
and Abigail Kramer

Graphic Design: Design Confederation

Photography: Jacqueline Lane
and Caleb Ferguson

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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