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**From Neglected to Nurtured: The Crisis of the Foster Care System and the Crucial Impact
of Stability**

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by

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Introduction

In the year 2020, the foster care system in the United States consisted of 117,470 children eligible for adoption. Simultaneously, data maintained that between one and two million couples were waiting to complete the adoption of a child. When considering these statistics, the numbers affirm the plethora of families ready to adopt; yet, research has demonstrated that twenty percent of foster care participants will remain in the system for over five years, and others will tragically never experience adoption. The information available regarding the number of families pursuing adoption and the significant number of foster care children never adopted or adopted after an unnecessary wait exposes a pressing flaw in the foster care and adoption system in the United States. In order to resolve the inefficacy of this system, state governments must revisit and revise their current programming with deliberate attention to the long-term well-being of foster care children and families hoping to adopt. Through decreasing the amount of time children await adoption, the system could minimize the amount of psychological trauma which children incur from the inconsistency of the foster care system. By reverting to a government-nonprofit collaboration with private adoption agencies, states could increase the number of children placed in safe homes in a timely manner each year. Instead of state departments vetting perspective parents, conducting home studies, and running training for families, private agencies would be tasked with matching children in the state system with potential adoptive families. Through government support, these private agencies would be able to provide more accurate, personalized, and routine placement.

While for many the concept of “childhood” leads to the recollection of fond memories of ease, wonder, and adventure, for others “childhood” correlates to a time of abuse, neglect, and instability. According to the Department of Health and Human Resources, the drug epidemic has recently served as the leading catalyst for the influx in children entering the foster care system.¹ As of the year 2019, the average child remained in the foster care system for 15.5 months.² When considering 15.5 months in the span of a whole childhood, the number may seem minimal. However, critics must not underestimate this span of time in proportion to the length of childhood. Furthermore, the factor which contributes to the overall detrimental impact of foster care is the inconsistency experienced by children over the duration of this time within foster care programming. In the United States, 4.12 moves is the national *standard* for the number of moves a foster care child will experience during a 12 month period in the system.³ Contrast this with the 2.5 moves the average child experiences between birth to their last year in junior high.⁴ Through evaluating the psychological effect of the foster care system on children, a study found that foster

¹ Health and Human Services. “Child Welfare Outcomes 2015 Report to Congress,” (2015): 71. <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/documents/cb/cwo2015.pdf>

² Child Welfare Information Gateway. “Foster Care Statistics 2019,” (2019): 7. <https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubpdfs/foster.pdf>

³ Rom Reports. “(Federal) Placement Stability,” (2014). https://secureapp.dhs.state.ia.us/PublicROMReports/report_help/default.htm#!Documents/federalplacementstability.htm

⁴ Rebekah Coley and Melissa Kull, “How Housing Matters,” MacArthur Foundation, 1. https://www.macfound.org/media/files/hhm_brief_-_is_moving_during_childhood_harmful_2.pdf

care participants contemplated suicide 4 times more than children outside of the system.⁵ Because the current system fails to provide children with a stable environment for their nurturing, development, and psychological well-being, state governments should adapt their systems in order to exchange their current placement programming for government-nonprofit collaborations.

The Cycle of Change in a Foster Child's Life

While the foster care system seeks to place children into stable environments, programming often repeatedly relocates children after displacing them from their homes. Instead of assimilating children into a steady home life, the system often contributes to children developing psychological disorders due to traumatic separation.⁶ Ultimately, the foster care system aspires to integrate children into a permanent setting; however, it is deficient in this endeavor. According to the Child Welfare Outcomes Report, permanency is accomplished when a child experiences: “Reunification with parents or primary caretakers, living with other relatives, living with a legal guardian,” or is, “legally adopted.”⁷ The strain of changing relationships and environments debilitates children’s ability to properly mentally develop. In the past, lawmakers have approached this issue through crafting legislation which prioritized fixed homes for children. However, foster care participants continue to suffer from mental health problems arising from inconsistency. A study published by the Social Service Review referenced research which confirmed, “Children who experience multiple placement changes are more likely to exhibit attachment difficulties, externalizing behavior problems, and internalizing behavior problems.”⁸ Thus, simply enforcing timelines and legislating priorities for the foster care system fails to produce a healthier program for children transitioning from a threatening home life.

Effective Foster Care Programming

While numerous approaches to foster care have been implemented, only some have delivered the aspired results. Currently, some states utilize privatization and traditional public welfare in order to serve participants in the system. Due to issues with foster care placement, states began considering privatization as a means for reducing the ineffectiveness of foster care

⁵ Daniel Pilowsky and Li-Tzy Wu. “Psychiatric Symptoms and Substance Use Disorders in a Nationally Representative Sample of American Adolescents Involved with Foster Care,” *The Journal for Adolescent Health: Official Publication of the Society for Adolescent Medicine*, April 2006, 351. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC1472845/>

⁶ Peter Kenny, “Delay, Despair, and Detachment: The Mental Health of Foster Children,” *Attachment and Bonding in Foster and Adopted Child*. Hoosier Family Law. https://www.hoosierfamilylawyer.com/foster-children-adoption-book/delay-despair-and-detachment-mental-health-foster-children#_ednref7

⁷ Child Welfare Information Gateway. “Foster Care Statistics 2019,” (2019): 25. <https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubpdfs/foster.pdf>

⁸ Christian Connell, et al. “Changes in Placement among Children in Foster Care: A Longitudinal Study of Child and Case Influences.” 80, no. 3 *The Social Service Review*, (2006): 399. <https://doi.org/10.1086/505554>

programming. Privatization allows families to walk alongside an organization as they prepare to welcome a child into their home. After passing the required home studies, undergoing training, and abiding by any other state statutes, couples interested in adopting should be positioned to become foster care parents until the state releases or returns the child to their guardian.

The Status Quo of the Foster Care System

State welfare agencies preside over a significant portion of children in the foster care system.⁹ In 2019, these agencies transitioned 248, 669 children out of foster care. Families adopted around 26 percent of these children and 47 percent returned to their guardians. When comparing these numbers to the statistics gathered in 2009, the data demonstrates an increase in adoptions and a decrease in the number of children who transition back to their guardians. While such data indicates a positive trend towards movement out of the system, the reports provided by all state child welfare agencies revealed a negative upsurge in the length of time children remained in the system. Thus, these agencies relocated more children into adopted families or back to their guardians in 2019 than 2009, but these same children spent an average of 2.2 months longer in the system. Even though this increase seems miniscule, it reveals a tradeoff of the current policies of many states' welfare systems.

Strict Privatization of Foster Care

Since the operation of foster care by bureaucrats evidences serious flaws, some policy makers have proposed the strict privatization of foster care. States like Nebraska have attempted this approach. Nebraska concluded that privatization alone will not resolve all the dilemmas aroused by government run foster care, but should be examined as a step towards reform.¹⁰ Based upon Nebraska's experience with privatization, analysts acknowledge the need for governments to provide private agencies with support when privatization becomes the means for caring for foster care children. Regarding Nebraska's experiment, researchers concluded, "transferring responsibility from public to private agencies alone is unlikely to improve provision of child welfare services for children and families, a task that requires a highly organized system of care and commitment from a large body of dedicated and well-trained professionals."⁹ Thus, the ideal method of privatization involves the work of private agents with the support of local government resources. Instead of subjugating foster care to the sole responsibility of the private sector, states should consider nonprofit-government collaboration.

Nonprofit-government Collaboration

When considering possible alternatives for foster care reform, nonprofit-government collaborations appeal to the necessity of stability and confront the issues with strict privatization.

⁹ Child Welfare Information Gateway. "Foster Care Statistics 2019," (2019): 6.
<https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubpdfs/foster.pdf>

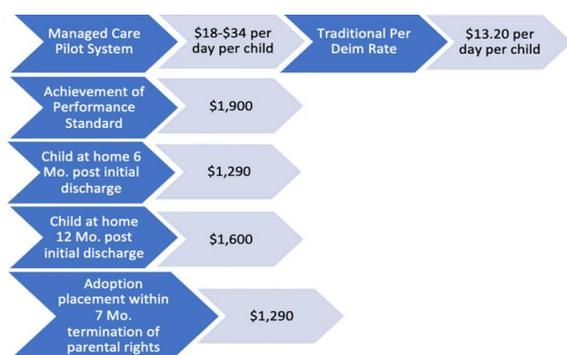
¹⁰ Grace Hubel. "A Case Study of the Effects of Privatization of Child Welfare on Services for Children and Families: The Nebraska Experience," University of Nebraska Department of Psychology, (2013).
<https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1825&context=psychfacpub>

Through the process of non-profit government collaboration, data gathered indicates that non-profit organizations actually increase the efficiency and value of their services.¹¹ Adopting the method of gatekeeping, non-profits, “establish interorganizational linkages in order to subcontract with lead provider organizations, to gain competitive advantage over other agencies through acquisition and mergers, and/or to share risk and explore mutually beneficial opportunities.”¹⁰ Seeking to work alongside non-profits, states such as Michigan have apportioned money to agencies per child, and ensured follow-up payments to reward organizations settling children into stable, “permanent” environments and progressing children through the system in an efficient timeframe. The system functions by rewarding the completion of a benchmark established by the state government. Table A illustrates the benchmarks utilized by Michigan’s foster care system. Post-implementation, the non-profits sought to optimize the timeliness and efficiency of their services. Thus, the shift in programming incentivized non-profits to supply higher quality foster care experiences to children in their care.

Conclusion

Because of the critical impact instability has upon children, states should approach their foster programming with stability as a high priority. As PEW Charitable Trusts concluded, “Children do best when they remain in a stable household, instead of being bounced from one foster family to another or placed in a group home. When it’s not safe for them to be with their biological parents, the next best option is a home with adoptive parents.”¹² Through reevaluating their current foster care systems, states can access both the effective and the inefficient characteristics of their programming. States such as Michigan, which has critiqued its own foster care initiatives, serve as a reference for others for advantageous approaches to foster care. When comparing the standard foster care programming by states’ welfare services, the privatization technique, and the government-nonprofit collaboration design, government-nonprofit collaboration offers the choice method for promoting the stability of children in the foster care system and transitioning them into stable homes.

Table A



¹¹ Bowen McBeath & William Meezan, "Non-profit Adaption to Performance-Based, Managed Care Contracting in Michigan’s Foster Care System," *Administration in Social Work*. (2006): 42-44. doi:10.1300/J147v30n02_05

¹² The Pew Charitable Trusts. “Fostering the Future: Safety, Permanence and Well-Being for Children in Foster Care,” *Commission on Children in Foster Care* (May 1, 2004) <https://www.pewtrusts.org/en/research-and-analysis/reports/0001/01/01/fostering-the-future-safety-permanence-and-wellbeing-for-children-in-foster-care>

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