

Necessary Reconstruction: The Child Welfare System

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Abstract

Across the nation children of the system are transferred from place to place with nothing but the stability of a disposable garbage bag. Children of the state are being placed into foster homes, group homes, and juvenile detention facilities as a result of the lack of families willing to take them into their homes. Despite the juvenile justice system being amongst one of the largest in the United States, it is also one of the most marginalized and least discussed. Ultimately, it is the children and teens that the system is intended to serve that suffer the repercussions and outcomes of the exertion of unjust circumstances. Upon close analysis of the child welfare system, a desperate call for attention and reformation is made.

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Background

Nicholas Zill, an educational consultant and author of Brookings.edu essay *Adoption from Foster Care: Aiding Children While Saving Public Money* discussed the tolls the lack of adoptions within the child welfare system have not only on the children but also on the national economy. He analyzed the way in which the increase of children within the system means more dollars from taxes being used to fund institutions such as foster and group homes. He concluded that if more people were to adopt, essentially they would be benefiting not only the children but also the economy as a whole.

The National Infertility Organization (resolve.org) advocates for the rights of individuals and families that cannot have children of their own. The organization analyzes the way in which the once standing Hope for Children Act imposed by President George W. Bush was extremely helpful for individuals planning to adopt. The Hope for Children Act “ is legislation to increase the adoption tax credit to \$10,000 for all adoptions and increase the employer adoption assistance exclusion to \$10,000” according to the Holt International Organization (holtinternational.org). The Act was deemed beneficial as it aided families aspiring to adopt that were reluctant to do so simply because they found themselves with insufficient financial resources. With the application of this legislation, families will be compensated with \$8,000 to \$30,000 for any qualifying adoption fee such as; "court costs,

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attorney fees, traveling expenses (including amounts spent for meals and lodging) while away from home, and other expenses directly related to, and whose principal purpose is for, the legal adoption of an eligible child." According to the organization, because of budget cuts of the child welfare system, this aid will no longer be available to aspiring adopters. This poses a potential threat to the already low number of adoptions that occur on a yearly basis. All in all the organization advocates for a need in additional funds for the system so that potential adoptive families have financial resources to rely on throughout their process and ultimately, so that the children may be granted the opportunity to be welcomed into safe homes.

The Stateline article *Giving Group Homes a 21st Century Makeover* from The Pew Charitable Trusts discusses the importance of renovating the group home system so that the children adequately benefit from its services. The article analyzes the dynamics of the group home as it stands and the impoverished qualities that must be reformed. Additionally, it discusses the Family First Prevention Services Act, signed into law recently on February of 2018 enacted to restrict funds allocated to group homes. The Family First Prevention Service Act is only part of the larger Bipartisan Budget Act. The overarching goal of these collective acts is to provide resources to families in danger of entering the child welfare system and preventing children to continue flooding the institution. Instead of placing them into a group or foster home, families eligible for this service are given federal funds in order to reach out to services such as "mental health services, substance use

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treatment, and in-home parenting skill training” (campaignforchildren.org). The organization argues that child welfare officials are not heading in the proper direction given that they are imposing caps on federal group homes. Instead of investing money on the organizations, they invest money in leaving the child with their families that often times cannot provide adequate living arrangements. Due to the overwhelming amount of children entering the system, they have focused on trying to flush out as many young individuals as they can- neglecting their desperate call for help. The reality, the article states, is that “well-run, congregate care for kids is at least as good as a mediocre family — or better,” said Carroll Schroeder, executive director of the California Alliance of Child and Family Services, which advocates for child welfare agencies in the state. If the government's goal is reunification of families prior to entering the child welfare system, it should not be at the expense of the children already in the institution.

The Dayton Daily News article *High staff turnover, burnout puts child welfare system in crisis* discusses the impact that the overwhelming number of caseloads imposes on the quality and effectiveness of the child welfare system. Social workers are essential contributors within the system. Through this article, staff writer, Chris Stewart depicts the impact turnovers impose on families and children. Given that individuals within the system are seeking stability for themselves, the lack of consistency from social workers is not ideal for their progress. Stewart also denotes the impact that the system has on the social workers themselves and why often times they decide to leave

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their occupation. The article overall analyzes the problems within the system with regards to social workers.

Method

In order to understand the depths of the child welfare system, I aspired to get a grasp of insight from an individual who had partaken in the system itself. Through my professor, Ms. Abuan, I was able to meet Anna Abuan, a former group home leader in the San Leandro, Oakland area. Given that she did not reside in Merced, the interview was conducted over the phone. I organized a series of questions prior to the interview in order to provide some structure and guidance as to what information I was looking for. The questions and outline of the interview may be found in the appendix. Mrs. Abuan discussed extensively about her experience working for the system and what she believed could be improved. Throughout the process, I took notes on my laptop using Google Docs, writing down key points discussed within the interview and experiences I believed would be interesting to develop additional research on. The interview lasted approximately 50 minutes.

After the interview, I reviewed and sorted the notes in order to determine which portions best aligned with the goals of the research. Prior to and after the interview, I conducted an extensive amount of secondary research. I utilized the UC Merced Library as well as publications found on organization's websites. Throughout the process of selecting the resources, I

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wanted to ensure that they were both reliable as well as credible. The CRAAP Test-Evaluating Information; a resource found on the Meriam Library published by the California State University, Chico provided explicit guidelines for doing so.

Interview Findings

Much like the secondary research conducted, the interview indicated that the child welfare system was in great need of reformation on multiple levels in order to proper and effective aid for the children. As we initiated the interview we discussed Mrs. Abuan's initial reasoning for partaking in the system. She explained that at the time of which she offered her services, much like today, there were not sufficient locations for children, specifically teenagers who have been within the system. According to her, this seems to be a problem that still seems relevant, too many kids not enough resources or homes. She was a member of Teen Center, an organization whose primary focus was teenagers stuck within the system. This organization worked to find homes for teenagers who have been neglected and failed by the system. Mrs. Abuan denoted that because it is so difficult for children older than five years of age to get adopted more often than not they are placed in juvenile hall (detention facilities). "They're scared of them" she says of potential adopters' perceptions of the teens and older children falling through the cracks of the system " they think they're bad kids, which is a big generalization, the truth is... they're just mad and hurt... and rightfully so".

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She explained that since the state had nowhere else to place them, some foster children are left to reside in juvenile and consequently labeled delinquents. As a result of this, they are left with scarce and poor quality of resources. Ultimately, a pipeline has been generated from the welfare system to correctional facilities and children have no say as to what their future will hold.

When asked how the teens were placed under her care, Mrs. Abuan indicated the process by which teens were admitted into the program, the dynamics of the group homes, and life for the individuals once they aged out. Teens that were being considered for admission into the group home were sought out to where they were staying at the time, most of which were staying in juvenile detention facilities. When they met with them they were required to agree to a set of rules that they would abide by when they entered the group home. Typically these rules required the teens to attend school full time, help with the cooking, abide by a set curfew, be respectful of one another and the house parents, and to do their best to address each other as a family. When it was possible, these teens would also be encouraged to meet with their parents. She explained that once they were in the group home, the vast majority aged out, one of twenty eight teens that she took care of was kicked out because of disciplinary issues, and despite qualifying to be adopted it was almost unheard of that these teens would leave the group home to reside with a permanent family. Unfortunately, after they turned eighteen years old they were required to leave, they were not

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allowed to stay there unless they were in their last few months of high school. I asked “what happens to these teens after they age out” she took a long pause and said “That will bug me to the day I die... we’re just supposed to let these teens out on their own, they need the same help as you and me but the reality for these individuals in the system is that they are on their own for the most part”. Despite this, it seemed that teens that were placed in the group homes found a way to figure it out. For the most part they got jobs and “some were really lucky” said Mrs. Abuan and were able to go to college with the help of organizations such as the upward bound program at UC Berkeley.

I also asked her to identify the resources that were provided to her by the system, which she felt were beneficial, and which resources she felt the system needed to impose in order to fulfill the needs of the homes and the children. Mrs. Abuan attempted to name some but was not able to identify very many. Amongst those very minimal resources were “a medical system which was horrid, social workers- if you could get them, and there was a requirement that a psychologist come in at least once a month which was kind of a waste of time” she said. The psychologist was sent to assess the temperature of the place and kids. One reason their work wasn't really efficient was because they didn't see the teens for what they were therefore it was not uncommon for the teens to become more aggressive, ultimately the psychologist wouldn't be able to handle a group for more than 6 months. The state itself did not provide additional resources for the teens or the

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group home but community involvement did not go unnoticed. In her experience, Oakland police officers would show up around Christmas and provide gifts- as for the state, they just sent in their check and that was the end of it. The primary and frankly the only benefit the system really provided was the chance for a teen to get placed in a group or foster home, which was arguably better than being left alone in the streets. She said that the major resource needed for these children and teens is a place to go after they age out. The establishment of organizations for this particular cause is incredibly necessary.

Additionally, I asked Mrs. Abuan where she believed the problem seemed to reside and what she felt were areas of utmost importance to reform. She noted that the grassroot issue when it came to the child welfare system is that there is lack of awareness and accountability in regard to the institution. If it was more in the public spotlight more would get addressed and more would get done. Now, the only time the foster care is brought to light is when a child is neglected or abused, you only hear the slander. As a result of this negative platform the general public would be completely oblivious of the widespread issues affecting the institution and much less aware of resolutions to the problems. "It's one of America's greatest secrets" she said, people know it's bad but don't understand the extent of the issue. The system also fails to give the children and teens the platform to be heard. They're left to fend for themselves when their journey through the system comes to an end.

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As we concluded the interview Mrs. Abuan reflected on the stories of these children and the way in which her experience has impacted her own outlook on life. One reason she got into the Teen Center Organization was because she thought she had a terrible childhood “I hated it” she explained. As her time in the organization came to an end she realized that her adolescence was not the horror story she thought it to be, as she became conscious that she had more than what an average child in the system has. She concluded the interview stating “In many ways life is far more confusing and fast paced. It's very trying for adults, for kids as well, I think had I not had that experience I think I would be largely oblivious to that. It helped make me a good person”.

Secondary Research Findings

According to Brookings.edu, the annual state and federal cost for foster care “total more than \$9 billion under Title IV-E of the Social Security Act alone”. This cost is exceedingly high and increases linearly as more youth are being placed into the system. This cost does not account for the medical expenses, food stamps, and welfare cash that is provided for some of the children within the system. Despite this overwhelming cost, the Foster Care system and the Child Welfare system still falls short in terms of providing adequate resources for the youth they serve.

Additionally the article discusses the long term cost noting that nearly “50,000 will stay in foster care five years or more, while 30,000 will remain

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there until they reach adulthood". Unfortunately, they represent a much bigger portion of the young people who go on to create serious disciplinary problems in schools, drop out of high school, become unemployed and homeless, bear children as unmarried teenagers, abuse drugs and alcohol, and commit crimes.

According to the National Infertility Organization "80% of those adopting independently or through a private agency responded that the inability to have a biological child was the reason they chose to adopt." There are a significant number of individuals aspiring to adopt but their financial status prohibits and hinders them from doing so. The organization states that The Hope for Children Act doubled the adoption tax credit to \$10,000 for couples who adopt children, increased the income limitations so that more families were eligible for the credit. What this meant is that couples are encouraged to adopt children in exchange for a cut in tax payment via adoption processing fees. Unfortunately, because of politics and budgetary issues, the tax credit is set to expire in 2011. This resource will no longer be available for couples that are unable to conceive a child nor for anyone else hoping to adopt. Resolve's improving the adoption process statement denotes their aspiration to "seek improvements in the institution of adoption, consumer protections for adoptive families and an easing of the financial barriers to adoption". Noting the importance of financial support for the child welfare system from the position of organizations encouraging adoption.

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Additionally, the *Giving Group Homes a 21st Century Makeover* article states that The Family First Prevention Services Act caps federal funding for group homes for the first time, creating further limitations to the already insufficient funds granted to these services. Given that the Act aspires to keep children out of the system, it is not taking into consideration the children that are already in the system and the youth that do need to be removed from their current living situation. The article states “From a strictly philosophical perspective, there are certainly states that hold the belief that well-run, congregate care for kids is at least as good as a mediocre family — or better”. Due to the cut in funds, states with programs that don’t qualify under the new rules will have to either shut down or continue on with no federal support.

High staff turnover, burnout puts child welfare system in crisis states that many caseworkers take on this occupation and responsibility in hopes to turn around broken lives and as a result “only to become broken themselves. They cite daily emotional pain — and in some cases threat of physical harm — that accompanies the grim onslaught of child abuse and neglect cases.” The overbearing job of a social worker often comes with emotional tolls which are not often recognized. The article also discusses how the instability amongst social workers often reflects negatively on the individuals they serve. According to one study, a child with one caseworker through a year has a 74 percent chance of permanency, a term used when a child is reunified with their own family or placed permanently with an adoptive

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family that has obtained legal custody. However, that rate drops to 17 percent when two caseworkers are involved and 5 percent with three, the study found. Furthermore, the profession does not compensate the caseworkers adequately considering all the work they do. Staff writer Stewart determines that researchers argue that it is probably the worst profession for requiring a higher advanced degree with low-end salaries. This ultimately demonstrates that caseworkers work incredibly hard to acquire the necessary skills to fulfill this occupation but are not being truly recognized for the extensive work they do.

Solutions

There is a call for reform in various sectors of the child welfare system. Perhaps the best place to start in order to create a newfound system is raising awareness of the issues surrounding the juvenile justice system. One cannot solve an issue with a group of individuals with a lack of understanding the depths of the problem. Further establishment of organizations such as the National Infertility Organization would be one potential solution. Just as this organization raises awareness for the rights of infertile couples attempting to adopt, potential organizations can raise awareness regarding teens in the system as well as advocating for higher wages and mental help resources for social workers. Raising awareness will inevitably lead to action. Additionally, changing the way the media projects the juvenile justice system is essential to moving towards a society that is more willing to adopt.

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Ultimately it is important to act on the needs of the youth already in the system that will soon age out. Providing programs for teens to learn how to drive and perfect a trade will allow them to find some direction as to where they will go after they age out of the system.

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Appendix: Interview Questions

How did you begin your time as a group home leader?

What motivated you to partake in this movement?

Were you reluctant to take in any children? If so, why?

Was there a particular age group you were willing to take in?

How were the children brought under your care?

How long did the child typically stay under your care/ in the group home?

What resources were provided to you as a group home leader?

What resources do you feel you could have benefited from?

What resources were provided to the children?

What resources do you feel the children could have benefited from?

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Where did you go if you needed additional help?

Where did the children go after the group home typically?

What were the responsibilities of the children in the group home?

In what ways do you feel the system protected and advocated for the children?

In what ways do you feel the system could better serve the children?

In whose hands do you believe is the power to evoke change?

Did you ever keep in contact with the children after their time in the home?

Were these children eligible for adoption? If so, was it common for them to get adopted?

What do you believe is the primary cause for the dysfunctional system?

What impact did this experience have on your own life?