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The Annie E. Casey Foundation Releases New Report Showing Too Many Children in U.S. Child Welfare Systems Not Living in Families

Rhode Island has Second Highest Percentage of Children in Foster Care Not Living with Families

BALTIMORE –On any given night, about 57,000 children under the care of our nation’s child welfare systems are going to bed without the care and comfort of a family. In its latest KIDS COUNT® policy report, *Every Kid Needs a Family: Giving Children in the Child Welfare System the Best Chance for Success*, the Annie E. Casey Foundation highlights this and other sobering statistics that point to the urgent need to ensure, through sound policies and proven practices, that everything possible is being done to find loving, nurturing and supported families to help raise more of these children.

Specifically, *Every Kid Needs a Family* emphasizes making and keeping a lifelong connection to a family. The report also highlights the promising ways that state and local government leaders as well as policymakers, judges and private providers can work together as they strive to help these 57,000 children who are living in group placements – and overall, the more than 400,000 children in the care of child welfare systems.

The imperative is clear: Despite what current data show, 40 percent of young people who live in group placements while in the care of child welfare systems in the United States have no clinical need to be in such restrictive settings, threatening their well-being and chances for finding a permanent family. These placements also have been shown to be harmful to a child’s opportunities to develop strong, nurturing attachments. Group placements can also cost seven to 10 times the amount it takes to place a child with a relative or foster family.

In Rhode Island, 28 percent of the 1,803 children in foster care in 2013 were placed in non-family placement settings – that’s twice the national average. Colorado was the only state with a higher figure – 35 percent.

Every Kid Needs a Family recommends how communities can widen the array of services available to help parents and children under stress within their own homes, so that children have a better chance of reuniting with their birth families and retaining bonds important to their development. And it shows ways in which residential treatment – a vital option for the

small percentage of young people who cannot safely live in any family during treatment – can help those young people return to families more quickly and prepare them to thrive there.

“We have an obligation to help all of our kids succeed,” said Patrick McCarthy, president and CEO of the Casey Foundation. “If our children couldn’t live with us, we would want them to live with someone close to us – and if that couldn’t happen, with a caring foster family who could provide them with as normal a life as possible during a turbulent time. This report shows more kids can live safely in families and get the nurturing they need while under the care and protection of our child welfare systems.”

Research shows the secure attachments provided by nurturing caregivers are vital to a child’s healthy physical, social, emotional and psychological development throughout his life. Young people who do not grow up in families are at greater risk of being abused in group placements, and of being arrested. Despite this, many children—especially teens—are sent to a group placement as their very first experience after being removed from home.

While more jurisdictions are finding ways to increase the number of children being placed with families, these efforts vary widely from state to state, and even within states. Among the report’s findings across the United States:

- One in 7 children under the care of child welfare systems live in group placements, even though federal law requires that they live in families whenever possible.
- Forty percent of the children in group placements have no documented behavioral or medical need that would warrant placement in such a restrictive setting.
- While research shows children who need residential treatment likely need to stay no longer than three to six months, young people are staying in group placements an average of eight months.
- Percentages of young people in group placements within states range from as low as 4 percent in Oregon to as high as 35 percent in Colorado.

“We need to focus on prevention to reduce the number of children in DCYF care. For those who are in DCYF care, we know that children who are placed with families do better. While group placement may be the right choice for a small percentage of youth, Rhode Island must work toward getting most children in the care of DCYF be with families to give them the caring, nurturing, and normalcy that they need,” said Elizabeth Burke Bryant, Executive Director of Rhode Island KIDS COUNT.

The Foundation reports that common-sense policies and practices can safely reduce use of group placements, and that these placements may be used when caseworkers feel they cannot find an appropriate family quickly. Jurisdictions that employ strategies to improve decision making, for example, see more children safely return home; use of kinship care often goes up as group placements go down. Policy and practice change can improve in four ways:

- **Increase service options.** Communities that provide a wide range of services have more options that enable children to remain safely in families. For example, state and

local child welfare and Medicaid agencies should work together to ensure adequate support by the behavioral health system for services that can be conveniently provided in a home setting.

- **Strengthen pool of families.** Public and private agencies should do more to find families for children and to make sure those families have the support they need to help children thrive. Washington, D.C.'s Child and Family Services Agency, for example, has created a rapid-response program for locating and licensing kin that finds relatives for children in need day or night.
- **Keep residential treatment short, with family in focus.** Residential treatment should be strengthened to meet children's acute needs in a customized, short-term way that equips young people to live in a family and to maintain family connections throughout treatment. In New York, Children's Village – one of the country's first residential treatment centers for children – has greatly expanded its community services and network of foster families in recent years, including foster families prepared to take on the older teens receiving treatment in the facility's residential cottages.
- **Require justification for restrictive placements.** Substantial justification should be required by child welfare systems and by the courts before young people are sent to group placements. In Connecticut and Philadelphia, for example, the top child welfare executive must approve all group placements. Judges can require caseworkers to provide regular updates to make sure a child still needs residential treatment.

Every Kid Needs a Family will be available May 19 at 12:01 a.m. EDT at www.aecf.org. Additional information is available in the [KIDS COUNT Data Center](#), which also contains the most recent national, state and local data on hundreds of indicators of child well-being. The Data Center allows users to create rankings, maps and graphs for use in publications and on websites, and to view real-time information on mobile devices.

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Rhode Island KIDS COUNT is a statewide children's policy organization that works to improve the health, economic well-being, safety, education and development of Rhode Island children.

The Annie E. Casey Foundation creates a brighter future for the nation's children by developing solutions to strengthen families, build paths to economic opportunity and transform struggling communities into safer and healthier places to live, work and grow.

For more information, visit www.aecf.org.

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