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## Re-Envisioning Foster Care

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# **Re-Envisioning Foster Care: A Collaborative Initiative Designed to Inspire Widespread Investment and Innovation**

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## **Background:**

### *Why Re-envision Foster Care?*

Horror stories of child abuse and neglect, broken child welfare systems and poor outcomes of children in care dominates public perceptions regarding foster care and the children and families who experience foster care. Legal systems and state child welfare agencies that prescribe the parameters of response and intervention mandates, as well as political, policy and funding battles that compound the burden on systems to meet these mandates, also influence public perceptions and sense of responsibility regarding children. Poverty, racism and trauma are inherent factors that further affect citizen and community understanding of foster care issues, their relationship to systems of care, and their response to the children and families served by them.

The complexity of issues surrounding foster care can be overwhelming and the problems easily seen as intractable. Debate on issues is often contentious and polarizing, with advocates pitted against systems and focused on failures and poor outcomes. At the same time, the two most common ways for the public to support children in foster care are to become a foster or adoptive parent. This option is too much for most people to consider. The result is that most Americans walk away and leave

the job of supporting our most vulnerable children to large, overburdened systems who are legally responsible and under resourced.

***Re-Envisioning Foster Care Vision***

Re-Envisioning Foster Care seeks to change this picture by building public investment and engagement in our most vulnerable children and moving from contentious debate to constructive dialogue, partnership and collaboration. Re-Envisioning Foster Care seeks to create a vision of child welfare that is broader than the issues of child abuse and neglect and build new engagement opportunities for citizens to support our most vulnerable children, while fostering innovation and best practice.



Re-Envisioning Foster Care is one of the initiatives of the Treehouse Foundation and founder, Judy Cockerton.([www.treehousecommunities.org](http://www.treehousecommunities.org))

## **Re-Envisioning Foster Care Strategies in Western Massachusetts**

Building a structure to facilitate collaboration and investment in a tri-county, diverse area has included many strategies and generated a great deal of learning across disciplines. These strategies have included *planning and implementing a regional initiative through a series of conferences and multi-stakeholder conversations that leads to action designed to improve the well being of children in the targeted region.*

History: The first RFC initiative was launched in Nov. 2010, and focused on the Hampden, Hampshire and Franklin County region of Western Massachusetts comprised of rural and urban areas. The RFC Initiative envisions development of a “collaborative, multi-sector and active “lab” that engages individuals and organizations in our region in a vital process of dialogue, engagement and action over time to support positive outcomes for youth who have experienced foster care.”

### ***Collaboration***

Founding collaborators for the Initiative include the Treehouse Foundation, Friends of Children and the Rudd Adoption Research Program at UMass Amherst. This collaboration exemplifies diverse perspectives and experience on child welfare issues including foster care, adoption, advocacy and research. Founders provide a planning and information dissemination structure that increasingly is informed and directed by participants in the regional initiative and a widening system of collaboration and responsibility.

## ***Partnership with Massachusetts Department of Children and Families***

Partnership with the Department of Children and Families (DCF,) the state's child welfare agency, is a fundamental component to success for any change and discussion related to foster care. Cultivation has included keeping the regional director of DCF fully informed about the RFC initiative and its goals, and inviting input and feedback throughout the process. Responding to concerns raised and building trust and credibility, and modeling collaboration have been critically important, particularly since systems of care are more familiar with being attacked and put on the defensive. Additionally, it is critical to understand the mandates, barriers and constraints that child welfare organizations face in order to make change together. This includes issues of scale, contract negotiation and other factors that are involved in changing practice and policies.

## ***Creating a Regional Structure***

### *Working Conference Structure*

The Conference structure provided an opportunity to bring people together to learn about RFC and its goals, as well as a format for collaboration and engagement, and providing new information and inspiration. The conference program included credible and respected child welfare figures from Casey Family Services who brought a national and regional perspective, the regional DCF director who presented current realities and his support for the initiative, and a keynote speaker providing a national policy and change agent perspective (Daniel Heimpel from Fostering Media Connections.) Importantly the structure of the conference also engaged youth and parent participation and offered scholarships to many

participants to encourage and invite broader and diverse investment and empowerment.



*“This is the first time I have sat together with people for the Department of Children and Families.” A long term foster and adoptive parent*

### ***Major Topics and Working Groups Driving Change***

The conference design also included time for participants to meet together to discuss three major topics: *Permanency, Aging-Out and Education*. Initial working groups on these topics generated information on what to stop, continue and start in each topic, providing the template for continued action and identification of priorities in the region. Continued activity since the kick-off conference has taken the form of topic-focused working groups that continue to meet to narrow down priorities, define strategies and action

agendas. Working groups have employed various strategies such as literature searches, tapping additional colleagues and others in the region and beyond, investigating model practices, and identifying federal legislative issues such as educational stability that can inform and strengthen local action and implementation. Information from conference and groups discussions is emailed to all participants.

### ***Direction and Priorities Established by Participants***

Establishing a level playing field for dialogue in the region has been a core RFC goal in order to build an initiative together across disciplines, degrees and experiences that fosters investment, sharing and empowerment of sectors that are not often included, such as parents. RFC participants include: DCF staff, trauma informed therapists, foster care program staff, adoption professionals, parents (foster and adoptive,) advocates, educators, former youth in care, and invested community members including retired professionals.

### ***Creating Avenues for Incorporating Non-Traditional Resources***

True to the mission of re-envisioning foster care, engaging people and organizations who are not typically part of child welfare discussion is critical to success. Involving organizations such as the Eric Carle Picture Book Art Museum that can enhance outcomes for children through new and innovative programming opportunities, or connecting with technology experts to help implement ideas such as educational passports, brings new resources and perspectives to foster care issues and solutions.

Broadening the group of stakeholders and widening the discussion is also a

critical component of building positive public engagement, understanding and investment in children who are foster children.

## **Issues and Action Plans**

Presented below are some of the issues and action plans that have been defined by participants in this regional initiative.

### ***Permanency***

Permanency is a complex issue with many components from recruitment and training of foster families to addressing therapeutic issues that threaten a child's progress and stability. Through the RFC working group process, those invested in the topic of *permanency* have defined several areas for action in the region: These include: *Education regarding trauma and attachment among many sectors in a child's life such as court personnel, educators, parents, DCF staff; Mandated Visitation; Support Network for parents; and, Recruitment of Foster Parents.* Access to continued education, improved access to resources and training on key issues related to trauma and loss are overarching themes in all groups.

## **Results of RFC Progress to date**

The following examples illustrate some the breadth and variety of collaborative work being done in the Re-Envisioning Foster Care Process around the topic of Permanency.

*Topic:* Mandated Visitation

*Issue:* For a small percentage of children, mandated visits between birth parents and a child/ren is traumatic and damaging. While DCF offices have recourse, through the courts, to waive parents' rights to visitation with their

child/ren, there is a lack of uniformity from court to court across the four counties of Western MA as to when visits should/can be stopped.

*Goal:* To create a uniform set of guidelines to help judges make informed decisions about stopping visitation, when appropriate.

*Topic:* Visitation between birth parents and their child/ren.

*Issue:* Visitation is often fraught with difficult and stressful dynamics including competition, anger, and control battles. Birth parents can be resentful of adoptive parents. In turn, adoptive parents can feel threatened by or judgmental about birth parents.

*Goal:* Foster a less adversarial, more collaborative relationship between birth and adoptive parents around visitation.

In the RFC process, strategies to address these and many other issues and goals are discussed, blending the expertise of varied perspectives represented in each discussion group. For example, a therapist suggests that birth parents visit with the child's therapist at least once *before* visiting their with their child and a DCF staff considers how this could be more widely implemented. Further discussion illuminates the difficulties birth parents face with visitation when they are out of touch with their children's lives or lack skills to overcome visit dynamics. In this process of exchange, new strategies and resources, and potential barriers are defined, and cross- disciplinary problem-solving promotes investment and realistic goal setting, as well as building greater understanding of issues. And a greater inclusion of all parties engaged in foster care is also being forged.

Similarly, in this process, non-traditional solutions can be explored such as using museums to hold visitations and exploring options for having a family pass available to facilitate such opportunities.

Another more structural issue related to Permanency that has been discussed is the question of recruitment and training of foster and adoptive parents. Can there be a rolling training so that potential resources are not lost while waiting for a new training? Can there be new approaches to recruiting family members that would reduce a current problem with infant placement that leads to unnecessary and potentially damaging multiple placements? What can we learn from other places this is being done? Can state and private agencies collaborate more on recruitment? How can relatives be encouraged to take a training that will assist them in supporting a child in their care? These questions have led to the goal of establishing a rolling training and opening it up to new populations including those interested in mentoring, not just fostering or adoption.

## **Conclusion**

The Re-Envisioning Foster Care Process outlined above provides a model for other regions and a way to identify and respond to specific regional concerns, while engaging area specific resources from professionals to parents, from community colleges to museums. This model centers on partnership and engagement with the state's child welfare agency and will incorporate other institutional sectors from a child's life such as schools. Many of these issues considered will be relevant to other geographic areas and there are practices and research in other areas that can inform the questions and issues being raised in Western Mass.

The Re-Envisioning Foster Care is focused on solutions and bringing new approaches, people and resources together to support improved outcomes for children and families who experience foster care and to increased public engagement and awareness. Further documentation and research on this process, its progress and outcomes, regionally and nationally, would be very valuable. Currently, the Re-Envisioning Foster Care Initiative begun in Western Massachusetts has inspired the planning of a similar event in California for September 2011.

*Specific examples and anecdotes in this report come from the Re-Envisioning Foster Care Permanency meeting notes from 1-20-11 and 3-17-11.*