

Q: Why are High Risk Teens Living in an Ambulance Bay? A: Annie E. Casey Foundation

This [Star Tribune story](#) documents that 145 teens who are dangerous to themselves or others lived at some point since last September in the M Health Fairview Masonic Children's Hospital ambulance garage.

The root cause of this problem is Baltimore's Annie E. Casey Foundation. Their lobbying got the 2018 Family First Act passed, which eliminates federal funding for residential treatment centers.

Why? Because Casey thinks foster care is bad, and restrictive placements are worse. But, some young people really need intensive residential services to learn to live safely in the community.

As this [Child Welfare Monitor analysis](#) shows, the ensuing disaster is national in scope.

Meanwhile, Casey execs have zero accountability for the consequences of their actions.

Their outlook would likely change if they spent a week in the garage with these youth and the medical staff who support them.

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What do Casey's lobbying campaign and closing juvenile detention centers have in common?

Narrative for Podcast on Q: Why are High Risk Teens Living in an Ambulance Bay? A: Annie E. Casey Foundation

This short piece on children living in ambulance bays points to a much more complex and multifaceted set of issues around out-of-home placements for children. And by the way, thanks to the Star Tribune and journalist Jeremy Olson for covering this issue in the first place, which gets too little attention, and for making a complicated issue understandable and compelling.

The first layer of this incident is explaining how it is that the Family First Act, known more properly as the Family First Prevention Services Act of 2018, has wreaked such havoc on the residential treatment and group homes part of the child welfare safety net. The second layer is how and why a foundation such as Annie E Casey has so much influence on social policy that it can drive major legislation impacting the whole field of child welfare throughout our country?.

Regarding the first layer, Annie E. Casey and other liberal foundations and groups had worked for years to get Family First Act passed. There was jubilation when they finally got over the goal line in 2018. The philosophical underpinning of the act is a belief that foster care generally is bad for two reasons. One is that the child welfare system removes Black, Indigenous and other BIPOC children from their families at a disproportionate rate compared to white children. The other is that outcomes in foster care are generally poor.

This is basically looking at child welfare through an ideological lens. A child-centered approach would look at each child and try to figure out what is the best option for them at a particular time. To do otherwise is to sacrifice the urgent needs of individual children to the political goal of reducing racial disparities.

In a well-known 2012 article by Emily Putnam Hornstein entitled “Racial and ethnic disparities: A population-based examination of risk factors for involvement with child protective services”, she and her co-authors conclude that, once controlling for poverty and related factors, Black children are actually screened into child protection, and removed to foster care at a slightly lower rate than white children. This raises the concern that we may be willing to leave Black children in high-risk situations, and be harmed, longer than white children. Hornstein’s articles and others point to the reality that poverty is a more significant driver of child maltreatment than racial discrimination by caseworkers. So by leaving BIPOC children in situations where they continue to experience great harm, we are essentially applying a quick fix to the issue of racial disparities and doing so on the backs of these children. Of course we should continue to address bias in decision-making by people in the system. But we should focus more of our attention and resources than we have until now on lessening the impact of poverty on families, whether by dedicating more resources in the child welfare system to directly improve the financial situations of families in or on the cusp of child protection, or by broader political strategies aimed at reducing poverty, or both.

The second issue is the concept that foster care is bad. This belief again is based largely on concerns about the disproportionate number of BIPOC children in foster care. Blaming foster care for the situation instead of the underlying factors that make foster care necessary in the first place is such a basic failure of critical thinking that it is hard to know what to say about it.

Attacking foster care has also been part of long-term goals of the Casey Family Programs, a Seattle-based sibling foundation to Annie E Casey, which vowed in 2010 to “safely reduce foster care by 50% by 2020”. They did not succeed in this goal, as you may know, but the key word to focus on is the word “safely”. That’s because while it is possible to measure the number of children in foster care, and hence whether that number has been reduced, there is no mechanism in place nationally or for that matter in most local settings to determine if children were left at home or returned home safely. So once again these two powerful foundations have put children in harm’s way without ever being in a position to be accountable for the results. And the results have been severe. This campaign by Casey Family Program is a contributing factor to the overall family preservation philosophy that is current in child welfare. As of the last survey in late 2019, 13 states ended or suspended parts of these essentially parent-focused approaches, largely as a result of having too many children get murdered.

The second element of this is to note that children in foster care generally have bad outcomes later in life in terms of the usual measures such as employment, time spent in prison, difficulty with relationships, and health and mental health issues. But there is ample research demonstrating that the bad outcomes are primarily related to the damage to children that got them in foster care in the first place, and that a majority of children in foster care think it was a

positive experience and one that saved them from harm. I will leave it to you to do any research you would like in this area, there are plenty of readily accessible studies. This is not to say that foster care does not need to improve in its overall quality, in fact it is one of the things that we spent a lot of time on. It is just that once again the simplistic, undisciplined thinking that children have bad outcomes because of foster care rather than looking deeper is just frankly hard to understand.

So back to the Family First Act. What does it do that has caused children in Minnesota to end up living in an ambulance bay, and children in other states to similarly spend weeks or months in hotel rooms for psychiatric hospitals when they could be living in a less bleak and more supportive setting? By the way, it should be said that it appears from the Star Tribune story that the people at the Masonic Children's Hospital are doing really well at helping the children who end up there, despite the unsuitable physical plant.

For a detailed analysis of the Act I commend to you Marie Cohen's article referenced in the blog. She does a marvelous job of describing its major components clearly. Just go to childwelfaremonitor.org and look up the August 21st 2021 edition.

In it Marie notes that there were two goals to the to this legislation. One was to move money from out of home care to more early intervention and prevention services, and the other was within the continuum of out-of- home services, to move more children into foster care and out of group homes and residential treatment centers.

The direct impact of this legislation, and the reason that children are living in ambulance bays, is that the legislation cut off funding to group homes and residential treatment centers. It did at least attempt to create an option for children who did need secure placements by creating a new level of service known as Quality Residential Treatment Programs but, as Cohen explained, these programs quickly ran up against a restriction in Medicaid which prevents facilities with more than 12 beds from getting Medicaid reimbursement. They are still trying to fix this. On this issue the Star Tribune article which indicated Minnesota lost 580 beds and 11 residential treatment centers as a result.

I have already talked about why Annie E. Casey thinks Family First is a good strategy. Let's look at it though through a more child-centric rather than political lens. As I have mentioned in other podcasts, I started out in this field working with street kids and runaways. This was not the sort of work of handing out toothbrushes and sleeping bags under bridges, but more along the lines of helping kids get away from pimps and other people who were exploiting them. It's not the kind of work one can do from an office. You have to be out on the streets and have a certain amount street cred just to get through the day successfully. So working in this environment for a time gives you a pretty good idea of why children, and I have known them as young as 11, would walk out of their houses and go to the scary and dangerous streets. The short answer is that they believe it will be a lesser hell than the one they are leaving. And often they continue to believe this even when they are in situations where they are being harmed on a daily basis. As an aside by the way, I have been told that the term "runaway," is not a politically proper term

because it does not acknowledge agency on the part of the young person. I am open to being corrected about this, but I do need someone to explain that to me. I can't imagine a better example of agency than a young teen making the decision on their own to hit the streets.

I also want to insert this point the parallel between Casey's strategy and decisions to close juvenile detention centers. Ramsey county Minnesota did this several years ago. It was accompanied by triumphant press releases and ceremonies with backslapping involved. But, similar to closing residential treatment centers, my question is, where the heck did they think these children were going to go? Did they think because they closed these facilities that children who have been damaged throughout their life, who have had a thousand insults to their bodies and minds would suddenly be healed? Of course they went somewhere. They went largely to the streets, to gangs, to the independent school districts that serve the same population and quickly became overwhelmed with the new influx. They went to the streets. They went into crime, they were arrested and tried as adults, may be a lucky few ended up in some mental health facility where perhaps they got treatment, but where there are many fewer beds than there are young people who need them. This is another example of a quick fix which makes us think that we have done the right thing in terms of racial disparities, but is actually putting children, and disproportionately BIPOC children, through more hell.

The sad reality is that many children that we have allowed to remain in situations where they were physically abused, tortured, sexually assaulted over long periods of time, sex trafficked, and psychologically abused will never recover. They will never be able to live a normal life or live out the potential that they had when they were born. Many children however can, with expert help and a lot of patience, gain some control over their anger and impulses, and develop enough skills to live independently in the community, although probably not with as much joy and fulfillment as they could have had if we had helped them out sooner. For some children, if they are not in a secure setting, they are simply out on the streets vulnerable to every type of predator, continuing to be injured on a daily basis.

The problem is different in some ways when children are harmful to others as well as to themselves. Getting rid of secure settings, including juvenile detention, allows these young people to harm others, which is not a solution either, it just creates a whole new round of harms to people's bodies and spirits, many of them innocent bystanders.

Of course the best and most hopeful goal is to step in and minimize the kind of brutal harms children are experiencing when they are young. This will require, as we have so often said, rebalancing the child welfare system to become child-centric rather than community or adult centric. While we should do whatever we can to help families work through the issues that cause them to harm their children, but there comes a point, and it's a lot sooner than the current system recognizes, when the ongoing harm to children is irreparable and we should act.

This was reinforced in my thinking as I reviewed cases for a fatality review study that we are currently doing. One was a 2015 fatality where a 17-year-old boy shook his girlfriend's infant daughter to death. He was tried as an adult and sentenced to forty years in prison. But the story

really began 20 years ago when child protection ignored, over and over again, incidents of severe abuse by his mother who was Seriously and Persistently Mentally Ill (SPMI). Despite the seriousness of the abuse he wasn't moved into the care of his grandmother until he was 15 years old. Way too little and way too late. His problems with anger and impulse control caused him to kill an innocent baby end up in prison essentially for life. So the injustice to that six-month old girl who lost her life and a 17-year old spending his life in prison really tracks back to the injustice that the child protection system visited upon the young man when he too was very little.

So back to the Annie E Casey and Casey Family Program Foundations. I have actually known some of the people who work in these organizations and worked with them at points in my career. Most of them are brilliant, far smarter than I. And while there are some brave souls within these organizations try to be the voice of reason, the people who manage them are generally not grounded in what children are living through, and don't have a feel for what the policies that they are promoting are doing to those children's lives.

If you Google some of the conferences that these two foundations have organized, and watch the speeches, you may sense that there is a kind of certainty that their view of things is just so clear and straightforward that they really aren't obligated to go into a lot of explanation . It's like "How could anyone disagree?" No matter that the policies and practices they promote have no empirical foundation whatsoever, and in fact fly in the face of solid and long-standing research.

Some of this may attitude stem from the great wealth that the founders accumulated. They perhaps have a sense of entitlement that clouds their judgement. Maybe they mistake their prowess at making money (or mostly their parents' or grandparents' prowess) or more generally their lofty position in society, with their ability to sort out the gritty problems in an sector that most of them haven't worked in directly.

Whatever the reasons, the policies and practices that have led for at least two decades to children being left in situations where they are harmed repeatedly over the course of years in the name of family preservation are not going to be corrected by these elite institutions. If we are ever to restore a balance which factors in the needs of children appropriately with those of families and communities, it will not be because the powerful people who currently decide what child welfare policy should be suddenly saw the light and changed their approach. It will be because ordinary people on the ground like us, mental health and child welfare professionals, fosters who lived inside the system, advocates, guardians *ad litem*, judges, state legislators and county commissioners, and others who are actually in the field decide that we have had enough, and that we ourselves are going to insert ourselves into the policymaking decision processes at the county and state levels and make the necessary changes happen. It's a tall order, but I believe if we persist we can eventually pull it off.

Rich Gehrman
Executive Director, Safe Passage for Children of Minnesota
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