

Creating Happiness: Community Support Programs for Massachusetts Foster Children

POLICY PROGRAM CHAIRS

Jean-Philippe Gauthier
Kathryn Walsh



GROUP CHAIR

Amira Abedallah

AUTHORS

Amira Abedallah
Jane Suh



RESEARCH COORDINATORS

Shatha Hussein
Sarah Moon
Michelle Yang



September 2012

Final Report of the Institute of Politics
Child and Family Student Policy Group



Creating Happiness: Community Support Programs for Massachusetts Foster Children

POLICY PROGRAM CHAIRS

Jean-Philippe Gauthier
Kathryn Walsh

GROUP CHAIR

Amira Abedallah

AUTHORS

Amira Abedallah
Jane Suh

RESEARCH COORDINATORS

Shatha Hussein
Sarah Moon
Michelle Yang

September 2012

ABOUT THE INSTITUTE OF POLITICS CHILD AND FAMILY POLICY GROUP

The Institute of Politics is a non-profit organization located in the John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University. It is a living memorial President John F. Kennedy, and its mission is to unite and engage students, particularly undergraduates, with academics, politicians, activists, and policymakers on a non-partisan basis and to stimulate and nurture their interest in public service and leadership. The Institute strives to promote greater understanding and cooperation between the academic world and the world of politics and public affairs. Led by a Director, Senior Advisory Board, Student Advisory Committee, and staff, the Institute provides wide-ranging opportunities for both Harvard students and the general public.

The Child and Family Group is part of the Institute of Politics' Policy Program, an initiative designed to help students express their views and make recommendations on complex and pressing policy issues such as healthcare and education. The Child and Family group was created in 2012 by Amira Abedallah, a Harvard undergraduate interested in social issues. This report is the result of a semester-long intensive effort by two undergraduates and is the first report published by the Child and Family Group.

The Institute of Politics does not endorse specific policy positions; accordingly, all views expressed in this publication should be understood to be solely those of the authors.

© 2012 by the Institute of Politics. All rights reserved.

Cover photographs: Governor Deval Patrick: <http://www.mass.gov/edu/images/gov-visits-with-children.jpg>; Foster Child: http://article.wn.com/view/2012/06/15/Providing_help_for_foster_childrens_emotional_problems_w/; Foster Parent Support Meeting: <http://parentsbychoice.blogspot.com/2011/09/foster-parent-support-meetings.html>.

Institute of Politics
Harvard University
79 John F. Kennedy Street, Cambridge, MA 02138
Tel: (617) 495-1360
Fax: (617) 496-4344
Web: www.iop.harvard.edu

CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	V
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY	VI
IMPORTANCE OF COMMUNITY PROGRAMS	7
RECOMMENDATIONS:	
1. Saturday Program	9
2. Transition Program	11
3. Mentorship Program	11

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

For the past four months, a team of interdisciplinary undergraduates have worked to analyze the current state of community support programs for the Massachusetts foster care system. This issue has not received as much coverage as it deserves in the past years, and as such, the Child and Family Group thought it appropriate that community support programs be the subject of its first policy report. The students gathered information from scholarly and news articles, as well as through interviews with a leading academic expert on the subject.

This report would never have made it to this stage had it not been for the tremendous efforts of the IOP's staff, including Laura Simolaris, the executive director of the policy program, Esten Perez, director of communications, Catherine McLaughlin, the executive director of the Institute of Politics, and Trey Grayson, the director of the Institute. A massive thank you also goes to Jean-Philippe Gauthier and Kathryn Walsh, the direct supervisors of the program, for all their hard work and support throughout the year. Finally, our thanks goes to Julie Boatright Wilson, Harry Kahn Senior Lecturer in Social Policy at the Harvard Kennedy School, for kindly agreeing to read our first draft and comment on it. Of course, all remaining errors are entirely our responsibility.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This paper focuses on the implementation and improvement of community support programs for children in the Massachusetts foster care system. It is tragically ironic that foster children are more likely to not finish high school, spend time in prison, be homeless and unemployed when the sole purpose of foster care is to provide children with safe and loving homes in order to prevent the abovementioned effects the state feared would take place if the children remained in their original homes. Alarming, the foster care system is not fulfilling its foundational purpose. Focusing on creating and improving existing community support programs will provide practical and emotional support to foster children and will gradually eliminate this negative trend. We suggest:

1. Creating a Saturday Program for children between the ages 5-18 with fun and educational group-based, age-appropriate activities.
2. Implementing a transition program for children aged 16 and up that will provide information and guidance regarding practical matters such as finances, college applications and funding, and finding housing and employment.
3. Facilitating connections with adult role models who can provide emotional support through the implementation of a mentorship program that is integrated into the Saturday and Transition programs.

While any of these programs would provide a lot of community support, we must stress that fact that the best results would be achieved if all three programs were utilized during a child's time in out-of-home care (where appropriate). The Saturday Program initiative will prevent the undesired effects of foster care at a younger age and together with a solid transition and mentorship program, Massachusetts' foster care system can gradually turn this negative trend around. They will also enable the state to safely place children into the system and be confident that they will thrive emotionally, socially and academically at the same rate as their peers who are out of the system.

The City of Boston needs to implement *active* and, most importantly, *long-term* community support programs because in short, they will be proactive and solve some of the fundamental problems of the foster care experience. In the long run they will 1) provide emotional, educational and practical support for foster children to help them transition to life after foster care so that early parenthood, homelessness, addiction, prison time, and lack of a high school diploma etc. will not be the fate that they are more likely than their out-of-system peers face, 2) compensate for non-satisfactory foster parenting (that is an unfortunate but nonetheless very true reality for too many children) and 3) provide more incentive for adults to become foster parents.

IMPORTANCE OF COMMUNITY PROGRAMS

The Massachusetts foster care system has many issues that need to be addressed. This paper focuses on creating and implementing community support programs for foster youth: Saturday, Transition and Mentorship programs. The general purpose of these programs is to provide emotional, social, academic and practical support to increase the quality of the foster care experience and help the children make a smooth transition to life after out-of-home care.

Many children have been placed into foster care due to abuse or neglect. Currently, the Department of Social Services in Massachusetts is responsible for roughly 9,000 children in out-of-home care and each year about 900 children age out.¹ In the foreword to *On Their Own*, former president Jimmy Carter writes: "There is probably no group of young people in America more at risk than those who have aged out of foster care."² Countless studies have shown that foster children have consistently been more at risk compared to children with stable and permanent living and family situations and face rougher living conditions after they age out of the system due to lack of support in general. For instance, they are more likely than their out-of-foster care peers to drop out of high school, spend time in prison, experience early parenthood and mental health problems, homelessness and unemployment.³ Community support is therefore paramount and the appropriate solution to these social problems foster youth face after they age out.

It is utterly important that we not only create support that improves the foster care experience, but also support on practical matters that helps to ease the transition from the foster care system to independent adulthood. Emotional support is equally crucial and is provided by any adult with whom the child feels a strong connection and safety. This adult could be any person in the child's environment: within the foster family, in school or in afterschool activities. However, in many cases, foster children are forced to travel from home to home and adjust to new and unknown environments frequently. As a result of this instability, it is hard to forge and maintain close social relationships. When children in non-foster homes prepare for adulthood and venture off into "the real world" they have a safety net consisting of parents and relatives who are there whenever they need practical, financial or emotional assistance. However, we must bear in mind that foster children do not always have adult role models who can teach them the practical matters of adulthood nor provide the emotional and financial support of a parent. The following is part of a statement from a former foster youth in Massachusetts: "I was growing up but nobody was teaching me how to grow up. I didn't understand what a helping hand was until I had moved ten times. With every move, I had to start in new schools, make new friends, and try to trust new foster parents and adults. [...] I didn't have time to think about why I was in foster care because I concentrated on how to make

¹ Children's Welfare League of America, "Massachusetts' Children 2012," 2012, <http://www.cwla.org/advocacy/statefactsheets/2012/massachusetts.pdf>.

² Martha Shirk and Gary Stangler, *On Their Own – What Happens to Kids When They Age Out of the Foster Care System?* (Colorado: Basic Books, 2004), VII.

³ National Family Preservation Network, "Intensive Family Reunification Services Protocol," March, 2003, http://www.nfnpn.org/images/stories/files/ifrs_protocol.pdf.

it in the foster homes.” In order to make it easier for foster children to secure a positive future beyond the custody of the Department of Social Services we propose the following community support programs: Saturday, Transition, and Mentorship programs.

In addition to helping foster children, these community support programs are also meant to provide assistance to foster parents and help the state with the constant lack of foster families. Seen from the foster parents' perspective, caring for a foster child or even thinking about undertaking such an important and time-consuming responsibility is daunting. There is a fear of making parenting mistakes and not having enough time. The active presence of these community support programs will therefore potentially attract more adults to becoming foster parents because they will know that there are additional resources of support both for them and for their foster children in their community.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Saturday Program: Educational Support

The first form of community support for foster children in the Boston area is a Saturday program for children between the ages of 5-18. The main mission of the program is to build a safe community for foster children to grow and to give them the tools for making smarter and healthier life choices that will positively impact their future as they transition into adulthood. We hope to create a safe community for these children to turn to so that there can be a source of consistency in their lives. By having themed activities for our Saturday program, we hope to educate them on a wide range of issues such as career exploration and public health. Most importantly, through group-based activities we hope to create a fun, safe and strong community so that these children do not feel alone.

Curriculum

Every other week, foster children and volunteers will join together on Saturday from 10am-2pm following a curriculum that will be created for the children. Each child will join one of four age groups: 5-7 years, 8-10 years, 11-14 years, and 15-18 years old. For each Saturday program, we will focus on a particular theme such as mental health, relationship building, conflict resolution, career opportunities, public health and other topics that will educate them on important issues. Each theme will be targeted in the appropriate way for each age group. Along with this educational component, an important aspect to the curriculum will be creating a strong community environment that will foster healthy relationship building. The children will participate in fun group activities and games that might go along with a specific theme for the day. This is a great time for foster children to get to know the other children or even to be able to meet their brothers or sisters from whom they have been separated from. The community building aspect to this program will be important for encouraging healthier relationships with one another and to empower the youth to find their unique identity in this safe community.

For each Saturday Program, volunteers will come and be set up one-on-one with a foster child for that Saturday. It will be the responsibility for the volunteer to stay with the child for that entire day and participate in the activities with the child. We hope to establish a healthy form of trust between the volunteer as a mentor to the child and to simply be his/her friend.

Career Exploration

One specific theme that we want to expand upon through a series program for several Saturdays is career exploration. Through this series, the goal is to create a curriculum that focuses on a specific career field for each Saturday. For example, we will have a speaker who can talk to the children and answer questions about their specific occupation. The children will also be educated about the many career opportunities that relate to that field and the tools that might be needed in order to achieve that goal. By educating foster children at a young age about the endless career opportunities in the field of science, art, law, medicine, business, public service,

government, film, entertainment etc., we hope to inspire foster children to work hard in school despite potential difficulties such as transferring to different schools as a result of moving from family to family.

Public Health

Another series program that we want to incorporate is on public health. We hope to address certain topics such as obesity, nutrition, mental health, sexual health, disease prevention, and etc. to give children the tools for living a healthier lifestyle. For example, after learning about obesity, the children can participate in exciting outdoor activities with the other children and volunteers as a way to encourage exercising. For addressing mental health, we hope to have trained professionals such as psychiatrists lead discussion groups for the teens and provide them the safe space to talk about issues such as depression, anxiety, anorexia or coping with mental and physical abuse. By providing them with this community within this safe space, we hope to help these children realize that they are not alone but have a strong community to turn to. By educating and providing awareness about a wide range of relevant health issues to the foster children in the Boston area, we hope to improve public health for the well-being of the state of Massachusetts.

Challenges

There are challenges related to the practical feasibility of this program that need to be addressed. Firstly, how are the children going to be transported to and from the program? We recognize that transportation may be a challenge especially for younger children. Older youth can be provided with public transportation passes and get to a central location on their own, but younger children will need to rely on their foster parents to get them to the program location. Transportation could be a key responsibility for volunteers and mentors as foster parents may not have the time, resources or, in some cases, desire to provide transportation. Each volunteer, or group of volunteers, can be responsible for one neighborhood and can either utilize the public transportation system or organize a car pool depending on the location of children's homes and number of children in each neighborhood.

Secondly, we also recognize that some children may not be fit to participate in the program or need to be separated from other children. According to Harvard Professor Julie Boatright Wilson, some children and youth in foster care are so distressed that they cannot spend time with other children and youth, even their siblings, without strict supervision. The solution to this would be to separate children into different smaller groups. The trained staff will have to make a judgment of where to place the child. However, it is not intended that the children should be aware that they are in a certain group because they are more distressed than other children.

Thirdly, how do we ensure that the involvement of staff (volunteers and mentors) is long-term? Stability within the program is paramount because this may be lacking in the foster children's lives due to constant change of families and schools. In order to address this issue, we need to identify who the volunteer is. For mentors (as outlined more in detail in the next section), a two-year contract could be signed by both the mentor and mentee as a symbol of

long-term commitment. For non-mentoring volunteers (such as high school or college students), a one semester or one-year contract could be signed to ensure that they will be able to form substantial relationships with the children.

Transition Program: Practical Support

Secondly, we propose a transition program for foster children aged 16 and up to provide the necessary practical knowledge and guidance for a smooth transition into adulthood. By 'practical' we refer to financial issues, how to secure employment and housing, and help with college applications and funding. We recommend that an early start is crucial in order to provide the best preparation especially when it comes to preparing for college. The program consists of a series of mandatory weekly workshops (3-4) that touch upon all of these issues. Volunteers would lead the workshops, which would consist of a mix of the lecture-format and interactive discussion. After the foster child has participated in all mandatory workshops, he or she can sign up for additional workshops that are designed to specifically deal with a topic that is of special interest to the him or her e.g. college and scholarship applications or an alternative to college.

This program is the most important in the sense that it provides concrete information on how to survive out of the foster care system, it is necessary that all foster youth 16 and up are given the opportunity to participate. Additionally, in order to ensure that the program is used to its full potential (i.e. that all concerned foster children actually do participate), some sort of "reward" can be given to children who participate in the mandatory series as a way of encouraging participation.

Mentorship Program: Emotional Support

Thirdly, we recommend a mentorship program that will facilitate the development of a relationship with an adult role model. This program is dependent on volunteers. The mentor is required to undergo appropriate training to have knowledge of the foster care system and some of the common issues that foster children deal with, but we must emphasize that the mentor is not supposed to act like a case worker or a foster parent, but more like a friend or an older sister or brother who does not judge, but is there to listen, support and encourage. In order to match mentor and mentee, a matching process involving a questionnaire and a statement of interests and preferences will be done. Also, in order to avoid losing contact in the case that the child moves around the state, a two year contract will be signed by the mentor and the mentee as a symbol of long-term support. In addition to frequent contact over email and phone, the mentor and mentee will meet together 2-3 per month face-to-face. To not lose contact due to potential transitions between foster homes, easily arranged Skype meetings would serve as a replacement. We propose that this mentorship program be used by children aged 13 and up. The goal of this program is, together with the transition program, to ease the transition process out of foster care. The same mentorship program, if desired, could be arranged for adolescents who have recently aged out and who would want a mentor to provide support in continuing education, career development or just in general. If possible, we recommend that all programs be volunteer-based in order to attract people who are genuinely interested to help and to make

the children feel that they are genuinely being cared for without money standing in the way. The mentorship program is not meant to be a stand-alone program, but to be integrated into the other two programs.