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Exceptional Individuals Honored for Improving Life Outcomes for Vulnerable Children and Families

Casey Excellence for Children Awards recognize individuals making a difference in the lives of vulnerable children and families across America

SEATTLE – Casey Family Programs, the nation’s largest operating foundation focused solely on safely reducing the need for foster care and building Communities of Hope for vulnerable children and families across America, is pleased to announce the winners of the annual Casey Excellence for Children Awards.

The foundation presents these awards to recognize outstanding individuals and leaders in child welfare who have demonstrated distinguished work, exceptional leadership and relentless dedication in improving child welfare systems in America. Award winners are selected from among a group of outstanding nominees within five categories: birth parents, alumni of foster care, foster parents, kinship caregivers, and leaders in child welfare.

“The outstanding efforts of these individuals moves us closer every day to building safe, healthy communities of hope across the country where children and their families can thrive,” said Bob Watt, chair of the Board of Trustees of Casey Family Programs. “It is important that we recognize the work of these individuals and look to them as both humanitarians and leaders in the field.”

The winners of the Casey Excellence for Children Awards are:

Birth Parent Awards - Father

Eric Luciano
San Diego, Calif.

Mr. Luciano is involved with Paternal Opportunities Programs and Services, known as POPS, an advocacy group that encourages fathers to become engaged in their children’s lives while the children are involved with San Diego’s child welfare system. Additionally, POPS advocates for fathers with child support, custody and visitation and co-parenting issues. Mr. Luciano has been an advisory committee

member with the Casey Family Programs Birth Parent Transition and Implementation Committee and currently serves on the Birth Parent Advisory Committee. He recently earned his master's in social work and has been hired as a social worker with the County of San Diego Health and Human Services Agency.

Birth Parent Awards - Mother

Nancy Vivoda

Detroit, Mich.

Ms. Vivoda is a mother of five children between the ages of 10 – 19. Ms. Vivoda overcame the obstacle of having all five of her children removed and placed into foster care and is now a respected and accomplished parent advocate in Detroit. She was the first birth parent in her county to work as a Parent Partner for the Association for Children's Mental Health. She was recruited to work as a family advocate at the Detroit Center for Family Advocacy where she continues to work today. She is a national consultant and trainer for the National Resource Center for Permanency and Family Connections. Since 2007, Ms. Vivoda has been engaged with Casey Family Programs' birth parent work. Currently, she is a member of the Casey Family Programs Birth Parent Advisory Committee and is a founding member of the Birth Parent National Network.

Alumni Award

Reverend Darrell Armstrong

Trenton, N.J.

An alumnus of foster care, Reverend Armstrong has worked tirelessly to strengthen families by addressing issues that impact their physical, mental and spiritual health and well-being. In 2009, Rev. Armstrong founded the Institute for Clergy Training which is dedicated to helping clergy of all faiths understand family engagement programs that strengthen overall family functioning. He has been a keynote speaker at numerous national conferences including CWLA, Early Childhood Comprehensive Systems and the Center for the Study of Social Policy's Strengthening Families Summit. The author of three books, Rev. Armstrong has earned a post-master's Educational Specialist (ED.S.) degree in Marriage and Family Therapy from the College of New Jersey and has pastored the historic Shiloh Baptist Church of Trenton, N.J. for the last 14 years. The impact of Rev. Armstrong's work is significant. Today, he is considered a national and international leader and has made many lasting contributions on issues pertaining to child welfare, child displacement and family strengthening, particularly on foster and kinship care.

Foster Parent Award

Michelle Burnette, R.N.

California, Md.

In 2000, Ms. Burnette started a Resource Parent Association in California, Md. In 2005, she helped form the statewide Resource Parent Association and has served on its board since its inception. She has also served on the National Foster Parent Association's board of directors since 2008 and she currently is the chairperson for the annual educational conference for Resource Parents. Three years ago, Ms. Burnette developed the nation's first non-traditional Parent Teacher Association for Resource Parents. Ms. Burnette has represented the National Foster Parent Association in congressional hearings, authored several publications and has spoken on National Public Radio (NPR) regarding foster care.

Kinship Caregiver Award

Linette Kinchen

Chicago, Ill.

A decade ago, Ms. Kinchen founded the GRANDFamilies Program of Chicago, an organization whose mission is to improve the quality of life for grandparents raising their grandchildren. Since then, the organization has served over 2,000 kinship families. In addition to her involvement with state policy makers, Ms. Kinchen advises the Illinois State Department of Aging on kinship related issues. Ms. Kinchen has served as one of the state's coordinators for three national "Grand Rallies" in Washington D.C. Her involvement with LEGACY intergenerational housing led to a national educational convening for all Housing and Urban Development employees about kinship care providers and their housing needs.

Child Welfare Leader Awards

Reggie Bicha

Executive Director, Colorado Department of Human Services

Denver, Colo.

Reggie Bicha was appointed the Executive Director of the Colorado Department of Human Services in 2011. He has extensive experience working on child welfare, education, employment and health issues at the county, state and national levels. Director Bicha has helped to lead a 33 percent safe reduction of the number of children in foster care in Colorado between 2005 and 2013. During that time, Colorado also maintained an approximate rate of 85 percent of children in care exiting to permanency. The number of children achieving permanency in Colorado is 50 percent, 10 percent above the national average, and the percentage of children who do not experience maltreatment within six months is 93 percent. When Director Bicha assumed leadership, the state child welfare system was in considerable flux. Director Bicha's steady leadership has enabled a practice model to take shape, the implementation of a Title IV-E waiver and a strong partnership with counties to emerge.

Dr. Allison Blake

Commissioner, New Jersey Department of Children and Families

New Jersey

For nearly 30 years, Dr. Allison Blake has been working on behalf of children and families. She served for 18 years at the formerly named New Jersey Division of Youth and Family Services, where she worked in direct service and administrative positions. Dr. Allison Blake was appointed Commissioner of the New Jersey Department of Children and Families (DCF) in 2010. As commissioner of the New Jersey Department of Children and Families, she has led the development of the blueprint for the state's child welfare system with an emphasis of working in partnership with NJ's communities to help ensure the safety, wellbeing, and success of NJ's children and families. Between 2005 and 2012 New Jersey DCF has safely reduced the number of children in care by 41.1 percent. During the same seven year span, exits to permanency increased. Dr. Blake and her staff continually review both the data and their practice to safely keep children at home and find timely permanency.

Child Welfare Leader Awards—Lifetime Achievement

Marc Cherna

*Director, Allegheny County Department of Human Services
Allegheny County, Pa.*

Marc Cherna has served as Director of the Allegheny County Department of Human Services (DHS) for over 17 years. He has implemented system-wide changes that have resulted in significant improvement in outcomes for vulnerable children and families. Director Cherna has lead Allegheny County DHS to achieve improved outcomes over the past three years. Under his leadership, DHS safely reduced the number of children in out of home care by 48 percent between 2005 and 2013. Exits to permanency and reunification have increased. Of all children who exited care in Allegheny County in 2012, over 80 percent of children exited to permanency, including 72 percent of those exiting to reunification. Director Cherna began his career in human services as a youth worker over 40 years ago. He has extensive experience in the field, including 13 years as an Assistant Director with the New Jersey Department of Human Services.

Judge Michael Nash

*Presiding Judge Juvenile Division, Los Angeles Superior Court
Los Angeles, Calif.*

Michael Nash, the current Presiding Judge of the Los Angeles Juvenile Court, was appointed to the Los Angeles Municipal Court in 1985. Elevated to the Superior Court in December 1989, Judge Nash was assigned to the Juvenile Dependency Court the following year. Since 1995, he has served as either Supervising Judge of the Juvenile Dependency Court or Presiding Judge of the entire Juvenile Court. Nationally, Judge Nash is a former president of the National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges and is a member of the Board of Fellows of the National Center for Juvenile Justice. Judge Nash has improved the well-being of and permanency for children in the Los Angeles County child welfare system through his efforts to reduce the number of children in congregate care and their length of stay; increase and improve oversight of children receiving psychotropic medication; and the creation of Adoption Saturday.

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Casey Family Programs is the nation's largest operating foundation focused solely on safely reducing the need for foster care and building Communities of Hope for vulnerable children and families across America. Founded in 1966, we work to influence long-lasting improvements to the safety and well-being of children, families and the communities where they live. For more information visit www.casey.org.