

A SEASON OF **HOPE**

Growing
the **role**
of families





The destiny of all of us is,
to a large extent, in the
keeping of each of us.

- JIM CASEY



Contents

4 A commitment to family
DR. WALTER HOWARD SMITH, JR.
CHAIR, BOARD OF TRUSTEES

6 Hope belongs
with the family
DR. WILLIAM C. BELL
PRESIDENT AND CEO

11 Connecting with kin
strengthens families

16 Raising hope in
Allegheny County

22 Q&A: Kin-first
culture in California

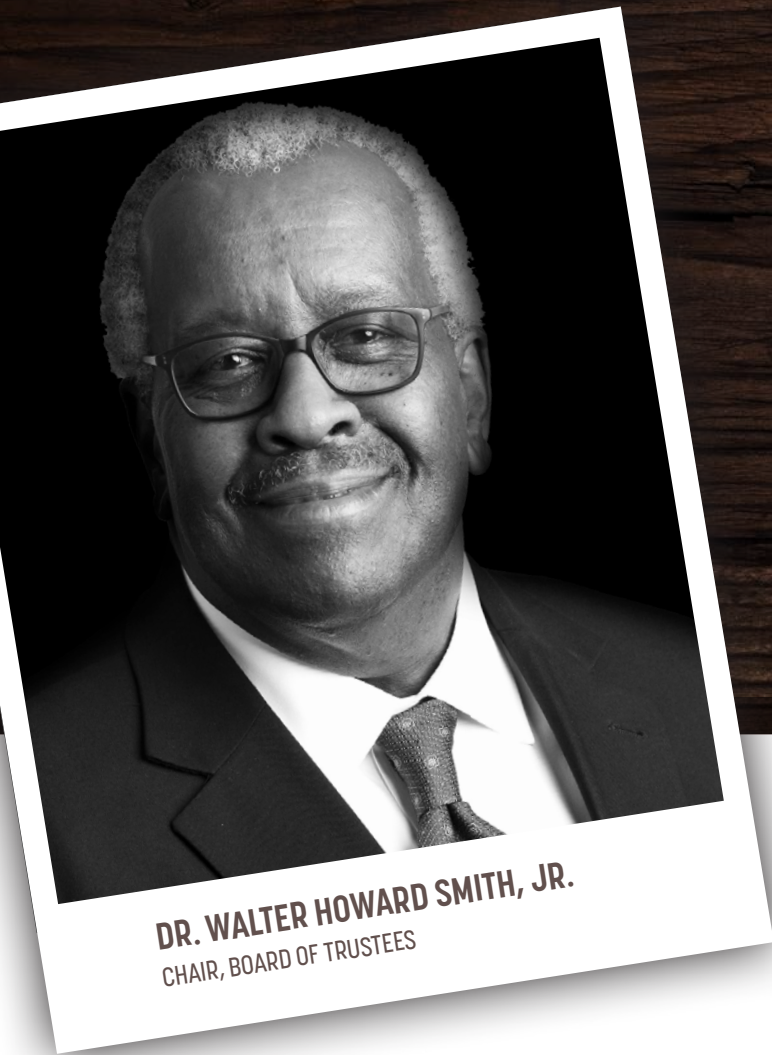
24 Helping Ohio families
stay connected

31 Letting families
lead in Austin

34 About Casey
Family Programs

36 Leadership and offices

37 Financial summary



A commitment to family

Jim Casey understood the important role that a safe, stable and supportive family plays in helping children reach their potential.

When he established Casey Family Programs in 1966, his goal was to help address one of the challenges he observed as he built United Parcel Service from a small messenger company into a global leader in shipping and logistics: People who lacked a strong connection to family were more likely to struggle in the workplace and in life.

For Jim, it was more than a workforce issue — it was also a personal one. When he lost his father at a young age, it was the strong bonds to his mother and siblings that provided the family with the strength and resilience to persevere.

The name of our foundation, Casey Family Programs, reflects his belief in the hope that families provide to their children.

Indeed, our mission to provide and improve — and ultimately prevent the need for — foster care is rooted in the belief that all children need the stability and support of a safe, permanent family to reach their full potential.



Our mission is reflected today in the 1,000 children and families we directly serve each year with foster care and related services. It is reflected in the many long-standing partnerships we have established with public child welfare systems in all 50 states, Washington, D.C., Puerto Rico, the U.S. Virgin Islands and with tribal nations. And it is reflected in our work with policymakers at the federal, tribal, state and local levels.

By understanding the critical role that families play in the safety, health, happiness and well-being of children, we honor Jim Casey's vision and help to create the conditions needed so every child in America grows up in a Community of Hope.

Casey Family Programs' Board of Trustees brings a wide range of insight and experience in medicine, public health, psychology, finance, economic development, policymaking, social work and law, among other fields, ensuring the foundation can meaningfully improve the lives of children and families now and for decades to come.

I'd like to recognize the contributions of one trustee in particular — our treasurer, Dr. Sharon L. McDaniel. As you will read in this report, the nonprofit she founded, A Second Chance, Inc., is a national leader in demonstrating what is possible when communities rethink the role that families can play in transforming our approach to child welfare in America.

While much work remains to be done to achieve the vision of Building Communities of Hope, I believe that Jim Casey would be immensely proud of the progress to improve the lives of so many children and families.

I hope you feel the same sense of pride, and are inspired, when you read these stories of hope for families everywhere.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Walter Howard Smith, Jr.".

Walter Howard Smith, Jr., Ph.D.



DR. WILLIAM C. BELL
PRESIDENT AND CEO

Hope belongs with the family

Every child in this nation is born with unalienable rights. They include the right to freedom. The right to happiness. The right to be and feel safe. And perhaps most importantly, the right to know where they belong.

These rights stem not only from our country's history but also from the heart. We all share the fundamental need to belong: to belong to a family that loves you, to belong in a community that cares about you, to belong with friends and loved ones who will look out for you.

Hope is made stronger when children know that they belong.

For 58 years, Casey Family Programs has understood that the sense of belonging was foundational to the well-being of every child. Our goal to safely reduce the need for foster care is rooted in the understanding that children need more than a roof, a bed and a meal to thrive. They need the stability and safety that can only come from knowing there is a place in this world where they are seen, a place where they are loved. That place is in their family.

This notion of belonging is not controversial.

A recent survey finds that an overwhelming majority of people in the United States agree that when it comes to ensuring the safety and well-being of children, we should look first to their families.

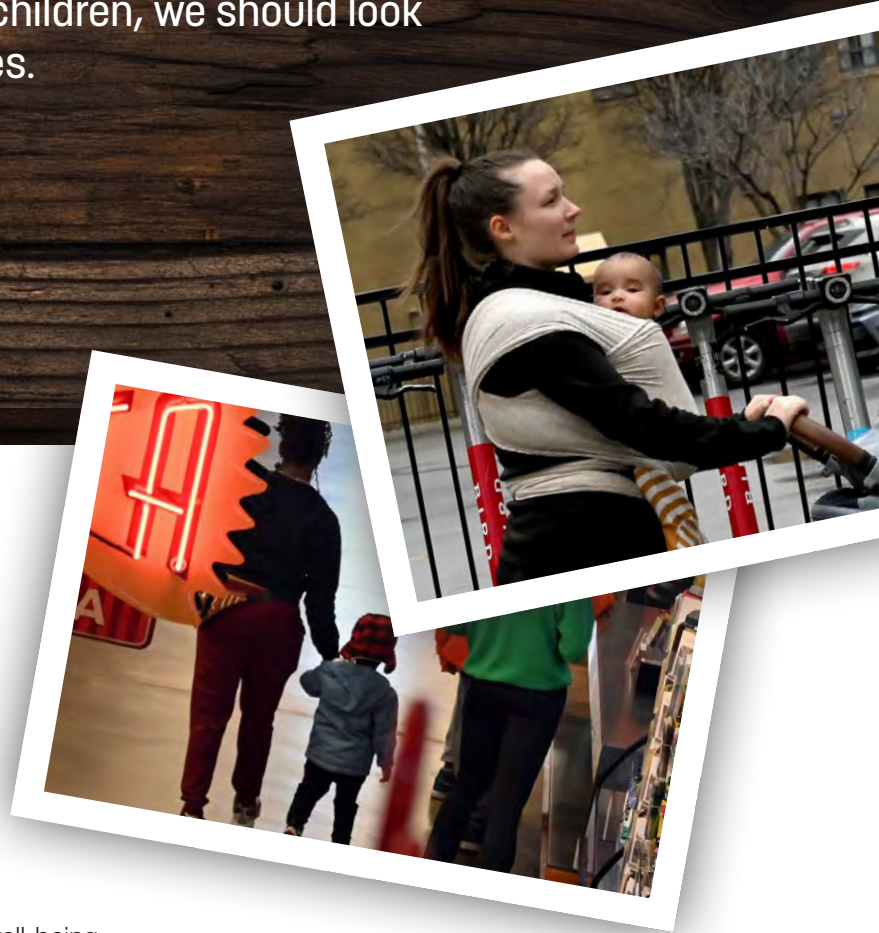
This notion of belonging is not controversial. A recent survey finds that an overwhelming majority of people in the United States agree that when it comes to ensuring the safety and well-being of children, we should look first to their families. People understand that we cannot separate the safety of children from the context of their families, and that we cannot separate the strength of those families from the conditions and supports available in their communities.

This is at the heart of our belief that every child deserves a Community of Hope.

And yet, the systems developed to ensure the safety of children have far too often ignored the vital roles of family and community.

We see it plainly when children are separated from their families if their parents cannot safely care for them. Slightly more than a third of these children are placed with kin: relatives or chosen adults close to the family. The majority are placed with someone they have never met.

Is this what we would choose for our own children? Is this what we should continue to choose for any child in America?



As we continue walking and working in a season of hope for America's families, **we must commit to transforming today's child welfare system into a true child and family well-being system**, where local communities provide the supports that children and families need to reach their full potential.



Studies show us that when children cannot safely stay with their parents, they do better when they remain connected with their families, their communities and their cultures. They do better when they know they belong. We also know that those families who step up to care for their relatives do so more often, and more successfully, when they have the right supports.

As we continue walking and working in a season of hope for America's families, we must commit to transforming today's child welfare system into a true child and family well-being system, where local communities provide the supports that children and families need to reach their full potential.

We must also recognize that the resources required to support a child are the same regardless of whether they are placed with strangers in foster care or in the embrace of their extended family.

In this report, you will learn about communities and systems that have chosen to create cultures where kin are prioritized when children must be removed from their parents. And you will hear from families about the difference that choice has made in their lives.



You will read about how the presence of Hope has increased in the lives of children who have been embraced by a sense of belonging.

I invite you to be curious, to explore and to reach out to Casey Family Programs for additional resources on how you can make a kin-first culture a reality for the families in your community. Every one of us has a role to play in building Communities of Hope, where hope belongs.

Sincerely,

William C. Bell, Ph.D.





Connecting with kin strengthens families



Children do best when they live with someone they know and love. When parents are overloaded with challenges, providing the right supports for them can mean the family won't face the added trauma of being separated. That should be our first course of action — to help keep parents and children safely together if it is possible to do so. But in cases where parents aren't able to care safely for their children, placing the children with kin — a relative or close friend they know and trust — is the best approach until they can be reunited.

Research tells us that children have better outcomes and are more likely to remain connected to their families and culture if they are placed safely with relatives or close family friends while safety issues are resolved. In this report, you'll learn what science tells us about the importance of connection, why a kin-first culture leads to better outcomes for children and families, and how communities around the country are embracing this powerful approach to help children grow up where they belong.

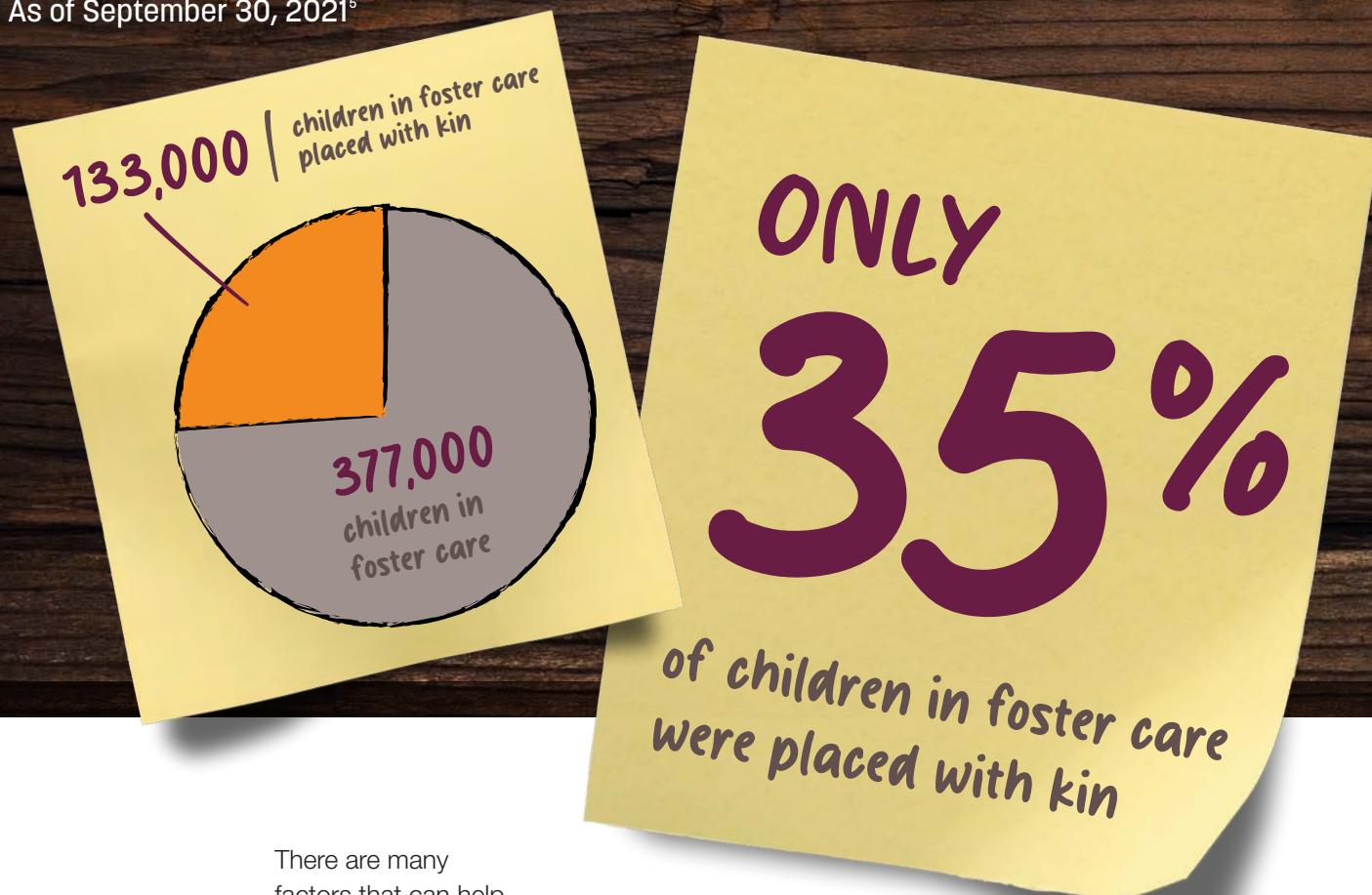
Strong families start with early relational health

When children are young, every interaction, experience and relationship helps shape their growing brains. When they have positive interactions with parents and other caregivers, they are better able to handle the natural stressors in life, and they have better health outcomes.

If stress is chronic — for instance, in cases of abuse or neglect — children's stress responses are over-activated, leading to wear and tear on the body and brain. This toxic stress can lead to multiple physical and mental health problems as adults, such as heart disease, diabetes, obesity, depression and substance abuse.¹



As of September 30, 2021⁵



There are many factors that can help protect children. Research shows that if a child has a nurturing relationship with an adult, even in the face of chronic adverse childhood experiences, this acts as a buffer and protects them.^{2,3}

And it's not just the child who benefits from strong beginnings. Parents and other caregivers who have positive interactions with children also enjoy better physical, mental and emotional health. This concept is referred to as early relational health. Importantly, to strengthen early relational health, supports must be in place for both the child and the parent, especially in communities overcoming current and historical inequities.⁴

The landscape of kinship care

When a child is removed from their parents, that removal itself is traumatic. But if that child can stay safely with someone they know and love, whether a relative or close family friend, they are more likely to have better outcomes.

Data and research support what we instinctively understand: if you are in crisis, would you rather go to someone you know and trust, or someone you've never met?

Nationally, 377,000 children were in foster care as of September 30, 2021. Only about 133,000 of these children, or 35%, were placed with kin. Across states, kinship placement rates ranged from a low of 11% to a high of 54% in 2021.⁵ Differences in state policy — including the definition of kin and policies around licensing and payments — all contribute to this wide range, making comparison difficult.⁶

When a child is removed from their parents, that removal itself is traumatic. But if that child can stay safely with someone they know and love, whether a relative or close family friend, they are more likely to have better outcomes.

Kinship caregiver families, often called grandfamilies if they are grandparents or simply relatives, face many challenges, such as limited income or access to other resources. Anyone raising a child understands the financial impact that carries: clothing, food, health care, activities. When children have been removed from their families and placed in formal kinship care — that is, placed in foster care with kinship caregivers — the children are entitled to certain supports and services, including monthly payments to offset living expenses. They may have better access to various types of care. And they have a case plan for their future, such as reunification with a birth parent, guardianship or adoption.

Better outcomes for children

Why is it so important that, when safe, possible and appropriate, children live with kin if they're removed from their parents?

A review of more than 100 studies⁷ found that, when compared with children in nonrelative foster care, children in kinship care have:

- More stability in placement and greater likelihood of remaining with siblings
- Lower rates of both re-abuse and institutional abuse
- Better behavioral and mental health
- Higher likelihood of achieving permanency through guardianship with their relative caregivers to maintain lifelong connections with their family if they are unable to safely return home.

First and maybe foremost, outcomes are better when we're placing with kin. When we think about reunification, adoption, permanency, legal cost, custodianship, those kids are ending up in permanency more often, and a number of other really important outcomes are better.

- ERIN DALTON

DIRECTOR OF HUMAN SERVICES
ALLEGHENY COUNTY, PENNSYLVANIA

Families also tell us it's better.

"My kids felt like they were as close to home as they could be within the circumstances," says Sara Tate, a Pittsburgh mother of three whose children were placed with family members while she battled addiction. "Knowing that my mother was there to see them, and they were with people who loved them already ... allowed me to get into the mental space that I needed to prepare to fight for my freedom." (*Read more about her story on p. 16*)

In fact, most Americans agree that extended family members should be involved when parents face challenges: 90% favored family involvement before considering foster care, and 76% opposed adoption until all family care options are exhausted, according to a 2023 Harris Poll conducted for the Bipartisan Policy Center.⁸



Building a kin-first culture

We know that it's best for children to stay connected to their families, their communities and their culture — gold standard values that are reflected in the recently upheld Indian Child Welfare Act. So how do we get to a "kin-first culture" that prioritizes safely placing children with family and others close to them?

"First and maybe foremost, outcomes are better when we're placing with kin," says Erin Dalton, director of Human Services in Pennsylvania's Allegheny County. "When we think about reunification, adoption, permanency, legal cost, custodianship, those kids are ending



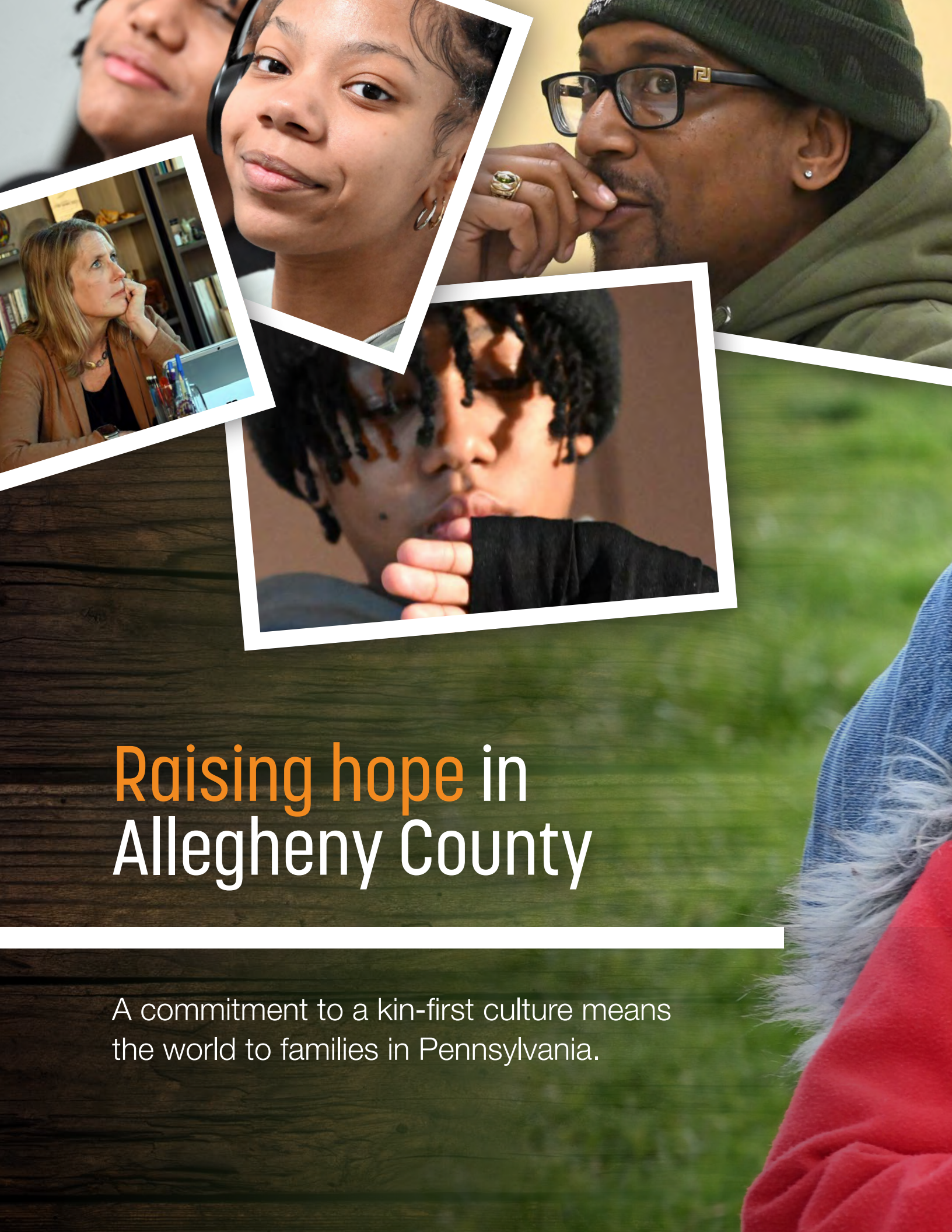
up in permanency more often, and a number of other really important outcomes are better. ... Agencies should do whatever they can to reduce barriers to the thing they think is the right outcome.” ***(Read more about Allegheny County’s approach to kin on p. 16)***

Policies can pave the way. New federal regulations announced in 2023 allow states, territories and tribal nations to create kin-specific licensing standards for caregivers of children who are placed by the child protection agency and require the same financial support as that provided to non-relative caregivers.⁹ Some states, such as California, already have licensing and support policies in place and are leaders in prioritizing a kin-first culture. ***(Read more about California’s kin-first culture on p. 22)***

Elsewhere, communities and child welfare systems are working hard to improve supports for kinship caregivers, regardless of whether they are formally licensed. This can include providing kinship navigator programs, which are supported with federal funding, to help families find their way through complex systems to get to the right resources. And sometimes it involves intensive family-finding services. ***(Read more about connecting families in Ohio on p. 24)***

Creating a kin-first culture requires centering families. And that means uplifting their culture and listening to what they tell us they need. This can look as simple as bringing their favorite meal to a case-planning meeting or asking them who they want to sit at that table with them.

“I think kinship care is probably one of the most important roles in child welfare, and especially is the trend moving forward,” says Judge Aurora Martinez Jones, presiding judge of the 126th District Court in Travis County, Texas. ***(Read more about Casey Family Programs’ work in Austin, Texas, on p. 31)***



Raising hope in Allegheny County

A commitment to a kin-first culture means
the world to families in Pennsylvania.

SARA TATE AND HOPE





Four-year-old Hope helps her mother water their houseplants. “Just a little bit, Hope-ey,” Sara Tate instructs gently as they tend to the orchids and peace lilies in their cozy Wilkinsburg duplex a few miles from downtown Pittsburgh.

They share a quiet moment before Hope returns to hopping around and chattering. Big sister Harlym, a high school sophomore, retwists brother Anthony’s hair, her own beautifully self-braided and coiled on her head. She’s learned from her mother and grandmother.

That the four of them are sharing this peaceful Sunday morning is a testament to the power of family and a community’s commitment to kin.

Commitment to a kin-first culture

If you had children or grandchildren of your own that you couldn’t care for, who would you want to care for them?

In Pennsylvania’s Allegheny County, that question has driven a child welfare approach that prioritizes kinship caregivers — family members and close family friends — as safe placements when children must be removed from their parents. This approach means 68%¹⁰ of children are placed with relatives, compared to a state rate of 45% and a national rate of 35%.⁵

“There was a time when about 30% of our first placements were with kin, and now that is above 60%,” says Erin Dalton, director of Allegheny County’s Department of Human Services. “You don’t want kids to have to move. Why not go to family right away? They might not even realize that there’s been a change in situation for their family because it’s grandma or it’s their aunt or uncle.”

Allegheny County’s commitment to a kin-first culture relies on a partnership more than 30 years in the making. The county teams with A Second Chance,



When we center the kinship triad first, **we reap the benefits** of child, family, kinship and community well-being.

- DR. SHARON L. MCDANIEL
PRESIDENT AND CEO
A SECOND CHANCE, INC.

Inc. (ASCI), a local nonprofit organization whose mission is to strengthen and preserve healthy kinship families for children.

ASCI has kinship navigators placed within the county's Office of Children, Youth and Families. When a child comes into care, the navigators begin with family finding, seeking to identify kinship connections for the young person as their first, and hopefully only, placement until they can safely return home.

"We believe in leaving children with their families. So even though they [temporarily] may not be with mom or dad, they're at least still with a grandparent, a family friend, a teacher, where they can still see their family, go on vacations, holidays ... and celebrate their birthdays with their birth parents or with their grandparents," explains Misty Patterson, ASCI's managing director of program and intake.

Caseworkers at A Second Chance visit families' homes to make sure they are safe and appropriate placements. Then they make sure any basic needs are met: Is there a bed for the child? Do grandparents need help with transportation or school for their grandchildren?

Along with support for the child and the kinship caregiver, ASCI engages the birth parent — creating what they call "the triad" — to work toward reunification when safely possible, Patterson says.

"When we center the kinship triad first, we reap the benefits of child, family, kinship and community well-being," says Dr. Sharon L. McDaniel, president and CEO of A Second Chance and treasurer of Casey Family Programs' Board of Trustees.





'Just awestruck'

Though busy, Tate is happy to be juggling three children at three schools while she takes financial accounting classes and works a maintenance job at A Second Chance. She gets help from her sister, her mother and a cousin. For a couple of years, she needed more support. Starting in 2020, Tate's children were separated — Harlym lived with Tate's mother, Hope with her paternal grandmother and Anthony with his dad — while Tate, fighting addiction, was incarcerated. Her youngest wasn't even a year old.

"The family came together and everybody pitched in," making sure the siblings got to see each other, Tate says. "I think being with family made them feel like they were still a part of their family."

Even though she missed Hope's first steps, Anthony and Harlym got to see them. Knowing that her children were with people who loved them let her sleep at night and "allowed me to get into the mental space that I needed to prepare to fight for my freedom."

Along with family, Tate had a strong advocate in her ASCI caseworker, Savannah Mynahan. Their close relationship is clear, as each tears up when they talk about the other: mother with gratitude, caseworker with pride.



SAVANNAH MYNAHAN AND HOPE



For Sara Tate, a painted stone she received while in rehabilitation is a reminder of her sobriety and getting back to her children. “That stone reminds me of strength.” She leaves it out where her children can see it and plans to give it to her oldest daughter.



“When I needed someone, a shoulder to cry on, Savannah was there. When I needed a bed to lay on, Savannah found the resources for it, because I had lost everything,” Tate says. “She encouraged me, lifted me up. Savannah means the world to me.”

For her part, Mynahan shares how she “cried like a baby” when the judge closed Tate’s case and she was reunified with her children. “Seeing Sara’s kids now from the point that they were, I’m just awestruck by all they’ve accomplished,” says the 25-year-old Mynahan, who has been promoted twice at A Second Chance since her first case — Tate’s — and now serves as administrative assistant for the high-impact unit, respite and aftercare.

The first time she met Tate in person was when Mynahan brought Hope for their first visit. Tate was worried that her then-2-year-old wouldn’t remember her. “As soon as we got out of the car, Hope ran up to Sara and gave her the biggest hug.”

Building Communities of Hope

Allegheny County’s Dalton also notes the importance of supporting families early, before a child protection case is even opened.

“We build Communities of Hope by really investing in those communities first whenever we can, putting our resources into prevention and, whenever possible, keeping families together with supports. And if there has to be a removal because of safety issues, placing back with that family, with that community, and investing there again.”

Sara Tate is grateful for the investment in her family. They remain connected to ASCI, where Anthony participates in the Camp COPES Boxing Program.

“I felt like A Second Chance gave me hope. And then they literally gave me Hope. They gave me my baby.”

Learn more about the partnership between A Second Chance and the Allegheny County Department of Human Services at www.casey.org/a-second-chance-kinship-allegheny.

Q&A

Kin-first culture in California

California is leading the way in putting kinship at the center of its child welfare work, whether it's ensuring kinship caregivers receive the same supports as nonrelative caregivers, reforming payment rates based on need rather than placement type, or supporting counties as they work to improve family engagement. With a kinship placement rate of 38% in 2021, the state is in the top 20 and above the national average. We asked the director of California's Department of Social Services, Kim Johnson, and Deputy Director of Children and Family Services Angie Schwartz about the state's emphasis on kinship care and what it takes to make the shift. The following are excerpts from our conversations. *Answers are edited for length and clarity.*

In your mind, what role does kinship care play among all the tools used to keep children safe?

Director Kim Johnson: Firstly, we are about keeping families together whenever possible. Having a kin-first culture is about ensuring that when we can't keep youth directly with their families for their own safety and well-being, they are still with those who love them.

And we're not just talking about direct biological relationships. We're talking about adults in the child's life who love the child and have that connection.

Deputy Director Angie Schwartz: Kinship care is the primary tool in our toolbox. It's where kids do best. We know this. We know that the informal support of relatives can help stabilize a family so that the child never has to be removed from the parent in the first place. And if they do have to be removed due to the decision of child welfare, relatives are the first choice for placement.

That's under federal law; it's under state law. But we also know from the data how much better children fare when they have first placements with relatives. We know how much

more stable they are, how much more likely they are to reunify with their birth parents, how much more often they stay with their entire sibling group, how much less stigma there is for the child, how much better they do in terms of educational outcomes, and how many fewer interactions they have with homelessness and juvenile justice systems.

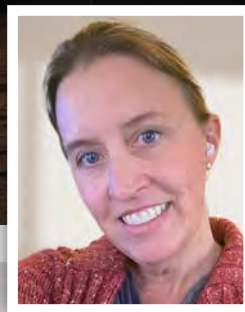
Kinship care obviously benefits children in care, but what benefits are there to an agency for prioritizing placement with kin?

Director Johnson: At the macro level, there are benefits to the state of California as it relates to costs associated with youth in care, because this approach is leading to better outcomes. This is a cost-saver compared to interventions and involvement with other systems in the future.

At the county level [which is how California's child welfare system is run], I think the agencies are being intentional about creating capacity within their communities to meet the individual needs of each youth and being able to have that infrastructure and support for the families. So I would say there are benefits to counties at a community level as well.



KIM JOHNSON
Director, California Department
of Social Services



ANGIE SCHWARTZ
Deputy Director, California
Children and Family Services

How did kinship care come to be the primary option for children and youth coming into care?

Director Johnson: In California we've gone from a child welfare system with a heavy reliance on congregate care to more family placements. This is something that we've been focused on for a very long time. And I continue to underscore that we have to lead with this lens — this kinship lens — for the betterment of children.

Talk to us for a moment about your views on supports for kinship families.

Deputy Director Schwartz: This is an area of ongoing reform. We amended our law [in 2017] so that relatives would get the same level of funding support available as nonrelative foster parents. Before that, most relatives in California — even if they met all the same standards as nonrelatives — often didn't receive any funding. As a result of the law change, families are eligible for anything that a nonrelative family home is eligible for.

The next thing we did was create the emergency caregiver program, because the regular payments only kicked in once the family was fully approved as a resource placement. That was taking around 180 days, and that's a long time to go without any funding. We've now cut that down and are continuing to work to decrease that time. The emergency caregiver program starts the basic level of funding at the date of placement so that there's immediate support

for that family until the resource family approval is done. Also, we recently unveiled a new rate reform proposal that would restructure rates so that they are based on the needs of each child, not placement type. In short, this proposal would invest directly in family-based placements to help keep youth connected to their relatives and communities of origin by providing increased funding to support their care, supervision, strength building and immediate needs.

What is the Center for Excellence, and what is its role in kinship care in California?

Director Johnson: I think all of us can recognize and appreciate that you can have a great policy, but true drivers of change are implementation, application and the policy becoming part of the culture — the standard practice. The Center for Excellence was created to give practitioners an opportunity to have not only the vision and the policy, but also knowledge on how to apply them.

It started with an investment of \$150 million for family finding, engagement and support, and it [recently] launched to drive this culture change.

Deputy Director Schwartz: One of the conditions of receiving funds from that investment was that counties have to have full-time dedicated staff that are focused exclusively on family finding, engagement and support. We have found the counties that are the most successful at finding and placing children with family are those that have dedicated folks whose entire job is finding and making sure kids are successful upon placement in those families.



Helping Ohio families stay connected

A sense of belonging and identity are at the heart of efforts to support families in Ohio.



You can terminate parental rights, but you cannot terminate relationships. And so the idea that we could find their kin and we could reconnect to them and have them have that sense of belonging in that network was the work that we needed to do.

- **SHANNON DEINHART**
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR AND CO-FOUNDER
KINNECT



Little Theo isn't shy with his affection. He happily baby-tosses a ball to a visitor, hugs and kisses his 2-year-old cousin and calls after his big sister when she's out of sight. He willingly lets himself be scooped up.

Buckled into his high chair, he's too young to understand how he is related to everyone in the kitchen all digging into cheeseburger soup and freshly baked crescent rolls. But it's clear that he is dearly loved. How Theo found his own seat at this family's table is a story about kinship and the power of belonging.

Kinnect to Family

When staff at Cleveland-based Kinnect define kinship, they speak of belonging, connection, bonds, identity and love. These values are at the heart of the nonprofit's work as it seeks to prevent children from entering the child welfare system and to reduce the time children spend in it if they are removed from their homes. Among the many services Kinnect offers are family search and engagement, kinship and adoption navigation, support for youth in or after foster care, and training to create an affirming culture for LGBTQ+ youth.

Its Kinnect to Family program has helped 3,000 families with an intense family search and engagement service that promises to provide dozens, even hundreds, of family and close kin connections for youth entering foster care. Even if they aren't a placement option, they might provide transportation or just want to stay connected to help in another way. The average is 150 connections per child.

"They're always amazed," says Shannon Deinhart, executive director and co-founder of Kinnect. "Often, a young person has been told there's no one."



SAMANTHA MILLER, AMAYA AND THEO



Before starting Kinnect in the early 2000s, Deinhart was a social worker, placing children in foster care and preparing them for adoptive families. But the number of children adopted was tiny compared to those who were waiting. Additionally, they found that the young people they worked with either had or wanted to have connections to their birth families.

“You can terminate parental rights, but you cannot terminate relationships,” Deinhart says. “And so the idea that we could find their kin and we could reconnect to them and have them have that sense of belonging in that network was the work that we needed to do.”

Knowing your roots

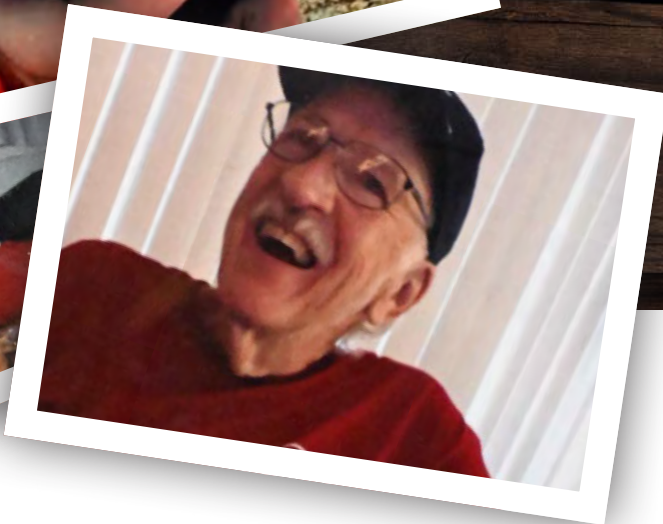
Jessi Ganyard and Samantha Miller had wanted to grow their family for a long time. When they first met, Miller's daughter, Amaya, was just 10 months old. Now nearly a decade later, they thought their opportunity for Amaya to have a sister or brother had passed.

That's when their best friend told them her cousin was going to have a baby but couldn't raise him because of her own life struggles — would they consider caring for him? The couple's hopes were high, but the baby boy initially went to an unrelated foster family. Then Kinnect to Family staff completed a genogram, or family



JESSI GANYARD AND THEO

Theo's grandfather — and namesake — made sure the toddler was included when he handed out golden dollar coins to all the grandchildren at a family gathering. Keeping those family bonds is key to his new parents.



diagram, that mapped out all the baby's connections. It included relatives and close family friends. The couple's names were on it, and with the blessing of other relatives, baby Theo joined their family. Just over a year later, they are finalizing his adoption.

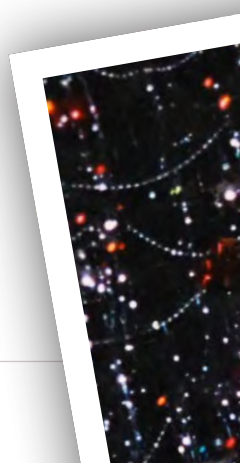
"He completed our family," says Ganyard, 30, who runs her own dog training business. She is especially grateful that Theo will grow up knowing his three siblings, who are being cared for by other relatives, and his extended family of cousins and grandparents. "I think knowing the family helps keep that culture of the family," she says.

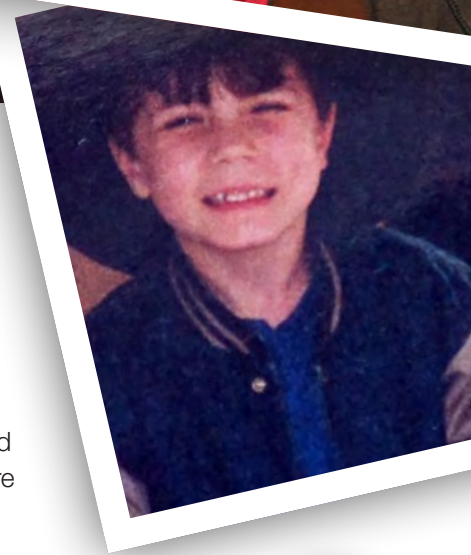
"The more people that love him, the better," adds Miller. "I always think it's important to know the roots you come from."

'I don't know who I would be'

Keeton Byerly vividly remembers his grandfather teaching him to drive a stick shift at 16. The teen repeatedly forgot to release the emergency brake in the black 2002 Hyundai Elantra that his Grandpa Lowell bought him. Stickers soon appeared in the car that read, "Take the brake off!" They were reminders not only of what to do in the car but of a grandfather's dedication to the grandson he was raising.

Byerly, now 29 and a part-time employee with Kinnect's Youth Navigator Network — a resource for young people who are in or have experienced foster care — shares the story as he looks through family photos that include his grandfather, who took him in as a toddler. Byerly's mother struggled with substance abuse, and his father was absent, so he moved in with his grandfather in Springfield, Ohio, where they lived until his grandfather died when Byerly was 17. After his grandfather's death, Byerly lived with his step-grandmother into his early college years.





"He was the person I saw when I woke up, the last person I saw at night," says Byerly, now recently married and hoping to start his own family in Columbus. "He cooked me breakfast, got on me about my grades. He was my everything."

Young people being able to stay with family rather than with strangers gives them a sense of who they are and where they belong, he says.

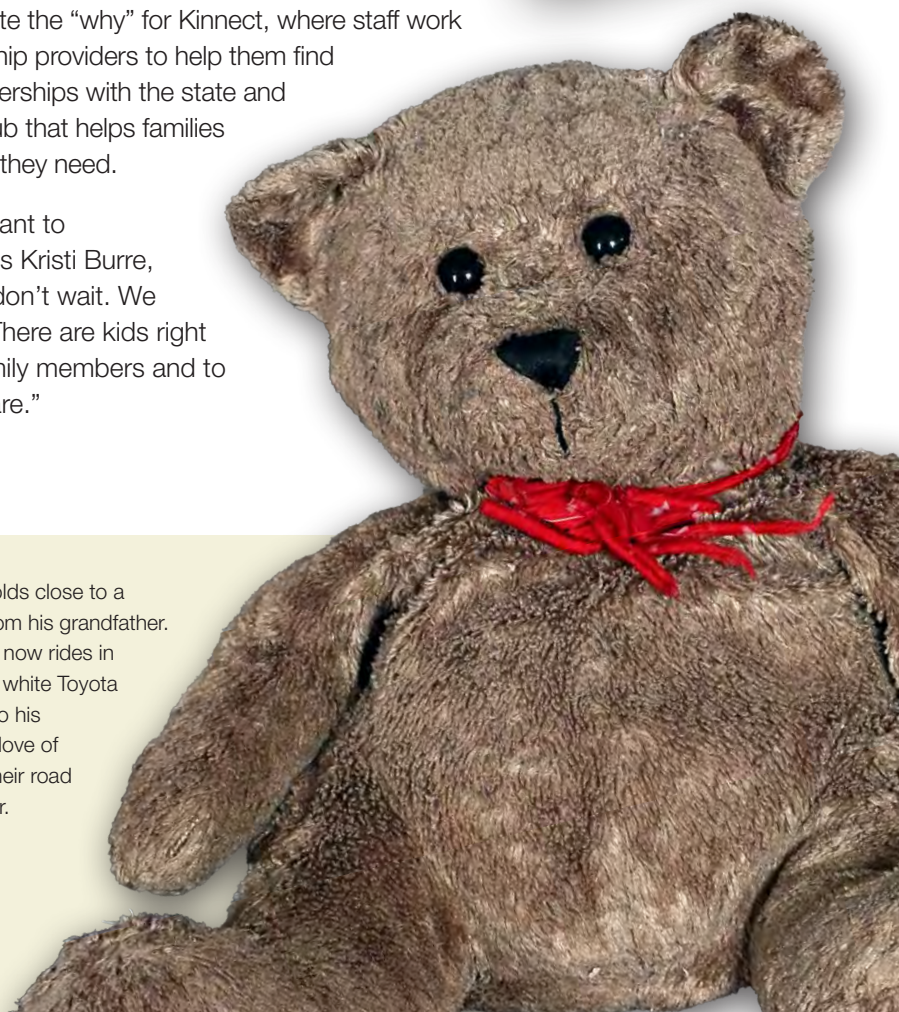
"If it wasn't for my grandfather, I would have been in the system. I would have been put up for adoption," he says. "If my grandfather wasn't there for me, I don't know who I would be."

These Ohio families' stories illustrate the "why" for Kinnect, where staff work with both formal and informal kinship providers to help them find the right resources. Through partnerships with the state and Ohio's 88 counties, Kinnect is a hub that helps families access the services and supports they need.

"My advice to other states who want to emphasize a kin-first culture," says Kristi Burre, Kinnect's director of strategy, "is don't wait. We don't have the luxury of waiting. There are kids right now who need ... to find their family members and to help them understand who they are."



Keeton Byerly holds close to a childhood gift from his grandfather. Goldie the bear now rides in the back of his white Toyota Camry, a link to his grandfather's love of driving and their road trips together.





CASEY FAMILY PROGRAMS AUSTIN FIELD OFFICE



Letting **families** **lead** in Austin

In the Casey Family Programs Field Office in Austin, Texas, creating a kin-first culture starts with families. They are the experts in their own lives, and if given time and space, they often come up with solutions for their children that are safe, sustainable and serve their best interests.


That family engagement starts when a child or family begins receiving services from Casey. The family is consulted throughout the life of the case. One of the primary tools Casey uses to support family-led decision-making is Family Group Conferencing. This approach puts families in the center of making short- and long-term decisions for and about themselves.

Lisa, a busy mother of seven, needed surgery for a brain tumor. The children entered foster care because neither parent was able to safely meet the children's needs prior to, during and after her surgery. A family group conference was used to develop a plan of support so the children could be successfully returned upon Lisa's recovery.

Valuing family culture

Before a family group conference, the family develops a list of everyone they want included in the meeting. Participants may be blood relatives or others who are close to the family. When the conference starts, the family is invited to begin with an opening such as a prayer, a cultural ritual or a family story. This is so the family can infuse the time with their culture and feel ownership of the process.

A meal of the family's choosing is served to foster connections and promote healing. One family with roots in New Orleans requested Cajun food, while another requested Honduran food. These meals help the family relax and smooth the way for the conversations to come.



A successful family group conference requires a commitment to planning and patience. That time invested at the beginning, **putting the family and the role of kinship care at the forefront**, pays off with fewer moves, behavioral issues and other disruptions.

Next, they review the agenda and goals, set ahead of time with the family. Preparing the participants so that there are “no surprises” is important. Once this is done, the family develops their plan. Anyone not part of the family or their support system leaves the room to give the family privacy. The family takes as much time as needed to develop their plan, and then the larger group reconvenes to review and approve the plan.

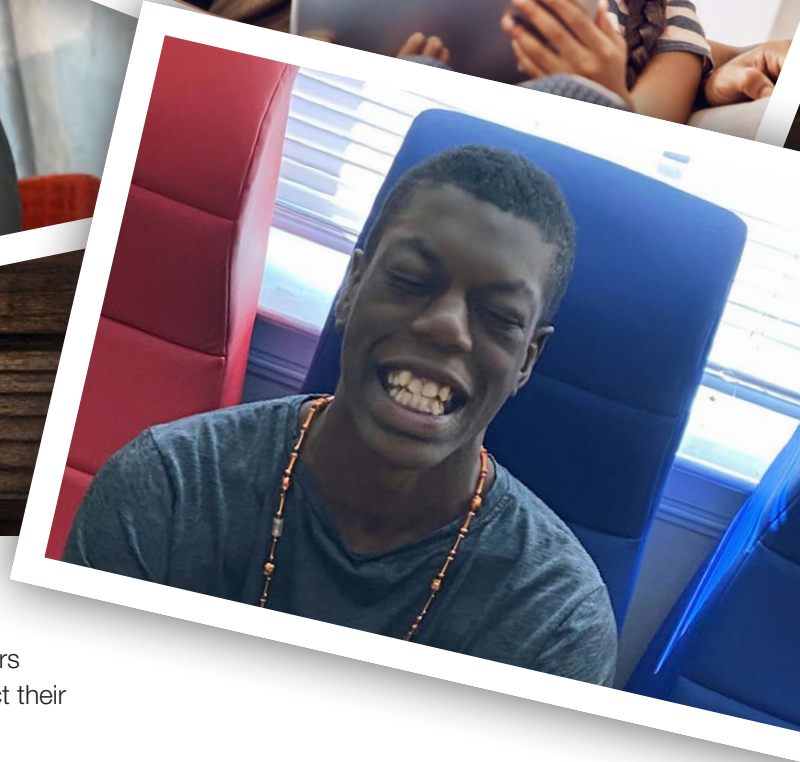
A successful family group conference requires a commitment to planning and patience. The time invested at the beginning, putting the family and the role of kinship care at the forefront, often pays off with fewer moves, behavioral issues and other disruptions.

And it's nearly always better for the child. In Lisa's case, it meant that her children were all placed with relatives, staying connected to their family and culture. Kinship care with the father's side of the family kept the three oldest children together. The baby was voluntarily placed with the mother's family, preventing the baby from ever entering foster care. These four children have since been successfully reunified with their mother.

The role of the judiciary

Creating a kin-first culture may be driven by a child protection agency, but the way a judge handles the cases on their docket can also have a huge influence.

“I think kinship care is probably one of the most important roles in child welfare, and especially is the trend moving forward,” says Judge Aurora Martinez Jones, presiding judge of the 126th District Court in Travis County, Texas.



Agency staff and family court lawyers understand this priority and conduct their cases accordingly.

“We have created the culture of collaboration in our community, and so the lawyers will also be very responsive to saying, ‘Judge, this feels like a time where we really would like you to send us to a family group conference; can you order to have that occur?’” Judge Martinez Jones says.

Finding the right situation for a child might take time and creativity, even when the placement will be within their own family. “When we’re working with parents and I see a lot of disconnect or a lack of communication between the family and child welfare professionals, or if there are complications where I think a good conversation would get everybody on the same page, that’s when I’ll order one.”

Running her court with a kin-first mentality comes from a source that lies at the heart of child welfare cases: the families themselves.

“I think a huge part of it was listening to families. When the parents would be in court, and we are talking to them about where they would like to see their child, understanding that the child couldn’t be with them ... they talked about family. When I talk to the kids ... they’re telling me about family,” Martinez Jones says. “That has led me to believe that we have to put more of a focus on family.”



About **Casey Family Programs**

Casey Family Programs works in all 50 states, Washington, D.C., Puerto Rico, the U.S. Virgin Islands and with tribal nations to influence long-lasting improvements to the safety and success of children, families and the communities where they live. We learn from and collaborate with communities at local, state, tribal and national levels to nurture the safety and success of every child.

Consulting

We offer ongoing strategic consultation, technical assistance, data analysis and independent research and evaluation at no cost to child welfare systems, policymakers, courts and tribes across America to support long-lasting improvements that safely reduce the need for foster care. We partner with communities across our nation to enhance partnerships, improve practice and policy, and ensure that these improvements will endure over time.

Child and family services

Casey Family Programs' Child and Family Services team provides direct services — including prevention, foster care, family reunification, young adult transition, kinship and permanency work — to more than 1,000 children and families each year. We operate nine field offices in five states — Arizona, California, Idaho, Texas and Washington — and work in urban, suburban and rural communities. We draw on evidence gained from research-informed and promising practices, as well as our nearly six decades of front-line child welfare experience, to provide a range of multidisciplinary services to children, youth, young adults and families. Through Casey's demonstration and spread, and community engagement programs, we share what we have learned with state, tribal and county child welfare systems, private providers and community partners, working with them to achieve better outcomes for families, youth and children.

Casey's Indian Child Welfare Program partners with tribes and American Indian/Alaska Native communities to support their development of effective and culturally responsive child welfare services. Strong

sovereign tribal nations keep children healthy, safe and connected with their families, relatives, tribal communities and cultures. Casey Family Programs partners with tribes and national partners through efforts that honor tribal sovereignty and support nation-building, help build capacity, and support tribal-state efforts to effectively implement the Indian Child Welfare Act and its principles as the gold standard of child welfare practice.

Public policy

We also support federal, state, tribal and local governments by providing comprehensive, nonpartisan child welfare information and education driven by data and based on evidence of what works best to improve the lives of children and families. We draw on our direct services and consulting work to help align and improve state and federal child welfare policies, allowing communities to focus on preventing abuse and neglect and improving outcomes for children in foster care.

We share what we have learned with public child welfare and tribal child welfare systems, private providers and other community partners to inform policy. We are committed to supporting federal child welfare policy changes that will provide every state with the ability to invest existing resources in the most effective strategies to safely reduce the need for foster care, strengthen families and improve the safety and success of all children.



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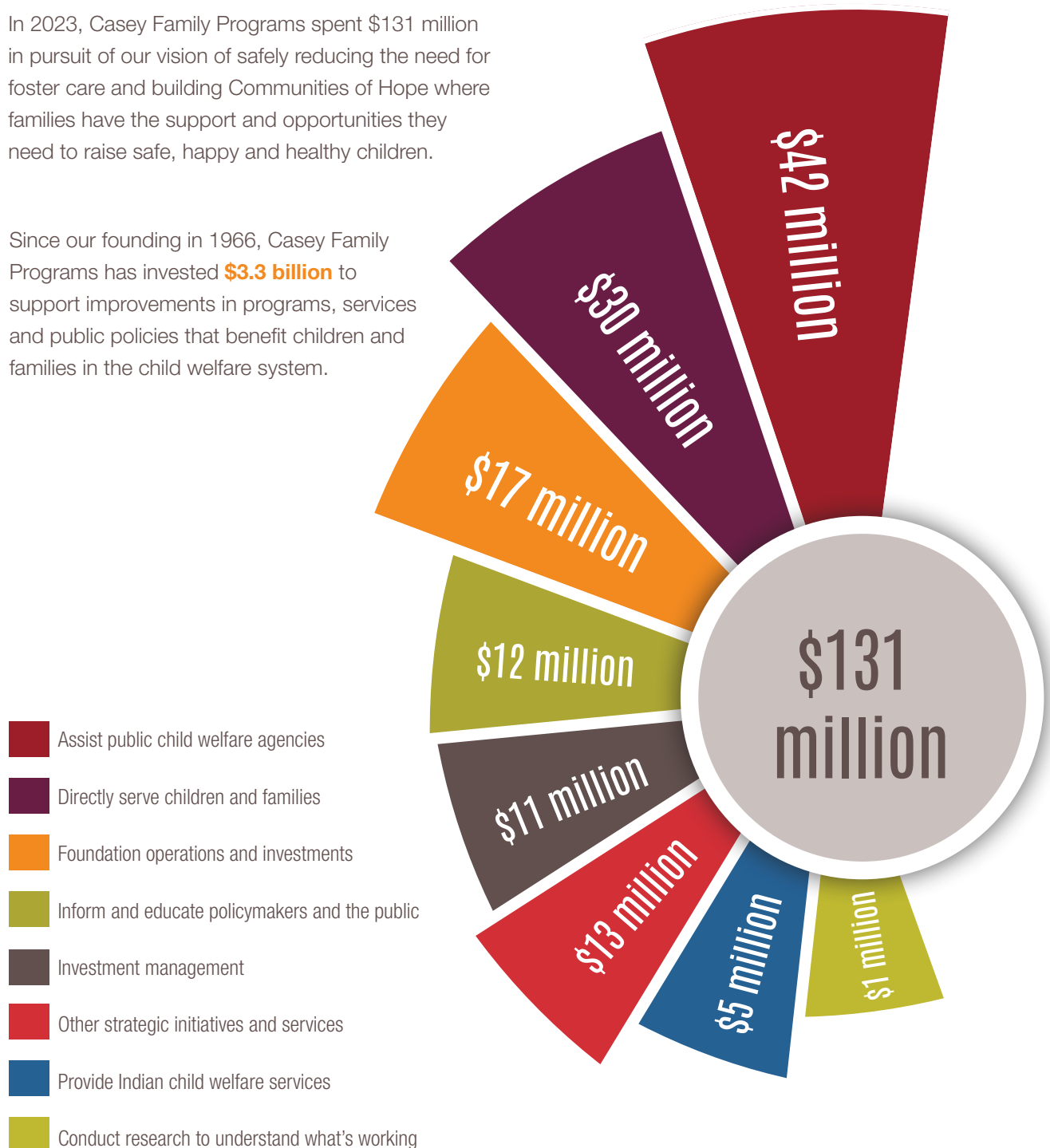
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2023 financial summary

At the end of 2023, Casey Family Programs' assets totaled **\$2.6 billion**.

In 2023, Casey Family Programs spent \$131 million in pursuit of our vision of safely reducing the need for foster care and building Communities of Hope where families have the support and opportunities they need to raise safe, happy and healthy children.

Since our founding in 1966, Casey Family Programs has invested **\$3.3 billion** to support improvements in programs, services and public policies that benefit children and families in the child welfare system.







Get started

Ready to learn more about creating a kin-first culture?
Visit casey.org/hope for additional resources.

Endnotes

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safe children | **strong** families | **supportive** communities



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