

**Remarks of Douglas W. Nelson, President and CEO
The Annie E. Casey Foundation
at the
2008 National Convening on Youth Permanence
Washington, DC
May 1, 2008**

Thank you, Ray for that warm introduction. And on behalf of the Annie E. Casey Foundation and our partners at Casey Family Programs, let me thank all of you for joining us here in Washington in what I hope will prove to be a milestone meeting in the history of American child welfare policy.

We are brought together this morning by a shared commitment to bring greater permanence to the lives of the hundreds of thousands of American children whose connection to their families is disrupted each year by their involvement in our child welfare systems. We are drawn to that commitment by the incontrovertible and elemental fact that all kids – every kid – needs a family; they need them to thrive physically, emotionally, psychologically, materially, spiritually and socially. We are also drawn to that commitment by the undeniable evidence that when we allow young people to leave foster care without helping them to build or rebuild a genuine and lasting connection to a caring family, we are consigning far too many of them to the lives of immense hardship, huge handicaps and unhealed hurts.

But for all our knowledge about the need for permanence, the disappointing truth is we have been awfully slow to act on it. For two decades permanence has been our official child welfare policy, but only rarely has it been our predominant child welfare practice. We still have far too many children coming into care whose families could have been – should have been – held safely together by what are now well proven and replicable interventions and supports.

We still too routinely choose placements for children coming into care that not only don't facilitate permanence, but actually inhibit it. We've got to stop placing so many kids so far from their schools, family and friends; we've got to quit overlooking and underestimating qualified kin as appropriate caretakers; we've got to stop separating siblings; and we absolutely have to stop using group and congregate care facilities as the default placement for older kids coming into care. Perhaps, most of all, we have to stop pretending there is such a thing as "independent living" for 18-year-olds without permanent families.

In the place of all these counterproductive patterns and practices, we need to embrace an authentic and effective commitment to restoring or recreating enduring families for every kid who enters foster care. At a minimum, this means vastly increasing the quantity and quality of supports we offer to reunifying families. For those kids who can't rejoin their birth families, it means mounting a far more aggressive effort to identify, recruit, enable and support the adoptive and guardianship families that they need.

It also means that we must make our commitment to seeking and finding permanence a truly inclusive and universal one. Kids with disabilities, older kids, kids of color can no longer be treated as if they had a lesser claim on the right to a lifelong family.

Taking any of these steps toward achieving greater permanence has been and will continue to be challenging. And, truth is, little real progress will be made on this journey unless and until we are prepared to provide our frontline child welfare workers with the training, with the time, with the resources, with up to date information systems, and with the mechanisms for shared decision making that this extraordinary work requires.

Equally important, we will not approach the promise of delivering real permanence until we routinely include, listen to, and hear the voices of the children and the families we are seeking to serve. Fact is, it is these kids (and their kin) that have the greatest stake in whether we succeed or fail in this difficult work, and the evidence is now abundant that their participation, their insights, and their aspirations can help guide us toward that success.

It is time that fulfilling the obligation of securing lifelong families for all the kids who need them be seen by all of us as a moral imperative. But holding that view doesn't make it easy. The reality is that none of us knows all that we need to know to make our child welfare systems real vehicles to permanence. But in this room there is a vast reservoir of individual experience, expertise, imagination, and determination – which, if we could bring it together, would give us all a far clearer roadmap to where we need to go.

In these next two days, let's listen, let's teach, and let's learn from each other. And let's leave this meeting...let's go back to our respective states and communities, and to our work – with renewed confidence, with practical ideas and with an increased capacity to assure that every kid has what every kid needs – a family.