



Strengthening Families & Communities

CASEY FAMILY SERVICES TESTIFIES ABOUT POST-ADOPTION SERVICES BEFORE HOUSE COMMITTEE

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On May 10, 2001, Casey Family Services Executive Director Raymond Torres and adoptive parent Sonya Merrill testified before the Subcommittee on Human Resources of the U.S. House of Representative's Committee on Ways and Means.

Testimony of Raymond Torres, Executive Director of Casey Family Services

Thank you, Mr. Chairman and members of the Committee on Ways and Means, Subcommittee on Human Resources.

My name is Raymond L. Torres, executive director of Casey Family Services. Casey Family Services is the direct service arm of the Annie E. Casey Foundation.

Founded in 1976 in Bridgeport, Connecticut, Casey Family Services operates service programs for vulnerable children and families in each of the New England states and in Baltimore, Maryland. We started as a foster care agency. Today our programs include foster care, treatment foster care, transition services for youth leaving foster care, postadoption services, family preservation, family advocacy and support, family resource centers, assistance to teen parents and to families affected by HIV/AIDS. Our post-adoption programs currently operate in Connecticut, Maine, New Hampshire, Rhode Island, and Vermont.

I have come here today to share with you what we have learned about the critical need for post-adoption services and its importance as part of a comprehensive approach to strengthening adoptions. The need is especially acute among families who have adopted children from foster care.

In the past decade the number of children in foster care has nearly doubled, while the supply of foster homes has decreased by one-third. For many foster children who cannot return to their birth families, adoption is both a desirable and viable solution. Yet, despite the passage of the Adoption and Safe Families Act with its impetus to speed the passage of children from care into adoptive homes, 118,000 foster children eligible for adoption remain in the foster care system. These children are generally considered "hard to place" because they are older than the infants usually favored by prospective adoptive parents, and after years in care, they are all-too-frequently further burdened with significant emotional, physical and/or psychological challenges. When families have come forward to take these children into their homes, they have come face to face with problems that are insurmountable without outside help.

For more than 10 years, Casey Family Services was at the forefront in the field of child welfare in the identification of the need for continuing services and supports among foster parents who adopted the children in their care. In 1991, Casey instituted one of the nation's first formal post-adoption services programs to assist

those families. Over the years, staff from Casey's Divisions in Bridgeport and Hartford, Connecticut, Maine, New Hampshire, Rhode Island and Vermont have engaged in collaborative efforts within their states to share their knowledge and experience. Today they offer technical assistance and training to colleagues in private and public agencies, and are reaching out to the communities in which adoptive families live.

In December, Casey Family Services hosted the first National Post-Adoption Services conference in Washington, D.C. The conference drew more than 500 administrators, state adoption managers, practitioners, policy-makers, advocates, attorneys and judges, mental health professionals and educators from all 50 states, the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands.

The event marked a pivotal point in efforts to draw upon experience and innovation across professional disciplines previously not accustomed to conferring on issues affecting the children and families in their care or under their jurisdiction.

Casey's Post-Adoption Services program grew out of the agency's experience providing assistance to our foster families who adopted the children in their care. Recognizing that the emotional and psychiatric difficulties of foster children did not end when they were adopted, we concluded that adoptive families needed continued contact with social workers and access to services to be able to stay together. Because very few public or private agencies offered services to families after their adoptions were finalized, Casey also began extending post-adoption services in 1992 to adoptive families in communities in which we are located. Without these services, I am convinced that many families would not have been able to maintain the adoption or would have maintained the adoption at the cost of the marriage.

Over the years we have come to appreciate the strengths and resiliency of families who adopt children with very challenging behaviors and very complex emotional problems. We have also seen the stress, frustration and desperation of families who have struggled to obtain help for their adopted children, when no help was available. The primary focus of child welfare agencies has been on placing children with adoptive families and finalizing their adoption. The longer term needs of these children and families has not been an equal priority. Without such ongoing support, however, many adoptions are at risk of failure.

Let me offer you just one example of the benefit of post-adoption services to families with special needs children.

Sonya Merrill, who is here with us today, is a licensed foster care provider. In 1995, Casey Family Services asked Sonya if she would be able to care for four children: three sisters and their brother. Sibling groups are normally difficult to place together. Other attempts to find a suitable foster home had not been successful,

but we at Casey were determined to keep the children together. Sonya listened and answered, "I'll try."

The three sisters, now ages 5 through 12, have been with Sonya ever since. Their brother has returned to his paternal grandmother, but is still in touch.

Casey social workers had worked with the birth family over the years in the hope that all the children could eventually return home. Family reunification is an important goal of Casey's foster care program. But that was not to be.

Just this year, Sonya and her three girls officially became a permanent family. However, with the legalization of the adoption process the need for services and supports did not end. Sonya and her children have taken part in many of our programs and services, from respite care to counseling and after-school programs.

For Sonya Merrill, knowing that the Casey support team and the services would always be there for her made a difference in her decision to adopt. What she has done is especially significant on two counts. A dedicated foster parent, her commitment to four challenging siblings has been extraordinary. Moreover, she has been willing and able to partner with the children's birth family—to include them in the parenting process. She's clearly the parent, but she's really very open to sharing an open adoption arrangement so that the children have a connection with their birth family.

The strength of families like Sonya's and what they bring to the lives of children who need a permanent home is a constant source of reaffirmation for all who work in Casey's Post-Adoption Services Program.

Recent public policy initiatives such as the Adoption and Safe Families Act (ASFA) have brought increasing momentum to effecting adoptions for children in foster care who cannot return to their birth families.

Since 1997 the number of children in foster care whose adoptions have been finalized has increased dramatically. Between 1998 and 1999 alone there was a 28% increase in the number of finalized adoptions of children in foster care, according to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. These statistics point to the critical need for post-adoption services to insure the stability of these many new adoptions.

The children, who remain in foster care after intensive efforts to find adoptive homes for them have failed, are those with the most challenging needs. Without the assurance of ongoing help and support after adoption, families are less likely to come forward. Postadoption services can be key to enabling these children to have a permanent family through adoption.

As a mother in our Vermont program so simply and eloquently expressed it:
“People think that adoption is happily ever after, but it’s not always that way.”

Children being adopted from the foster care system often have special needs that parents are not equipped to deal with on their own. Most children enter foster care because of physical or sexual abuse or neglect. Additionally many face ongoing instability and disruption in their lives due to multiple moves while in the foster care system. As a result of such trauma in their young lives, children often present significant emotional, physical, and psychological problems. Research has repeatedly shown that children in foster care are disproportionately affected by a range of chronic health problems; many younger children suffer from delayed development, many school age children have significant educational difficulties that warrant special education intervention; and some children have severe psychological and behavioral difficulties. These conditions often mean that children in foster care who are adopted have physical, emotional and behavioral problems that can create significant challenges for them and their adoptive families.

Casey developed its Post-Adoption Services Program a decade ago both to address the lack of help available for families after adoption and to serve as a model for other agencies interested in developing this service. The program is open to any adoptive family and serves families with a range of needs—families seeking information as well as families at the brink of disruption. When families and children are overwhelmed by troubles they are unprepared for and can’t find help, they may feel that the dissolution of the adoption is the only solution. Yet that is an outcome that can be avoided, for the benefit of both the child and family.

Every adoptive family has different needs based on the past histories of their children; the age at which they entered foster care and their foster care experience; the intensity of the children’s physical, social, and emotional needs. We recognize, therefore, that adoptive families need a broad range of services and supports. A family’s needs may change as the child develops, requiring a different constellation of supports.

Our program provides a range of services from prevention to early intervention to treatment. Our staff in Connecticut pioneered the program that now provides: information and referral (families and community professionals can call and obtain information about adoption and post-adoption resources); community education about adoption (staff go out to schools, mental health facilities and other community agencies to raise awareness about adoption and create a more supportive environment for families); education and training for adoptive parents, pre-adoptive parents and community professionals; support groups for adoptive children and for the biological children within those adoptive families; case advocacy and systems advocacy; and counseling.

Adoption-related issues may surface for a child at different stages of development. For example, children who have been sexually abused may not even be able to

share this information with their adoptive parents until several years after the adoption when they have learned to trust their parents. Oftentimes families are not aware at the time of the adoption what services they will need in the future. They cannot predict what kinds of adoption-related issues may surface as their children move through childhood and adolescence.

One Connecticut family described their experience with our program this way: "The social workers' expertise has been invaluable to us, especially with our special needs teenage son. If it weren't for their support, guidance and education, I don't think we would have made it this far. Nowhere else have we been able to get the support we need so much."

Another adoptive parent told us that her social worker came to a meeting with her child's teachers. She said she "had so many things going on with both my girls that I just needed someone there to help me hear what the teachers were saying, to ask questions that I wasn't thinking of, and help explain how my older daughter's therapy was going to impact her school activities."

Our services are available whenever a family needs them and families are encouraged to come back for help if the need arises. We shape the services according to what the families tell us they need.

A recent study of 300 families who received services from our program found that the median length of time between their children's adoption and their seeking services at Casey was five years. It also found that after families left services, they often returned for additional assistance at a later time. These findings further point to the need for services and supports to be available throughout a child's development, as the need for help arises.

Because we have a recognized track record in delivering excellent, effective post-adoption services that work, Casey Family Services has been invited to work in partnership with other private and public agencies. We promote the development of networks of community supports for adoptive families, which include service providers that are knowledgeable and sensitive to issues of adoption.

In the state of Maine we are working with the Department of Human Services and the University of Southern Maine on a federally funded Child Welfare Demonstration Project. The federal resources supporting this five-year project come from funds (Title IV-E) usually dedicated to providing services to children in foster care. Maine is the only state that was chosen to use these resources to serve adoptive families. In Vermont, through an Adoption Opportunities grant, we are part of a collaboration with the Department of Social and Rehabilitative Services and private agencies to extend post-adoption services across the state, particularly in rural areas in which services are often lacking. In Connecticut, also as part of an Adoption Opportunities grant, we are working with the Department of Children and Families and the state

Foster and Adoptive Parent Association to extend services to the southeastern part of the state.

These experiences have underscored the need for cross-system collaboration in order to truly address the complex issues and problems that families face that overlap social services, education and mental health.

At the groundbreaking December 2000 National Post-Adoption Services Conference in Washington, D.C., it was evident from the conference that child welfare agencies and professionals across disciplines recognize the growing need to support the increasing numbers of adoptions. They are hungry for information about how to finance, design and implement the range of supports that are needed.

We know that there are very good services being offered and expanded in many states, including Connecticut, Maryland, Oklahoma, Pennsylvania and more. Texas has a particularly impressive statewide comprehensive post-adoption services program, which was presented during the conference. It is important to disseminate information about such efforts as widely as possible.

We're now in the process of implementing the Casey Center for Effective Child Welfare Practice, which will help to provide information about best practice models in the field particularly in the area of post-adoption services. We are fortunate as an agency that is part of a national foundation to be able to fund these services as well as provide technical assistance at no cost to adoptive families or the agencies that serve them. However, our resources are not sufficient to fill the gap alone. Additional public and private funding is needed to insure that services and supports are available and accessible.

We must all work together to acknowledge, understand and solve the often complex issues that accompany adoption. The children—too often victims of past abuse and neglect—need our continued help in making what for them may well be the most important transition of their lives. The families who have opened their hearts and homes to them deserve more than our admiration. They need our support.

Testimony of Sonya Merrill, Adoptive Parent and Recipient of Post-Adoption Services

Thank you, Mr. Chairman and members of the Committee on Ways and Means, Subcommittee on Human Resources.

I am Sonya Merrill. I am a mental health professional with the State of Connecticut Department of Mental Retardation and Direct Care. I am a licensed foster care provider. And today I am something more: an adoptive mother of three girls, ages 5 through 12.

In 1995, Casey Family Services asked me if I would be able to care for four foster children: three sisters and their brother. I know sibling groups are normally difficult to place together. In fact, other attempts to find a suitable foster home for these children had not been successful. So, when Casey Social Worker Mary Harris-Miller pleaded with me to take them in, I said, "I'll try."

Shequoia, Patricia and Seima have been with me ever since. Their brother Joseph chose to live with his paternal grandmother, but I make sure the children stay in touch. Casey guidelines call for working with the birth family.

My adoption of the girls became final in January of this year. Throughout the process and to this day, I have taken advantage of just about every service that Casey offers. The treatment programs, for example, are particularly helpful because they are designed for children with severe psychological, emotional, physical or behavioral needs. And all my children have needs; they were born addicted.

I've used Casey's after-school enrichment programs, and the respite care has proven a godsend. I do need respite. I've taken part in a lot of the foster parenting support groups, and we've had a physician come in and serve, as needed, as a liaison with the birth parents.

Knowing that the Casey support team and services would always be there for me made a huge difference in my decision to adopt. I'm a single parent, and if the services Casey provides were not extended to me once I had adopted the children, I know that I could not adequately have taken care of these kids. The children need tutorial sessions and a counselor; I could not afford those services on my own. Sometimes the medical bills are astronomical. It is so important for families like ours to know we can find help when we need it. The average person cannot cope with their needs by themselves.

It was Casey Family Services that brought us together. It's Casey that supports us and keeps reinforcing that support. We think of the social workers as part of our family. We eat together. We laugh together. We cry together. We work out problems together.

I am very aware that we are fortunate that the services that Casey provides are available to us. But we should not be the exception. I believe that every adoptive family should have the same opportunities that my daughters and I have had to cope with the challenges before them.