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## **Nine Things Governors Can Do to Build a Strong Child Welfare System**

### **Summary**

In 2006, 905,000 children were found to be victims of abuse and neglect. To ensure the future safety of an abused or neglected child, the state must determine whether the child should be removed from his or her family or can remain safely at home alongside services and supports to the family. If the child is placed in foster care, the state must work to return the child to his or her family; if reunification is not possible, the state must establish a new permanent arrangement. At multiple junctures, the state makes critical decisions that have both short- and long-term consequences for the child. Implementing evidenced-based practices and cross-system partnerships can increase state capacity to respond to abuse and improve child outcomes.

Yet, given poor health, education, and economic outcomes for children in foster care, a state focus on preventing child maltreatment is equally critical. States can target efforts to address the underlying factors that lead to maltreatment, including poverty, substance abuse, mental health issues, and poor parenting skills. This will require multiple state agencies to be engaged, including health, welfare, education, mental health, and substance abuse. Involvement by law enforcement and the judicial branch will also be necessary.

Gubernatorial leadership is essential to mobilize the resources and effort of critical public and private stakeholders to ensure the safety of vulnerable children. Governors can communicate a vision of shared responsibility for child safety and well-being that begins with the state child welfare agency but ultimately engages many family- and child-serving agencies.

To create a strong child welfare system and improve child outcomes, governors can:

1. prevent child maltreatment and strengthen vulnerable families;
2. invest in services that enable children to remain safely at home;
3. emphasize permanency for all children;
4. address ethnic and racial disproportionality in the system;
5. support and invest in the child welfare workforce;
6. prepare for and respond decisively in the event of a tragedy;
7. support youth who are transitioning out of foster care;
8. engage the judiciary; and
9. require accountability for improving child outcomes.

## Background

Few functions of state government are as critical to the safety, protection, and well-being of the nation's most vulnerable children as child welfare services, and few public systems are as complex and challenging to operate as state child welfare systems. In 2006 3.3 million cases of child maltreatment were reported, and abuse and neglect was substantiated in nearly 777,000 cases.<sup>1</sup> If abuse and neglect is substantiated, the state must decide whether a child is in imminent danger and should be removed from the home or whether services can be provided to the family to mitigate the situation.

As of September 30, 2006, the latest date for which information is available, approximately 510,000 children had been removed from their homes, mostly because of child abuse or neglect, and were in state custody.<sup>2</sup> More than 60 percent of children who suffered maltreatment were removed because of neglect, 16 percent were removed because of physical abuse, and 9 percent were removed because of sexual abuse. Another 2 million children who had been brought to the attention of the child welfare system were receiving services to keep them safely at home with their families. States also provided services and supports to families whose children had been removed so these children could safely be returned to their home. When reunification is not feasible, states work to secure another permanent arrangement, such as adoption or guardianship.

As the chief executive of their state, governors are responsible for the leadership, administration, and oversight of the state child welfare system. At the center of the system is the state's child protection or child welfare agency, which is responsible for investigating child abuse and neglect, providing services to victims and their families, and arranging for the care and custody of children who have been placed in foster care. These services represent a significant investment of public resources. In 2004 more than \$23 billion in federal, state, and local resources was spent on child welfare services, with the state contribution totaling more than \$9 billion.<sup>3</sup> Other public agencies besides child welfare play important roles in preventing maltreatment, supporting families, and/or serving abused children and their families, such as health, welfare, education, mental health, and substance abuse agencies. The state judicial branch (family and dependency courts), law enforcement offices, community organizations, and local service providers also provide key supports and services.

The child welfare system makes decisions that can have substantial and long-lasting consequences for a child's future and well-being. Failure of a frontline worker to recognize imminent danger can result in severe harm to the child, while removal of a child from his or her home is traumatic and can have long-term, negative emotional, educational, and other consequences. The critical nature of the child welfare system's work attracts intense public and political scrutiny. Challenged by insufficient or inflexible resources and heavy demands on its workforce, the state child welfare agency usually receives the most attention when it has failed—when severe maltreatment, injury, or death occurs to a child in or known to the system. Such events, typically widely publicized by the media, can prompt needed reform. Yet they can also trigger short-term responses that have no lasting, positive effects or undermine longer-term reform efforts.

A child welfare system that is guided by clear goals, is adequately resourced, and is held accountable to measurable improvements can improve outcomes for children. A strong child welfare system can help prevent child maltreatment, ensure the state responds appropriately when maltreatment occurs, and enable more children to live in safe, permanent families. As a result,

more children will enter young adulthood healthy, educated, and on track to becoming productive members of society. Improved outcomes for vulnerable children will also save the state future costs linked to poor health and mental health, unemployment and welfare dependency, juvenile delinquency, and adult criminality.

This issue brief describes nine things governors can do to build a strong child welfare system. It reflects the thinking and experiences of numerous national and state experts on child welfare, including governors' policy advisors and cabinet secretaries, state child welfare administrators, researchers, representatives of nonprofit and advocacy organizations, and youth who have been in foster care. Despite their different perspectives, a surprisingly consistent set of recommendations emerged.

### **Policy Recommendations and Actions**

Governors and states are urged to take these steps to strengthen their child welfare system and improve child outcomes.

### **Recommendation 1: Prevent Child Maltreatment and Strengthen Vulnerable Families**

More than 900,000 children were victims of child maltreatment in 2006. The effects of this maltreatment are far-reaching and last into adulthood. Victims of child abuse and neglect are more likely to suffer from mental illness, have low self-esteem, require special education services, engage in delinquent behavior, and abuse alcohol or drugs. As adults, they are also more likely to experience homelessness, be unemployed, and rely on public assistance.

Child maltreatment is also very costly; a recent study estimated the annual cost of child maltreatment at nearly \$104 billion, much of which was incurred by state mental health, child welfare, law enforcement, special education, and juvenile and adult corrections systems.<sup>4</sup> Despite the staggering cost, the federal financial structure is still heavily biased toward out-of-home placement, allowing only about 10 percent of the dedicated federal child welfare funding to be used for prevention.<sup>5</sup> However, states can grow this limited funding by partnering with philanthropic organizations and public, private, and nonprofit family- and child-serving agencies.

More than 60 percent of maltreated children were victims of neglect, usually defined in terms of deprivation of adequate food, clothing, shelter, supervision, or medical care. Many prevention efforts seek to address underlying causes that can lead to these conditions, including poverty, unemployment, single parenthood, a lack of child care, a lack of a social support network, and a lack of knowledge about age-appropriate discipline. High rates of parental substance abuse and mental illness are also present in child welfare cases. Effective prevention programs draw on community support, strengthen families, and improve parenting abilities.

#### ***Actions to Prevent Child Maltreatment and Strengthen Vulnerable Families***

To prevent child maltreatment and strengthen vulnerable families, states can:

- support home visiting programs;
- promote cross-system collaborations; and
- call for a child abuse prevention plan.

**Support quality home visiting programs.** Colorado, Louisiana, New Jersey, Oklahoma, and Pennsylvania are implementing a [Nurse-Family Partnership](#) program statewide. The program sends nurses to visit first-time mothers throughout their pregnancy and until their child reaches age two. The nurses provide information and guidance on parenting and child development and link families to medical care and other services. Research indicates the program leads to improved prenatal health, fewer childhood injuries, increased maternal employment, increased father involvement, less family use of public assistance, and improved school readiness.<sup>6</sup> A cost-benefit analysis estimates that the program saves more than \$5.50 for every \$1.00 spent.<sup>7</sup> Another model, [Healthy Families America](#), uses specially trained paraprofessionals and has also demonstrated success.<sup>8</sup>

**Promote cross-system collaborations that address the needs of at-risk children.** In July 2005 North Carolina Governor Michael Easley issued an executive order that dedicated \$11 million to fund the school-based Child and Family Support Team Initiative. The initiative places teams, led by school nurses and social workers, in 100 schools to coordinate with mental health and social service agencies and ensure appropriate community services and supports are available for children at risk of school failure or out-of-home placement. The initiative requires collaboration among the departments of health and human services, public instruction, and juvenile justice and delinquency prevention as well as with the state board of education and the administrative office of the courts.<sup>9</sup>

In Arizona the state's Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) and child welfare agencies have developed a model to help address factors that can contribute to child abuse and neglect, including unemployment, mental illness, a lack of child care, and an inability to meet basic needs. At 10 sites in Maricopa and Pima counties, TANF-eligible families at risk of involvement with child protective services are referred to multidisciplinary Family Connections teams that link them to public and community resources to help the families achieve self-sufficiency, child safety, and child well-being. Teams include child welfare, family assistance, and employment specialists. Kinship caregivers have also been targeted for these services.

**Call for a statewide child abuse prevention plan.** In 2005 Florida's departments of health and children and families led the Florida Interprogram Taskforce, composed of multiple agencies, parents, providers, and other stakeholders, in creating a statewide child abuse prevention plan. The plan outlined strategies to achieve a 50 percent reduction in child abuse and reabuse rates.<sup>10</sup> Building on this effort, in 2007 Governor Charlie Crist appointed a standing 32-member Child Abuse Prevention and Permanency Advisory Council. The council combines the expertise of agency officials, judicial partners, private service providers, and advocates to plan, coordinate, and fund statewide prevention efforts. Each of Florida's 20 circuits has also convened teams to plan locally to prevent maltreatment; more than 500 individuals are engaged in this effort.

## **Recommendation 2: Invest in Services That Enable Children to Remain Safely at Home**

When maltreatment occurs, removing children from their homes and families may not be the best response given the trauma children typically experience when they are removed. According to one recent study, at least for children "on the margin" (i.e., those who are in situations where investigators might disagree as to whether or not they should be removed), children, especially older children, fare better when they remain at home with services.<sup>11</sup> Children who are placed in

foster care without the benefit of more-effective and less-intrusive alternatives have a higher risk of mental illness and typically experience school disruptions and poor educational attainment. As adults, they experience unemployment, welfare dependency, and corrections involvement. Several states and localities have worked with community partners to implement programs that aim to provide services to the family without compromising the safety of the child. As with many prevention programs, these efforts target the underlying issues that may have led to abuse and neglect and engage family members and community supports in the solution.

Keeping children at home if maltreatment has already occurred can appear risky. Governors can ensure that safety remains a priority by demanding child welfare workers are trained to use proven safety and risk assessment tools and by ensuring evidence-based programs are available in the community.

***Actions to Invest in Services That Enable Children to Remain Safely at Home***

To enable children to remain safely at home, states can:

- encourage the use of an alternative response method;
- implement programs that enable family and community engagement; and
- address substance abuse and other risk factors.

**Encourage the use of an alternative response method to reports of abuse and neglect.** The traditional approach to child protective services has been to conduct investigations that often put families and the caseworkers in adversarial positions. More recently, though, some states and localities have begun to use an alternative response method, sometimes called differential response. For lower-risk cases, this method enables caseworkers to approach families in a more supportive fashion that assesses their strengths and provides services in the home. An evaluation of **Minnesota**'s pilot project found that, compared with families receiving a traditional investigation, families approached through the alternative response method were less likely to have new child maltreatment reports and their children were considered to be safer.<sup>12</sup> **Missouri** uses the Intensive In-Home Services Program as an alternative to placement in the foster care system. Since data collection began in fiscal 2001, more than 80 percent of the approximate 3,000 children served through this program were not involved in a substantiated abuse or neglect case and 70 percent of the families were still intact after four years.<sup>13</sup> In **California** 43 counties participated in a Casey Family Programs "Breakthrough Series Collaborative" (BSC) initiative to test approaches to implementing differential response. The counties that implemented differential response decreased their placement rate by 22.9 percent compared to 9.0 percent in the non-BSC counties over the project period. The placement rate for African-Americans also dropped more significantly; 28.7 percent compared to 15.8 percent for non-BSC counties. Although the Latino rate actually increased for non-BSC counties, it showed a decrease in BSC counties. These findings offer evidence that concerted alternative response strategies do make a difference.

**Implement programs that enable family and community engagement.** Several states, including **Alaska, Arizona, California, Illinois, Maryland, New Mexico, Tennessee,** and **Washington,** are involved in the Family-to-Family Initiative supported by the Annie E. Casey Foundation. The initiative incorporates family team decisionmaking, which invites family members to participate in placement, service, and other key decisions. In Louisville, **Kentucky,** 34 percent of children previously identified by caseworkers as requiring removal from their families were able to stay at home with help from crisis services and other community supports made available through this initiative.

**Address substance abuse and other risk factors in the home when possible.** Experts estimate that between 40 percent and 80 percent of child welfare cases involve substance abuse.<sup>14</sup> Helping parents address their substance abuse problem before it results in further maltreatment of their children is vital to keeping children safe. **Arizona** Governor Janet Napolitano issued an executive order requiring all executive branch agencies that administer substance abuse prevention and treatment funding to give priority to families referred to child protective services (CPS). Arizona Families F.I.R.S.T. served more than 4,700 clients in 2006, with 98 percent of participants having no new substantiated CPS reports after their enrollment in the program.

### **Recommendation 3: Emphasize Permanency for All Children**

Stable connections to a caring adult or family typically result in improved education, mental health, and other outcomes for children. Permanency may mean safely returning a child to his or her biological family, adoption, or a legal guardianship with relatives. A permanent relationship is no less important for older youth in foster care who can benefit from the guidance and oversight of an adult as they navigate their teenage years and enter young adulthood. Youth who leave the system without such support are less prepared and experience poorer outcomes than youth who have found a permanent connection<sup>15</sup>.

By clearly articulating that permanence is the goal for all children coming into care and that foster care should be short term, governors can direct agency efforts and resources. Governors can hold their child welfare system accountable for improving permanency outcomes by tracking data on length of stay in foster care, exits from care to permanency, placement with kin and rates of reentry to foster care. In the fall of 2008 Congress enacted and the President signed legislation into law called the “Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008.” This law provides new opportunities for states to facilitate permanency as discussed below.

#### ***Actions to Help Ensure Permanency for All Children***

To help ensure permanency for all children, states can:

- establish or expand subsidized guardianship programs;
- support policies that encourage adoptions;
- connect children in foster care to family members and engage the family in permanency planning;
- keep children in foster care connected to their siblings;
- invest in postplacement and postadoption support programs; and
- make permanency for older youth a priority.

**Establish or expand subsidized guardianship programs.** More than 2.5 million children are living with relatives without their parents present in the home; most of these children are living with their grandparents. Placements with kin caregivers lead to more stable living arrangements and improve child outcomes while enabling children to maintain important ties to their family and community.<sup>16</sup> To support kin caregivers, states have established subsidized guardianships that provide monthly subsidies for relatives who become legal guardians. An **Illinois** subsidized guardianship waiver demonstration program created permanent placements for 7,000 foster children and helped increase the permanency rate by as much as 12 percent.<sup>17</sup> Although 39 states currently have subsidized guardianship programs, most are small in size and could be expanded.

States have used TANF monies, Social Services Block Grant dollars, and state and local funds to support the subsidized guardianships. Additionally, under the new Fostering Connections Act, states can now claim Title IV-E federal reimbursement for relative guardians who meet federal requirements. This may enable more states to initiate or expand subsidized guardianship programs.

**Support policies that encourage adoption.** Florida Governor Crist's 2008 budget proposal included funding for a statewide public service campaign promoting adoption and a 32 percent increase in the annual adoption subsidy for children adopted from the foster care system. To make it easier to shoulder the unanticipated costs of adopting an older child, some states not only are increasing adoption subsidies but also are offering a tuition waiver or scholarship program for children adopted from the foster care system.<sup>18</sup> Both **Maryland** and **Massachusetts** provide full tuition waivers at the state's postsecondary institutions for children adopted from the foster care system after age 14.<sup>19</sup>

**Connect children in foster care to family members and engage the family in permanency planning.** For the past several years, a growing number of states have been emphasizing an approach known as "family finding." This approach focuses on locating immediate and extended family members who are willing to provide support and /or make a permanent commitment to the child. Legislation in **Washington** requires social workers, the courts, and all professionals to make an effort to identify and locate family members at every stage of the process. In the first two years after the law was enacted, placement with relatives nearly doubled from 19 percent to 37 percent.<sup>20</sup>

Governors can direct their child welfare agency to adopt proven practice models that emphasize family and community engagement in the decisionmaking process and service plan development for the child. The practice models, known as "family group conferencing" or "family group decision making," have demonstrated success not only in reducing the number of children who must be removed from their home but also in increasing the number of children placed with family members when removal is necessary. In the past year, **New Jersey** has trained almost 4,000 caseworkers in a new case practice model that places family team decisionmaking at the forefront, and implementation of that new model is now well under way.

The Fostering Connections Act provides \$15 million annually for competitive grants to states for kinship navigator programs, family group decisionmaking, family finding efforts and residential family treatment programs.

**Keep children in foster care connected to their siblings.** Rough national estimates indicate that approximately half of all children in foster care have at least one other sibling who is also in foster care.<sup>21</sup> As of 2006, twenty-eight states recognize that maintaining sibling bonds can be critical to a child's sense of identity and well-being and have policies that prioritize the placement of siblings together in foster care or adoption.<sup>22</sup> The Family Connections Act now requires that all states make reasonable effort to place siblings together. If a state is unable to place the siblings together, it must provide frequent visitation and other ongoing interaction unless counter to the safety and well-being of the children.

**Invest in postplacement and postadoption support programs.** Parent training and respite care for the guardians or parents, family counseling and support groups, and ongoing access to mental health services for the child can help ensure more successful placements, regardless of whether the child is returned home, adopted, or placed with a legal guardian.<sup>23</sup> In **Arizona** several kinship

and adoption resources and education (KARE) centers have opened to provide information, resources, and support to relative caregivers and adoptive families. In Tucson 92 percent of all families involved with a KARE center continued with stable and healthy placements that did not engage or reengage with child protective services. **Georgia's** Department of Human Resources supported the development of the Georgia Center for Resources and Support. The Center provides a centralized resource and referral for adoptive and foster parents including support groups, special activities, training and web-linked communications. **New Jersey, Ohio, and Washington** are among the states that have also created kinship navigator programs—hotlines or help desks—to help connect kin caregivers to available programs, benefits, and supports.

**Make permanency for older youth a priority.** Several states are emphasizing permanent connections for older youth. In **Massachusetts**, as part of the state's commitment to guaranteeing that no child will leave foster care without a family connection, 31 teams of child welfare workers and administrators developed and implemented local initiatives to foster permanency for youth above age 12. **New Jersey** and **New York** have created pilot projects to target the “longest-waiting children”—children of a certain age (e.g., age 14 or 16), children who have been in congregate care for two years or more, and children whose parental rights are terminated but who are still in care—to find permanent families and/or connections for the youth. In 2007 Anne Holton, **Virginia's** first lady, launched the For Keeps initiative to find permanent families and permanent family connections for older children in foster care or those at risk of coming into care by strengthening practices at the community level. Helping youth understand their permanency options and including them in the decision-making process can foster better results.

#### **Recommendation 4: Address Ethnic and Racial Disproportionality in the Child Welfare System**

Despite making up approximately 40 percent of the child population, children of color represent 58 percent of the children in foster care.<sup>24</sup> Nationally, African American and Native American children are represented in foster care at more than twice their proportion of the population in the census. In some states, the disproportionate representation of children of color is even more severe. Hispanic and Asian subgroups are also greatly overrepresented in several states and localities. Although research confirms that families of color are not any more likely to abuse or neglect their children than their white counterparts, families and children of color are disproportionately represented at every decision point within the child welfare system. For example, compared with white children, African American children are more than twice as likely to be removed from their home, remain in foster care an average of nine months longer, are less likely to receive services, and are much less likely to return to their families.<sup>25</sup>

The issue of disproportionality is complex and not fully understood. Several factors likely lead to the disproportionate representation of children of color in the child welfare system, including worker and system bias, poverty, and other external factors. In some communities, comprehensive services for at-risk families or community-based alternatives to out-of-home placement may be unavailable, contributing to higher rates of out-of-home placement. Data have helped bring national attention to the issue, and a number of promising practices have begun to emerge. States will likely have to implement multiple strategies to reduce disproportionate representation and disparate treatment starting with a thorough examination of their data. Collaboration with the judicial branch is also important in this effort. Governors can provide strong leadership on the issue of disproportionality by identifying it as a priority and resolving to address this issue.

*Actions to Address Disproportionality in the Child Welfare System*

To address disproportionality in the child welfare system, states can:

- conduct a study;
- establish a task force and ensure leaders from communities of color are included;
- dedicate staff time and training to address inequities;
- implement family group decision making;
- implement or expand subsidized guardianship programs; and
- promote the adoption of children of color.

**Conduct a study of disproportionality.** Analyzing and disseminating data can raise public awareness about disproportionality and help policymakers and administrators better understand the problem and appropriately target efforts. Legislation in **Michigan, Minnesota, Texas, and Washington** that requires studies of disproportionality has provided a starting point for statewide initiatives and helped generate concern and a commitment to act. **Michigan** also commissioned an external review of its policies, practices, and contracts to identify any systemic bias.

California's Blue Ribbon Commission on Children in Foster Care, a high-level multi-disciplinary body charged in 2006 with providing recommendations for judicial and executive reform of child welfare included disproportionality as a focus of its recommendations. Governors can initiate the process by calling on the child welfare agency to undertake an analysis of relevant outcomes by age, gender, race and ethnicity, and local jurisdiction.

**Establish a task force or other entity to address disproportionality and include leaders from communities of color, the judiciary and other stakeholders with direct interest in outcomes.**

Fifteen states have established commissions or councils on disproportionality.<sup>26</sup> In 2004 the **Michigan** Department of Human Services established the Advisory Committee on the Overrepresentation of Children of Color in Child Welfare, which is co-chaired by the department's director and includes 41 advisors representing diverse individuals and groups from the public and private sectors. In **Iowa** a community-based coalition, the Community Initiative for Native Children and Families, was formed to bring Native American service providers and public and private agencies together to ensure these children and families are served well.<sup>27</sup>

**Dedicate staff time and training to address inequities.** States such as **Texas** have dedicated staff to take direct responsibility for addressing disproportionality and reaching out to communities of color. Many states provide staff training on how to work effectively with children and families from different ethnic and racial communities. In April 2007 former **Kentucky** Governor Ernie Fletcher announced a project to target racial disparity in child welfare by providing cultural competency training for child welfare staff, community partners, law enforcement personnel, agency contractors, and members of local governments in six target counties.

**Implement family group decisionmaking.** Family group conferencing or decision making (FGDM) enables the child's immediate and extended family to participate in a broad range of decisions about the child's well-being. In **Texas** the implementation of FGDM has had a remediative effect on disproportionality; 32 percent of African American youth whose families participated in FGDM meetings returned home, compared with just 14 percent of those whose

families received traditional services.<sup>28</sup> Similarly, 39 percent of Hispanic youth whose families participated in FGDM returned home, compared with 13 percent of those whose families received traditional services.<sup>29</sup> FGDM also led to increased reunification for white families, though the differences were not as profound.

**Implement or expand subsidized guardianship programs.** Legal guardianship with kin is considered beneficial for many children. Because African American and Latino children are more likely than white children to be placed with kin, efforts to make these relationships legal and stable may be able to substantially reduce the time children of color stay in the system. Subsidized guardianships can also help prevent children from entering foster care.

**Promote the adoption of children of color.** Governors can raise awareness about the importance of adopting children, in general—and of adopting children of color, in particular—by adding their voice to public relations and information campaigns. States have also implemented faith-based initiatives to recruit foster parents for children of color, such as the One Church, One Child program started in Chicago, which works to recruit families from African American churches to adopt African American children. Since its founding in 1980, more than 140,000 children of color have been adopted as a result of the partnership between One Church, One Child and state child welfare agencies in more than 30 states.

### **Recommendation 5: Support and Invest in the Child Welfare Workforce**

Preparation, support, recruitment, and retention of child welfare workers are critical to improving outcomes for the children and families they serve. Without a stable, competent workforce, other reforms will not take hold. Although child welfare caseworkers have considerable responsibility for making critical decisions about children’s safety and well-being, they are often required to do so with inadequate training and minimal resources. Several challenges stand in the way of establishing and maintaining a high-quality child welfare workforce, including high caseloads and workloads, insufficient resources and training, a risk of violence, low salaries, limited opportunities for professional growth, and inconsistent supervision.<sup>30</sup> Having to confront these challenges on a daily basis often results in high caseworker turnover.

The average tenure of caseworkers is less than two years, and each year between 30 percent and 40 percent of caseworkers leave.<sup>31</sup> Turnover can result in families receiving fewer services, longer stays in foster care for children, multiple placements for children, and lower rates of permanency.<sup>32</sup> This is not surprising given that more resources must be spent on recruiting and training new workers rather than on providing services for children and families.<sup>33</sup> Fortunately, governors are in a position to help improve the workforce problems that currently plague the child welfare system.

#### ***Actions to Improve the Child Welfare Workforce***

To support and invest in the child welfare workforce, states can:

- support efforts to reduce caseloads;
- raise public awareness and show support for workers; and
- encourage the development of university training partnerships.

**Support efforts to lower caseloads to a reasonable level.** When caseworkers have high caseloads and workloads, they have less time to interact with and provide services to children and families. Although national standards for caseloads range from 12 to 18 children per caseworker and states are beginning to try to meet those standards, nationally caseloads still average 24 to 31 children per caseworker.<sup>34</sup> **Delaware** reversed a trend of high turnover rates and difficulties in hiring new staff by raising pay, improving hiring practices, enhancing training, establishing caseload standards, and adding seasonal positions if caseloads rise to more than 10 percent higher than the standard and making those positions permanent in the next budget cycle.<sup>35</sup> Governor Mitch Daniels of **Indiana** has made child welfare improvement a priority since entering office in 2005. He secured additional resources from the state legislature to hire an additional 800 family case managers to create more reasonable caseloads.

**Raise public awareness and show support for workers.** Governors can raise public awareness about the daily demands placed on child welfare workers and show appreciation for their hard work. **New Jersey** Governor Jon Corzine visited the offices of the division of youth and family services to see firsthand the challenges caseworkers face. The visit demonstrated his commitment to improving the system. The governor also created New Jersey's first cabinet-level department dedicated solely to children and families and hired an additional 600 new caseworkers and supervisors to help reform the system and dramatically reduce caseloads. To show support for its child welfare workforce, **Alabama** created a video to promote the good work caseworkers do and shared it with the public.

Governors can also call on individuals, community organizations, churches, and businesses in the private sector to get involved. The **Texas** Department of Family and Protective Services has created a public-private partnership with Greater Texas Community Partners. The partnership has resulted in more than 260 caseworkers being adopted through its Adopt-A-Caseworker program. The program enables private citizens or groups to provide emotional and financial support to caseworkers as they serve the children and families on their caseloads.<sup>36</sup>

**Encourage the development of university training partnerships.** Caseworkers who hold a bachelor of social work degree or a master of social work degree are more likely to perform well on the job and stay on the job longer.<sup>37</sup> Some states expect all caseworkers to have at least a bachelor of social work degree and, in the case of **Alabama**, require all caseworkers to obtain licensure within one year.<sup>38</sup> To obtain well-educated caseworkers, **Kentucky** and **California** child welfare agencies have offered tuition stipends to social work students who agree to work for the agency for a minimum term (one to two years). Most of these students—86 percent in Kentucky and 85 percent in California—stayed with the agency even after their minimum commitment had concluded.<sup>39</sup> Under Title IV-E, the federal government will reimburse for up to 75 percent of the training funds a state uses to implement training programs for their current staff as well as develop and enhance graduate and undergraduate social work curricula to prepare the future workforce.

**New Jersey** has established several partnerships with its state universities and colleges, including a consortium of the four state universities and colleges with the leading social work programs, to develop curricula and training designed specifically for state child welfare staff. The training includes an intensive weekend master of social work program. A separate consortium of seven colleges and universities that offer a bachelor of social work degree works with the state to afford students an internship during their senior year with a promise of future employment with the

state's child welfare agency. **Idaho** has been able to use federal Title IV-E funds—along with matches from its partners in the Idaho Child Welfare Partnership, including Casey Family Programs, Boise State University, and Eastern Washington University—to train social work staff with an added emphasis on disproportionality.<sup>40</sup>

### **Recommendation 6: Be Prepared to Respond Decisively in the Event of a Tragedy**

Despite the best efforts of the state's child welfare system, during a governor's term in office, he or she will likely be faced with a tragic death or a case of severe maltreatment of a child known to the system. In 2006, an estimated 1,530 children died from abuse or neglect nationally.<sup>41</sup> Intense and negative media attention that often occurs in the aftermath of a tragedy can result in hasty responses that can undermine longer-term efforts to better serve children and their families. Every effort should be made to avoid a crisis, but governors and agencies must have practices and protocols should one occur. These will help assure the public that appropriate procedures were and are being followed and that action is being taken to ensure problems are addressed so they are not repeated. A strategic approach to communications can also promote more balanced media attention.

#### ***Actions to Prepare for a Crisis***

To be prepared to respond decisively in the event of a tragedy, states can:

- ensure the governor's office has a proactive and open communications strategy;
- establish a child welfare ombudsman; and
- provide support to child welfare leaders during crises.

**Ensure the governor's office has a proactive and open communications strategy.** Proactive media relations throughout a governor's term sets a better context for the media and the general public to understand the state's goals and objectives, the progress achieved, and the special and unique challenges in achieving safety, permanency, and well-being for vulnerable children. Child welfare leaders should discuss child welfare reform efforts periodically with the editorial boards of the state's major newspapers and in other media forums as well as invite the media to special events or meetings. In **Florida** Bob Butterworth, former secretary of the department of children and families, invited the media to attend a planning session on the state's effort to safely reduce the number of children in foster care; the media received information on the underlying reasons for the effort and its benefits to vulnerable children. Keeping the media up-to-date on the work of the agency can lead to a more balanced approach by the media in the event of a tragedy.

The state should also have clear protocols to guide internal investigations and actions as well as communications with the media when a crisis does occur. In **Arizona** cases resulting in a fatality or near fatality are subject to review by the agency director, district supervisor, and supervisor for the case based on information gathered from the field; the reviews seek to determine whether procedures were followed correctly. The agency's public information officer (PIO) is also included in these reviews so he or she is prepared to respond or reach out to the media. The PIO also notifies the governor's information officer when a fatality or near fatality occurs and provides information so the governor can respond to questions. Some states use independent third-party reviews for high-profile cases to promote transparency and openness.

**Establish a child welfare ombudsman to monitor performance and track concerns raised.**

Approximately 27 states have an ombudsman or child advocate office to provide oversight of children's services and protect the interests and rights of children and families.<sup>42</sup> By serving as an oversight body and a mechanism for the public to report concerns, these offices can help identify problems before they become crises as well as play an important role after a tragedy.

**Massachusetts** Governor Deval Patrick issued an executive order in 2007 creating the office of the child advocate to serve as a watchdog that investigates and oversees agencies responsible for child welfare. The child advocate has the power to initiate independent investigations into critical incidents affecting children in the custody of or receiving services from the state child welfare agency.

**Provide support to child welfare leaders during crises and give them sufficient resources to improve the system.**

Child welfare workers need to know that if their professional judgment is in line with law, policy, and training, the system will support and back them up. Some circumstances will require decisive personnel action if willful misconduct is found, and child welfare leaders need the support, resources, and authority to respond to the tragedy and address any personnel or systemic problems that led to the event. In **Arizona** negligence by workers will result in dismissal and, after each critical event, the agency undertakes a review of the system to improve practice and performance.

## **Recommendation 7: Support Youth Who Are Transitioning Out of Foster Care**

Youth ages 16 and older comprise approximately 21 percent of all children in foster care.<sup>43</sup>

Although many youth eventually return to their biological families or find another permanent home through adoption or guardianship, more than 20,000 youth age out of the child welfare system each year. Most youth who leave the foster care system do not receive adequate preparation and support for their transition to independent living. Compared with other youth, youth who have been in foster care are more likely to be homeless, less educated, incarcerated, unemployed, and unskilled. They are also more likely to experience physical, developmental, behavioral, and mental health challenges, which result in greater costs to the state.<sup>44</sup>

Governors and policymakers in many states are expressing interest in developing policies and programs that will result in better outcomes for youth who have been in foster care. They believe it is the right thing to do—that youth who have been in foster care deserve the same opportunities in life as other young people. It is also fiscally prudent because, without adequate supports and preparation, many of these youth will impose even greater costs on society. Moreover, this population is relatively small and easily identifiable, so state officials are finding that they can make a difference with targeted efforts. While improving services for those youth in preparation of young adulthood, states should continue to explore all other permanency options.

### ***Actions to Support Youth Who Are Transitioning Out of Foster Care***

To support youth who are transitioning out of foster care, states can:

- allow youth to remain in foster care longer;
- extend Medicaid coverage;
- waive tuition at public schools;
- call on the private sector and community to support youth in transition;
- create a structure to develop a comprehensive approach for improving services and outcomes for youth in transition; and

- give foster youth and alumni of care a voice in policy development.

**Allow youth to remain in foster care until age 21.** Youth outside the child welfare system do not lose their support system at age 18. In 2003 approximately 50 percent of all young people between the ages of 18 and 24 were living at home.<sup>45</sup> However, in most states, youth “age out” and leave the system at age 18. A longitudinal study of youth aging out of foster care in **Illinois**, **Iowa**, and **Wisconsin** found that keeping youth in the child welfare system past their 18th birthday enables them to stay connected to services and progress in school and decreases their risk of economic hardship, teenage pregnancy, and criminal justice system involvement.<sup>46</sup> On average, youth in Illinois who remained in foster care until age 21 demonstrated better outcomes compared with their peers in Iowa and Wisconsin who left at age 18 or 19.<sup>47</sup>

The Foster Care Connections Act of 2008 extends federal support for states that elect to allow youth to remain in care up to ages 19, 20 or 21 making this a more financially feasible option for states. Federal support is limited to those youth who are participating in education, training, employment or have a medical condition that precludes these activities.

**Extend Medicaid coverage until age 21.** Extending Medicaid coverage until age 21 can help address the high level of health and mental health needs of youth in foster care and those who have left the system. Under the Foster Care Independence Act of 1999, states may provide Medicaid coverage for youth in foster care up to age 21. At least 17 states have elected to do so and have found the costs to be modest.<sup>48</sup>

**Waive tuition at public colleges, universities, and community colleges for youth who have been in foster care.** Several states provide need-based scholarships and 16 states offer tuition waivers for state postsecondary institutions.<sup>49</sup> The [Washington State Governor’s Scholarship for Foster Youth](#) provides financial support to approximately 30 youth each year who can enroll at 56 public and private colleges and universities in the state. This type of financial assistance can supplement federal Chafee Education and Training Voucher funds, which states can use to provide up to \$5,000 per student for postsecondary education and related costs.

**Call on the private sector and community to support youth in transition.** In 2005 former **Florida** Governor **Jeb** Bush addressed 150 community and business leaders, asking them to be mentors, provide internships and job opportunities, or contribute to scholarship funds and matched savings accounts for youth in transition from foster care. In January 2007 **Tennessee** Governor Phil Bredesen announced a statewide initiative to pair volunteer mentors with teenagers in foster care. Research has shown that mentoring facilitates positive adjustment during the transition to adulthood.<sup>50</sup>

**Create a structure to develop a comprehensive approach for improving services and outcomes for youth in transition.** In 2006 **Michigan** convened an interdepartmental task force to focus on serving at-risk youth transitioning to adulthood. The director of the Michigan Department of Human Services and a state supreme court justice co-chaired the task force. The state is implementing the task force’s recommendations, which focus on improving access to housing, education and training, and health and mental health services for transitioning youth.

**Give foster youth and alumni of care a voice in developing state policies.** By hearing firsthand from youth in care and young people who have been in care, policymakers can gain a better understanding of the challenges and needs of youth in foster care and programs and policies that could assist them. Furthermore, such opportunities empower youth to assume greater responsibility for their well-being, promote civic participation, and help youth develop leadership

and communication skills. In **Michigan** the state youth policy board advises the human services department on policies and practices affecting youth in the state's care. In 2005 the board developed *Voice 1* a list of 15 priorities that it presented to the governor and her cabinet. In 2007 the board released *Voice 2* which lists 10 priorities and cites progress made on the original recommendations.

For more information on actions governors can take to help transitioning youth, see the NGA issue brief [State Policies to Help Youth Transition Out of Foster Care](#).

### **Recommendation 8: Engage the Judiciary**

The court is a critical partner of the child welfare agency in ensuring the safety and well-being of children. The judiciary ultimately decides whether a child has been maltreated and whether he or she should be removed from his or her home. These crucial determinations are made by judges based, at least in part, on information they receive from the child welfare agency. Once a child is under the court's jurisdiction, the court and agency share responsibility not only for the child's safety and well-being but also for ensuring he or she moves quickly toward permanency. Better coordination between child welfare agencies and courts has led to better outcomes for children and families. Governors can include key judicial leaders on their child welfare reform commissions.

#### ***Actions to Engage the Judiciary***

To engage the judiciary, states can:

- engage judicial leaders in efforts to improve outcomes for children;
- form court-agency partnerships to improve outcomes; and
- support efforts to share information.

**Engage the state's judicial leaders in efforts to improve outcomes for children.** A governor can appoint or ask the chief justice to serve on a children's cabinet or other statewide task force addressing child welfare issues. **Ohio** Governor Ted Strickland and Chief Justice Thomas J. Moyer jointly convened the Ohio Summit on Children. Both attached great significance to this event and personally and jointly signed each invitation to every Ohio juvenile judge and child welfare director. To enable participation in the event, the executive and judicial branches pooled discretionary federal and foundation funds. In **Michigan** the director of the department of human services and a state supreme court justice headed a task force created to improve services for at-risk youth transitioning to adulthood.

**Form court-agency partnerships to improve outcomes.** In **Minnesota** the chief justice and the commissioner of human services came together to form the Children's Justice Institute, a statewide initiative to examine the system through the eyes of the children it serves. The initiative established teams in the state's 87 counties consisting of juvenile court judges, social workers, attorneys, and other stakeholders. The endeavor has led to new court and agency performance measures, decreased the length of time children spend in foster care, increased the rate of adoption, shortened timelines for cases, and reduced the number of placements children have prior to placement in their permanent homes.<sup>51</sup>

**Support efforts to share information.** In many states, the courts, the child welfare agency, and other child-serving agencies have their own information systems that do not enable information to be easily shared. Consequently, judges, caseworkers, and other key decision makers often lack necessary information, preventing them from making fully informed decisions. **Missouri** created the Judicial Information System, which enables the court administrator, the family court division, and the departments of mental health, social services, health and senior services, and elementary and secondary education to share information.<sup>52</sup> This information sharing enables agencies to track their clients across systems, reduces duplicative services, and improves agencies' ability to provide appropriate services to children in a timely manner.

### **Recommendation 9: Require Accountability for Improving Child Outcomes**

The federal government requires states to collect data and report on program improvements intended to address weaknesses identified through its child and family service reviews. Many states are going beyond these requirements, however, to track child outcomes over time, compare performance across jurisdictions, and assess performance down to the frontline-worker level. Governors can require a process for continually monitoring progress on desired goals and outcomes and for using data to improve practice and policy. Making the information available to the public can help build knowledge of and confidence in the system and shine a light on exemplary jurisdictions while encouraging healthy competition among jurisdictions.

The prevention and remediation of child abuse requires the involvement of many agencies that are engaged in strengthening and supporting families, including TANF, substance abuse and mental health, and early childhood development. Governors can ensure every relevant executive branch agency is working toward common goals and understands its role in preventing child abuse and strengthening families by creating cross-agency entities such as children's cabinets.

#### ***Actions to Require Accountability for Improving Child Outcomes***

To require accountability for improving child outcomes, states can:

- create accountability mechanisms; and
- create a children's cabinet.

**Create accountability mechanisms.** States are implementing processes to require periodic reports to the governor and review committees, citizen engagement, and public report cards. In 2007, when federal court oversight of **Alabama's** child welfare system was lifted after 19 years, the state was anxious to sustain and improve on the gains it had made. To this end, Governor Bob Riley created the Governor's Child Welfare Data Review Commission. The commission meets quarterly to review data on the performance of the state's child welfare system and advise the governor and commissioner of human resources. To hold the system publicly accountable, the state will also continue the quality assurance committees—composed of citizens who review practices and outcomes related to the reform efforts—at both the state and county levels. Moreover, each county is required to post its semiannual child welfare performance report card on the department of human resources' public Web site. The report cards provide assessments related to safety, permanency, and the quality of services provided.<sup>53</sup>

**Indiana**'s effort to measure and manage outcomes engages the governor in reviewing quarterly progress reports and assessing state performance against national data. **Nebraska**'s new [COMPASS](#) system presents performance accountability measures by both agency service areas and judicial districts on an interactive, user-friendly public Web site that is updated monthly. The state includes federal measures, such as timeliness of adoptions, placement stability, and absence of maltreatment recurrence, as well as additional accountability measures the state is tracking related to safety and permanency.

**Wyoming** Governor Dave Freudenthal's Children and Families Initiative established 28 indicators for five primary objectives, including providing stable, safe, supportive, nurturing, and healthy environments for children and families. Data are tracked and presented annually down to the county level, building accountability throughout the state.

***Create a children's cabinet to enhance coordination and shared accountability.*** Approximately 10 states have created children's cabinets to bring together cabinet-level directors from the various departments that provide services to children and families. These cabinets are typically charged with improving program coordination, service delivery, and resource alignment to achieve cross-cutting goals for children and youth. In 2007 Governor Crist of **Florida** created a 20-member cabinet that established five main goals, including improving the efficiency of service delivery for children, youth, and families and ensuring all children live in permanent, safe, and nurturing environments. The cabinet must report annually to the governor and state legislature on progress made under its strategic plan, which includes several recommendations aimed at preventing child abuse.

On her third day in office in January 2003, **Arizona** Governor Napolitano issued an executive order creating a children's cabinet with a focus on children served by the child welfare system. The executive order required cabinet members, including leaders of the departments of housing, education, health services, economic security, and juvenile and adult corrections, to develop a coordinated interagency strategy for serving abused and neglected children. The goal is to achieve more effective and efficient service delivery by, for example, coordinating education services, child welfare services, behavioral health services, health care services, and substance abuse services.<sup>54</sup> Since that time, the cabinet has broadened its focused and adopted measurable indicators of child well-being related to health, education, and safety and security. The governor views the cabinet "as a 'barrier buster,' breaking down administrative and systemic obstacles that stand in the way of improved outcomes for Arizona's children and families."<sup>55</sup>

## **Conclusion**

In the past decade, nearly all states have undertaken reforms to address shortcomings in their child welfare system. Some efforts have been spurred by a tragedy in the system, leading to a class action lawsuit settlement or consent decree. Reforms have also been necessitated by the findings of federal child and family services reviews. In still other instances, state leaders and stakeholders have recognized that the state's child welfare system is not doing its job well enough—too many children are being maltreated, entering the system, and staying in foster care for an extended period.

Strong support and leadership from the governor is critical to initiate and sustain successful system improvements that will lead to better outcomes. Child welfare reform is an ongoing endeavor that requires clear goals and a strategic plan, sufficient resources, support from key

stakeholders, a strong leadership team, and a process to measure progress. Although the child welfare agency is at the center of the effort, the governor must also engage and hold accountable other key agencies that provide services to vulnerable children and families before they enter care (e.g., TANF, mental health, and substance abuse) as well additional systems that affect children while they are in care (e.g., education).

To help ensure that these components are in place, states can create an entity to identify problems and solutions. For example, **Arizona, California, Delaware, Texas, and Washington** are among the states that have created child welfare reform commissions to develop recommendations for child protection and child welfare systems improvement. These commissions typically include representatives from the executive, judicial, and legislative branches as well as constituents and other key stakeholders, including advocates and community providers.

Another critical factor in successful reform efforts is involving constituents to help identify problems and solutions as well as monitor progress. Formal input from birth parents, foster parents, and foster youth and alumni can be attained by inviting them to join child welfare advisory boards and commissions. Annual state summits of foster youth and foster alumni also provide a vehicle to hear their concerns and recommendations. Broad representation can ensure that multiple perspectives are represented and can help build critical support for securing funding and sustaining reforms. Reform efforts must also include clear goals, a realistic timeline, and resources to accomplish the goals.

Preventing maltreatment, strengthening vulnerable families, mitigating the effects of child abuse, achieving permanency, and addressing issues such as poverty and substance abuse that contribute to neglect and abuse takes enormous will and effort from multiple sectors. Governors can articulate a vision that the proper care of children and the prevention and remediation of child maltreatment is a collective responsibility shared by multiple state agencies and citizens at large. They can send a clear message about the value of collaboration and hold all systems accountable for working together to improve the well-being of all children, particularly those at risk of becoming involved or those already involved with the child welfare system. With a clear vision, governors can mobilize the political will and resources needed to accomplish and sustain improvements in outcomes for children.

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## End Notes

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