



## It takes a village: America's foster care system.

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How many times have you heard the phrase "It takes a village to raise a child"? This expression may conjure up images of a far-off township of quaint dwellings and the sound of laughing children playing in the streets. But who reading those words imagines their own communities and the children being raised there? Many Americans are unaware of the large network of children all around them who really do depend on a village for their upbringing. On any given day, approximately 463,000 young people are in out-of-home placement in the United States ([Foster Care: Change a Lifetime. Statistics and Data](#)). They are children in foster care.

These youths are entwined in a complex weave of placements, regulations, stakeholders, and agencies that extends through the federal, state, and county levels of government. Few in the general public appreciate the intricacy of this web, and how difficult it can be for a youth in crisis to navigate.

### Walking the line

The foster care system walks a fine line between protecting the children it serves and causing additional harm. By the time a court determines a child should be removed from their biological family, some level of abuse and neglect has already taken place. However, for the child, this removal can still be traumatic. "Frequently, even taking a child from an abusive home is harmful to that child's psyche. That's what they know, that's what they have grown accustomed to, and those are their parents," says Rita Soronen, Executive Director of the Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption.



"My optimistic view would be that we could provide the support and services to families that would prevent kids from entering the system in the first place," says Celeste Bodner, Executive Director and Founder of FosterClub. Many would agree, but Bodner adds that despite abuse and neglect prevention efforts, "We have to recognize that there may always be a need to provide a safe haven for kids that have experienced these things."

Surrogate resources must be created to act as the missing family unit, or else children could be put at a lasting disadvantage. Youth who age out of the foster care system without a family network experience higher levels of risk compared to the general population. They are more likely to fail to graduate high school, be arrested, or become homeless ([Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative](#)). "It's not because they're bad kids," says Soronen. "It's because they don't have the safety net of family around them, because they haven't seen appropriate role modeling."

### A safety net

To create a safety net, communities and the foster care system need to "Flood a child and family with support," as Bodner puts it. Richard Lutz, MSW, Vice President of Youth Services for [Community Solutions Inc.](#), explains, "Support should include the public agency, the private agency, the foster parents, the biological parents, and the youth. All would be unified in the same direction around what the treatment plan, service plan, and permanency plan of the youth will be."

The general public is an important part of this support. Lutz adds, "People need to understand that it's not 'my neighbor's youth' that we're talking about, but that you have a responsibility, as a community member, to all the kids in your community." But how does one get involved?

### With the help of the village

"There are a lot of opportunities," says Bambi Schrader, Ames Service Area Licensing and Support Coordinator for [Iowa Kids Net](#). "You would just have to contact whatever agency is in your area and ask how you can volunteer, mentor, or help with whatever services the agencies are working with." Additionally, opportunities exist within various organizations (such as local Kiwanis or church groups) that volunteer at children's service agencies.

"Go to the Yellow Pages at the local level and look up your county children services agency," advises Soronen. "Almost every one has a volunteer program...There is everything from office work, to mentoring, to arts programs."

You can also use a broader approach. "A national organization such as the [Dave Thomas Foundation](#) can get you connected at a local level," offers Soronen. Bodner suggests the [Orphan Foundation of America's](#) e-mentor program: "People can sign up as an e-mentor to mentor young people who are aging out of foster care and headed off to higher education." Other helpful national resources include the [National Foster Parent Association](#), [Casey Family Programs](#), and the [Child Welfare League of America](#).

Another option is to become a [Court Appointed Special Advocate](#) (CASA). A CASA volunteer is a community member who acts as a voice for a foster youth during court proceedings. "Everyday citizens can do it; it simply takes the training," says Soronen. Children with a CASA volunteer are substantially less likely to spend time in long-term foster care or reenter care, and tend to receive more services (U.S. Department of Justice Audit Report, 2006).

There are also opportunities for individuals to get involved with [local youth groups](#). "These groups, led by youth, usually do their own advocacy efforts to improve the foster care system," Says Bodner. "People can connect to those youth groups as volunteers or donors."

Of course, the ultimate way to participate is to become a foster or adoptive parent. As Schrader, a foster and adoptive parent herself, points out, "People are more capable of doing this than they give themselves credit for. If people made the initial call and checked it out, or talked to other foster and adoptive parents, they would see that this is something a lot of them could do."

Whatever path community members choose in order to become involved with the foster system, their actions have the potential to make a significantly positive impact on a child's life. For youth leaving foster care, successful reunification or placement with their biological family is the most common outcome: in 2006, 69% of cases were resolved in this manner (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2009. Numbers and trends). But for those children who are not so lucky, the community's efforts will impact the rest of their lives. It truly does take a village.

#### **About the authors**

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