



Child Welfare Network

2011 Legislative Policy Agenda

Who We Are:

In April 2004, the Ritter Charitable Trust, in partnership with the Nevada Community Foundation, created the Child Welfare Network (formerly known as the Foster Care Task Force) to promote reform on behalf of children and families. We are a collaborative network of nearly 150 individuals representing both the public and private sectors, with the common goal of preventing child abuse and neglect while improving existing systems of care.

Our Vision: The Child Welfare Network seeks to create public accountability and better outcomes for the children and their families that it serves.

Our Mission:

- **Support information-sharing** by providing a forum where individuals and organizations concerned about children in Nevada's child welfare system can exchange resources, ideas, problems, and solutions through learning from one another and providing all members an opportunity to be heard;
- **Promote collaboration** among service providers, county and state administrators, educators, parents and foster parents, youth, private funders and concerned citizens with the collective focus on the best interests of children who are fundamentally our constituents; and
- **Take action** that leads to real results by advocating with a united voice on child welfare issues to improve services that respond to the needs of (and improve the lives of) children and families in Nevada.

Throughout the past two years, the Child Welfare Network convened several large group meetings of key stakeholders, including public and private child serving agencies, child advocates, philanthropists and others, to discuss legislative priorities for the 2011 Nevada Legislative Session. The purpose of the discussion was to identify the primary issues impacting child welfare in Nevada, as well as some potential solutions to improve the lives of children and families.

A large percentage of families are struggling to provide for their children with limited resources and social supports. In fact, a large majority [50%] of children who come into the child welfare system are there for neglect, as opposed to physical or sexual abuse.

The Community We Will, 2010

A Focus on Prevention - The following priorities were established to guide the discussion and recommendations of the group:

- **Preventing children and families from entering the system:** providing supports and initiatives that reach families prior to contact with the child welfare or juvenile justice system to ensure that families have the supports and resources necessary to provide a safe and stable home.
- **Preventing children from reentry into the system after reunification:** providing the infrastructure, resources and supports necessary to provide successful outcomes while involved with the child welfare or juvenile justice systems, including increased family engagement, access to quality treatment and support services, and sufficient transition services.
- **Preventing involvement with the adult system for youth who are aging out:** providing adequate services and resources for permanency and transition into adulthood for youth who have been involved with the child welfare and juvenile justice systems.

Recommendation 1: Develop a funding structure in Nevada that supports prevention services for children and families at risk of becoming involved with child welfare and for those who are currently involved with child welfare.

Despite the current economic crisis, Nevada needs to build the infrastructure necessary to support the provision of evidence-based, quality prevention programs. Although the current economic crisis may not allow for additional funding to support new prevention services, this recommendation may provide an opportunity for the State to re-examine the appropriation of existing funding streams and identify the most effective and efficient use of funds to prevent entry into costly systems of care. The following proposal utilizes a public/private collaboration model to promote and support the provision of evidence-based, outcome driven, community based prevention initiatives which will yield long-term financial and social returns.

- Establishment of an independent state position to oversee and coordinate statewide prevention initiatives and activities across relevant state departments, local entities, and private organizations. Establish a strategic mission and targeted goals aimed at preventing involvement in the child welfare and juvenile justice systems.
 - a. Coordinate policy and practice to promote prevention initiatives – ensure that state laws align to meet the common goal, as well as the practices of state and local agencies, as well as private entities.
 - b. Build community infrastructure to support prevention initiatives – identify and implement an infrastructure of state and local, as well as public and private enterprises which will work in collaboration with one another.
 - c. Provide resources and support to public and private agencies, as well as consumers, to support prevention initiatives – support resource networks (ie: Nevada 211) which make services known to consumers and assist providers with developing and measuring evidence based practices, as well as outcome measures.
- Establish a fund of public and private dollars to support evidence-based, outcome driven prevention activities which are clearly defined in statute to prevent involvement with and/or retention in the child welfare, juvenile justice and/or adult corrections or welfare systems. The fund should identify minimum contributions by the state (potentially utilizing existing sources of funds, in addition to new funds) as well as mechanisms to attract private funders (recognizing that private funds may need to wait until the system is established and proven). The purpose of the fund may include the following*:
 - d. To prevent and reduce the incidence of child abuse and neglect;
 - e. To prevent and reduce the incidence of youth violence and other delinquent behavior;
 - f. To prevent and reduce the incidence of youth alcohol and substance abuse and use;
 - g. To prevent and reduce the incidence of teen pregnancy; and
 - h. To increase adolescent self-sufficiency by encouraging high school graduation, vocational preparedness, improved social and other interpersonal skills and responsible decision making.

Funding for programs should be prioritized to support evidence-based or promising programs and/or those with measurable outcomes, where applicable.

* Based on the Wisconsin “Brighter Future Initiative”, Wisconsin Statute 48.545.

- Establish a funding formula for child welfare services that is consistent with the legislative language that was included in the original child welfare integration bill (AB1 of the 17th Special Session, 2001) to ensure adequate funding for child welfare in Nevada.

Recommendation 2: Adopt a foster child bill of rights.

The first Foster Child Bill of Rights was ratified in Philadelphia in 1973, endowing foster children with the “rights that inherently belong to all children.” The general argument for establishing written provisions is that since foster children have been temporarily or permanently separated from their natural parents and other family members, they require special safeguards and care. Another primary purpose is to create more accountability in the foster care system and to eliminate the vast disparities in treatment of foster children across jurisdictions. California, Florida, New Jersey and Rhode Island have passed statutes that include similar bill of rights for foster children. In Maine, New York, South Carolina and several other states, state agencies and/or child advocacy organizations within the state have adopted their own bill of rights for children in their care.

Recommendation 3: Establish a working group and/or interim legislative committee to review and provide recommended revisions to the language in NRS (and NAC 432B, as appropriate) to reflect a standard that is clear, and that can be implemented by all parties responsible for the removal of children from their homes. The recommended revisions of the work group/legislative committee would be introduced for consideration in the 2013 Nevada Legislative Session. *

A primary concern among child welfare advocates is the number of children who enter foster care in Nevada. In collaboration with the Community We Will and Casey Family Programs, the Child Welfare Network is recommending a complete review and re-write of NRS 432B, with a particular emphasis on revising standards leading to removal. An expert from the *Community We Will Business Case*, funded by Casey Family Programs, illustrates the need to review current policy and legislative mandates related to child removal:

When families are in trouble, and have come to the attention of the child welfare system for one risk factor or another, we have two options as a community – continue to overly rely on foster care as the response without considering the long term implications for the family or child, or invest in the family and the child by giving them the support they need to raise their own children safely. A large percentage of families are struggling to provide for their children with limited resources and social supports. In fact, a large majority of children who come into the child welfare system are there for neglect, as opposed to physical or sexual abuse.

Although removal of children into foster care may seem like a logical first choice when a parent is not taking adequate care of the child, it is not always the best long term solution. Considering the fact that in Nevada more than 68% of the children who come into foster care returned to their birth family within one year, and 13% of those who enter the child protective system

return home in 7 days or less, we are faced with the reality that unless we strengthen the family, and address the root causes for the abuse or neglect in the home, we have not really changed anything in the long run for the child who returns home, for his or her siblings.

The current language in NRS 432B is not consistent with “modern” child welfare practice, does not allow for implementation of best practice improvements, and allows for disparate interpretations of the standard for placing children into foster care. A more clearly articulated statute will lead to more consistent decision-making, which will help to ensure that children are not unnecessarily placed into foster care. The review should include revision of the standard legal definitions for both abuse and neglect in the statute, as well as updating policy to be consistent with the implementation of best practices. Any such review should include the input of a cross-section of stakeholders, including all agencies and organizations which are affected by NRS 432B, as well as representatives of individuals who are affected.

**Adopted from “Recommendation #2” from the NV Legislative Subcommittee on the Placement of Foster Children in Foster Care Technical Workgroup Final Report, 2008.*

Other Policy Priorities Supported by the Child Welfare Network

1. Enhancement of Nevada 2-1-1 to ensure that the system is appropriately staffed, that all appropriate resources are available and up-to-date in the system, that staff are adequately trained to field inquiries for services, and that the system is accessible to all Nevadans via cellular phone service.
2. Funding initiatives that support:
 - a. Quality, evidence-based or promising, outcome driven early intervention programs that are proven to reduce the incidence of entry into the child welfare and/or juvenile justice systems (including early home visiting programs and early childhood education programs); and
 - b. Quality, evidence-based or promising, outcome driven programs that support reunification and that meet the needs of children, youth and families to prevent recidivism into the child welfare and/or juvenile justice systems.
 - c. Best practices to support children and youth within the child welfare system which take a comprehensive approach to meeting the current and future needs of the child.



Prepared for the Child Welfare Network by:

Denise Tanata Ashby, J.D.

Executive Director, NV Institute for Children’s Research and Policy

Email: denise.tanata@unlv.edu