

## **PEW Commission Report on 'Foster Care Drift'**

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**pages 18-19**

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Today, more than half a million children in the United States are in foster care, placed there by public authorities because they could not live safely with their biological families. Foster care is vital to protecting seriously abused and neglected children. But too many children languish for too many years in foster care, moving from one temporary home to another. Federal financing mechanisms contribute to this foster care “drift” by restricting the majority of federal child welfare dollars to foster care and providing only a relatively small amount to other important services.

In a new report released by the Pew Commission on Children in Foster Care, “Voices from the Inside,” foster children and birth, foster and adoptive parents reveal the daily costs exacted from them by a child welfare system that is overly reliant on foster care. Three focus groups were conducted in September and October 2003. The Commission heard from eight former foster youth in Washington, D.C., 13 birth parents in New York City, and 11 foster and adoptive parents in Denver, including:

Jackie, 22, entered foster care at 8, had been living with an aunt. “I have excellent memories of living there,” she said. “I think if she had had a little help financially that I may not have entered foster care.” – *Read Jackie’s story in this issue of FFT.*

“Nancy”, whose children were in foster care, voiced frustration with court delays beyond her control, “Six months within a family’s life is a long time. If I go to court in September, and you give me six months, that’s in January. That’s Halloween, Thanksgiving, Christmas and New Year’s. Those are important times in a family.”

Alice, a foster and adoptive parent of 12, spoke of the plight of children who languish in foster care. “My heart breaks for them, because no one is going to walk them down the aisle, and no one is going to be there for their graduation.”

These “Voices from the Inside” represent the real-life daily struggles of those in foster care. Together, they provided powerful glimpses of a system that often does not succeed in serving the children and families who need it most. So, what works? What doesn’t? What are we going to do about it?

### **“Drift” At What Cost?**

The costs of foster care are typically defined in terms of dollars and financial implications. However, in a series of focus group discussions conducted by the Pew Commission, former foster youth, birth parents and foster and adoptive parents described costs that go well beyond dollars alone. The costs are borne first by those on the frontlines of foster care, but society as a whole pays a price when the system does not achieve the positive results it was intended to.

The report identifies six long-term costs of foster care:

**1. The Cost of Insecurity** - Children in foster care for extended periods of time, particularly those who have been in multiple foster homes, suffer from the insecurity of ruptured relationships and disrupted schooling. Jelani, who spent nine years in foster care, said “I remember every day I would come home from school, I would just see if my stuff was packed...that was the first thing I would go check for.”

**2. The Cost of Poor Communication** - Former foster youth, birth, foster and adoptive parents characterized the child welfare system as suffering from poor communication, where decision-making is fragmented, and information guarded rather than shared. This leads to more insecurity, frustration, lack of understanding and professional burnout.

**3. The Cost of Inflexibility** - The respondents described a child welfare system that failed to respond quickly, or adequately, to their individual needs. Lisa and her seven brothers and sisters were placed in foster care when her mother could not get treatment for her mental health needs.

**4. The Cost of Not Securing Timely Help** - Parents and former foster youth said help came too late – after the children were placed in foster care. They said earlier intervention targeted at addressing mental illness, substance abuse, and domestic abuse might have lessened the time a child had to spend in foster care, or even prevented the need for foster care.

**5. The Cost of Professional Burnout** – Workforce issues prevent social workers, judges, lawyers and others from protecting and supporting children; these include lack of appropriate training, unmanageable caseloads, high turnover and low compensation.

**6. The Cost of Stigma** – Youth and parents alike said that they feel stigmatized by their involvement with the foster care system. They feel the sting of this stigma long after their cases have been closed. In sharp contrast to public perception that foster parents are “in it for the money”, foster parent Dianna stated: “My love of children got me into foster care, and the thinking that maybe I could do something to make America a little bit better place to live.”

When tragedy strikes a child in foster care, the media and policy makers shine a spotlight on the child welfare agency, caseworkers, parents and foster parents. Sadly, that spotlight rarely illuminates the underlying reasons for child welfare system shortcomings, including a financing structure that encourages an inflexible, “one-size-fits-all” approach in treating all abused and neglected children, no matter how different their situations.

“The Pew Commission is dedicated to improving outcomes for children in foster care by developing practical, feasible policy recommendations to reform federal child welfare financing and strengthen court oversight of child welfare cases,” stated Vice Chairman and former Rep. Bill Gray, D-Pa. “Because the mechanics of financing and court operations can sometimes seem

far removed from the everyday experiences of children in foster care, we have endeavored to keep children at the heart of all of our work.”

Former Rep. Bill Frenzel, R-Minn., said, “Improving outcomes for these children will take more than the heroic efforts of individuals or the resilience that enables some children to beat the odds,” stated Frenzel. “It will take thoughtful changes in public policy and court oversight. And it will take public will and compassion equal to the individual commitment of the parents and children whose voices shape this report.”

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**ABOUT THE PEW COMMISSION** - The nonpartisan Pew Commission on Children in Foster Care was launched on May 7, 2003 under the leadership of former Reps. Frenzel and Gray. Supported by a grant from The Pew Charitable Trusts to the Georgetown University Public Policy Institute, this panel of experienced legislators, child welfare administrators and providers, judges, parents, and youth is committed to improving outcomes for some of the nation’s most vulnerable children by developing recommendations related to federal financing and court oversight of child welfare. It will report those recommendations in 2004.