

# Fund for Social Change

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## *The Story of the Child Welfare Fund*

**The Fund for Social Change administered the Child Welfare Fund until 2009**

[Click here](#) to view the chronology for the CWF

“The New York City child welfare system has fundamentally changed over the last several years....because you have forced us to change, because you have said openly and loudly, ‘Things cannot continue to go the way that they have been going.’ And we’ve listened to that.”

--William Bell, then-ACS Commissioner,  
in a speech honoring the Child Welfare Fund,  
June 2004

In 1992, the New York City child welfare system was in deep crisis. Poverty, the crack cocaine epidemic, and the spread of HIV/AIDS were devastating families. The number of children in foster care had more than tripled, from 16,230 in 1984 to 49,365 in 1992, putting enormous strain on the system. The city budget for foster care had expanded by hundreds of millions of dollars per year—yet the foster care system was dysfunctional. Too often, foster care had become the city’s first response to vulnerable families rather than a last resort after other measures had failed. Budgetary incentives within the system actually encouraged breaking up families by putting more children in foster care. The result was a system of which no one was proud, and in which no parent would want his or her child placed.

To address this crisis affecting hundreds of thousands of lives, a donor with experience and knowledge of the child welfare system formed the Child Welfare Fund (CWF) in 1992. First and foremost, CWF believed that the best way to improve the system was to give children and families within it a greater role in decisions affecting their own lives. Otherwise the system, no

matter how well-intentioned its goals, would continue to break families apart rather than keep them together; it would punish rather than heal.

Using as models other social service areas (developmental disabilities, mental illness, etc.), where parents had many more rights and helped shape policy, CWF set out to create and fund and in some cases guide organizations dedicated to similar goals. Although many judged these schemes likely to fail, CWF believed that teens in foster care could publish powerful stories about their experiences in Represent, that parents with children in the system could organize through the Child Welfare Organizing Project and other groups, that families would gain if biological parents had more rights to visit children in foster care, and that client empowerment could have an impact on a huge city agency, ACS.

CWF has not worked alone. The Annie E. Casey Foundation and many other organizations have been part of the effort. And today, thanks to all this work and the willingness of a huge city agency to change, parents and youth in the system have acquired a voice, and ACS staff has become more sensitive to clients' needs and experiences. For example, battered women have begun to advocate for themselves and to change the way the system responds to domestic violence. Other groups have raised awareness about discrimination and related problems faced by immigrant families in the child welfare system. To a greater degree than many thought possible, clients speak for clients.

One effort concerns the crucial Service Plan Review, which determines what parents must do to recover their children from foster care. Parents have had the right to attend these Reviews, but in the past only 10% of parents did so, largely because of barriers placed in their way by agencies and because of difficulties in their lives. To address this, CWF funded programs to train advocates for parents, ease participation by parents, publish adult and teen articles on the problem, and bring political pressure on ACS to change its approach to the Reviews. CWF also worked with ACS to make the Reviews more accessible. More than 50% of parents now attend their Service Plan Reviews.

In its early years, CWF was highly critical of ACS. But when ACS began to reform, CWF began to work with the agency. Both organizations have made strong efforts to encourage and support preventive services. One result is the Highbridge initiative in the Bronx, a concentrated campaign in a highly-distressed area to help families before they're overwhelmed and their children are placed in foster care. CWF and the Open Society Institute started the program; eight other foundations and ACS have now joined in.

CWF has supported many other programs of direct service to families. It does so because it sees specific needs and effective organizations, and because providing service helps CWF understand system-wide issues. CWF also promotes in-depth analysis of the system and its services. To that end, CWF helped create Child Welfare Watch, an independent journal that has shed light on the system and provided blueprints for innovation and reform.

## *Accomplishments*

The child welfare system has changed significantly since the Child Welfare Fund was founded in 1992, when almost 50,000 children were in foster care. Today, 18,000 youth are in the system. In addition, far fewer are placed into foster care each year—from 12,000 in 1992 to fewer than 6,000 today. New York City now has an accountability system to evaluate outside agencies under contract as well as the city's direct care program. Staff in ACS are better trained and better paid. The emphasis at ACS has shifted toward preventing the break-up of families and promoting neighborhood-based services. For the first time, more children are receiving preventive services than are in foster care.

The CWF approach has grown popular. It is taking hold in other cities. One example: Represent, the publication by and for youth in Foster Care, is being replicated in California and used throughout the country. The Child Welfare Organizing Project, which trains parents to be spokespersons, is also being emulated. Both organizations received their first grant from the Child Welfare Fund. The CWF approach has also attracted several other foundations, which now share many of its goals and programs and have joined with CWF to fund them.

Nevertheless CWF believes that without further system-wide effort in New York City, children and families in the system will continue to be at risk. If nothing else, the changes need to be sustained and expanded. In spite of the improvements, there are 2,000 more children in care today than in 1984, far too high a number. We can't forget that many past reforms have improved the system, only to be slowly undone. The battle is far from won.

In response to improvements elsewhere in the system, the CWF has shifted some resources to preventing family crises that might lead to foster care and to helping families and children after the children have been reunited with their families.

**For more information about the CWF and how to apply visit: [www.nycwf.org](http://www.nycwf.org)**