

**Remarks by Douglas W. Nelson, President & CEO  
The Annie E. Casey Foundation  
“A Look at Children’s Well-Being on the Eve of Change in America”  
2008 National Conference of the  
Alliance for Children & Families  
Baltimore, Maryland  
October 28, 2008**

Thank you, Peter. Welcome to Baltimore; it’s almost always this beautiful here.

I’m not quite sure what I promised Peter I would talk about this morning, but as I was thinking about these remarks last night I felt this irresistible temptation to go back to basics – to fundamentals.

For a long time now, I have held the belief that we make the greatest progress in human services – we make the greatest improvements in our policies, systems, programs and practices – when we decide to embrace the obvious . . . or maybe more aptly, when we decide to take the obvious and essential things that we know about the human condition seriously.

I first became an advocate of this not-so-stunning observation when I was asked – almost 28 years ago – by the Governor of Wisconsin to lead a task force to evaluate and improve aging programs in the state. Truth is, I didn’t know a damn thing about the elderly, aging programs, or senior services – so I immersed myself in all the progressive research and policy debates of that era – in hopes of coming out with a clearer-eyed vision of where the state of Wisconsin and its senior serving non-profits ought to be headed on behalf of the state’s older folks.

Well, I got pretty well-acquainted with what all the experts and advocates and providers were concerned about. We needed better Medicaid reimbursements for skilled nursing care, more intermediate care beds in rural areas, more senior centers in small towns, reduced staff-to-resident ratios in Milwaukee’s big nursing homes, and better assessment instruments to measure an older person’s dependency needs and daily activity limitations. We needed to create advocates or ombudsmen whom nursing home residents could turn to when abused, and finally, we needed ideas on how we might get older people themselves to contribute a greater share of the spiraling costs of institutional care that represented the overwhelming majority of all the state’s spending on the elderly.

Trust me, this was all sophisticated, cutting edge stuff at the time, and I was proud enough of what I was working on to tell my grandmother all about it. Now my grandmother thought I was a genius (or so she pretended), so I was counting on her usual affirming praise. Instead, after listening to my summary of likely recommendations, she said, “Douglas, why make all that “to-do” about old folks homes when they are the last places people my age ever want to be? All we want is some help to stay where we are and a little respect for who we were and who we still are. You should do something about that.”

And to that I said, “Yeah, Gram, I know all that – I hear that all the time.” BUT . . . but what? She was right. We simply weren’t putting her compelling common sense truth about the needs and interests of older people at the center of our policy or practice or spending.

That insight eventually changed the world of senior services in Wisconsin – and along with pioneering work that was also emerging in Oregon, Washington, and New York – it changed the field of aging across America. It redirected aging policy, programs, and spending towards home care, community care, family care – and it placed a new strength-based emphasis on autonomy, dignity, and independence for older folks.

I’m proud to report that as a result of my grandmother turning our attention to the obvious, the state of Wisconsin has fewer Medicaid beds today than it did 28 years ago, despite a doubling of the state’s over-70 population – and it now spends more on helping seniors stay where they are than it does to care for them where they don’t want to be.

Now why all that long-winded talk about aging for a crowd concerned about better lives, better futures for America’s vulnerable children? The answer is I am troubled that we kids advocates – we child-well-being experts – we too have yet to fully embrace or to fully act upon, the most obvious things about a child’s aspirations and needs and best interests. And that most obvious thing, as you all know, is family.

Family. We get it: Every kid needs one. We’ve gotten this for 20 years. We’ve changed our names – we all say “Children and Families” these days. The words family-centric and family-focused roll off our tongues. We’ve changed our messages and mantras. For 10 years, Casey has been reminding anyone who’d listen – that “kids do well when their families do well, and families do well when they live in supportive communities.” For more than a decade, our clinical and practice research has told and retold us that we can’t address a fragile kid’s health, mental health, behavioral, identity, or esteem issues unless we understand, engage, and address the child’s family and family networks. For two decades or more, we have incorporated families into our advocacy agendas, our speechmaking, our PR and our politicking. We kids’ advocates are now reliable endorsers of “family strengthening.” We believe in “family preservation. We want states to make “reasonable efforts” to keep stressed families together. We also like to proclaim that when kids need to come into out-of-home care that we need to work hard to secure permanence – that is, to safely reunify them with or creatively provide them new lifelong, caring families. And we say we ought to provide this valued permanence as quickly and as sensitively as we possibly can.

So, suffice it to say, we get it. We get the fundamental and obvious importance of family. Well, maybe. Maybe we get it. But then again, if we really got it, the fundamental question and challenge that confront all of us in this room is: Why don’t more of us really do it?

Let me begin with “family strengthening.” This is a country that believes in strong families and we are a field that increasingly understands that weak families are the best predictor and proximate cause of children coming into child welfare, of youth getting caught up in the

juvenile justice system, and of kids more broadly falling into that category of being “at high risk” of school failure, drug abuse, and premature parenthood.

And who exactly are these weak families who too often fail to safeguard, nurture, and succeed with their kids? Well, some are irresponsible, some are seriously ill, some are addicted, and some have endured awful and unpredictable tragedy. But an even broader and more apt description of these families is that they are overwhelmingly poor. They are stressfully balancing parenting, earning, and personal issues; they are insecurely housed; they live in communities of concentrated poverty; they are without access to affordable credit or personal savings to meet family emergencies; and they are often burdened by the disadvantages that arise from continuing racial and ethnic discrimination. They are, in other words, economically fragile families, who are chronically at risk of involuntarily short-changing their kids’ best interests – and, in their worst moments – being unable to ensure their kids core safety and well-being.

Those of us who advocate for and serve these children – whether we’re in protective services, foster care, delinquency or mental health agencies – we know that family poverty and economic insecurity helped bring most of these kids to our door. We know this because it’s obvious.

But what have we really done about it? The number and percent of children growing up in families living below poverty – and the number and percent living in extreme poverty – has been rising again over this past decade. And I can tell you one thing for sure: we aren’t going to make a dent in the numbers of American kids who fall victim to hardship, neglect, and compromised futures UNLESS and until we bring down the number of young families in this country who don’t have enough earnings, child care, health insurance, financial knowledge or savings to provide what their children need to be safe and well.

It’s as plain . . . it’s as obvious . . . it’s as basic as this. Our goals to improve child protection and child welfare are inseparable from our ability to significantly improve the economic success and security of millions of chronically impoverished, crisis-prone young families who remain outside the promise of American life.

If we truly embraced the obvious here, we’d all be saying that the Earned Income Tax Credit, the refundable child care credit, the minimum wage, states’ eligibility rules for unemployment compensation, the regulation of predatory retail and credit practices, access to quality affordable housing, the availability of child care and transportation – we’d all be saying that these are core issues for any agency, program, or individual who aspires to be a genuine advocate, a genuine future changer for vulnerable children. Put another way, we’d all be saying to whoever would listen that there is no way to improve the long term life futures of our most vulnerable children without first improving the near-term economic security of the men and women who are raising them.

So, I ask you – much as I’ve asked us at Casey – how much do these family economic success objectives . . . how centrally do these poverty reduction policies shape the work we do, the work our agencies do? How central are these family economic issues to our board’s or the

general public's understanding of the child and youth problems our programs are trying to address? If they are not yet at the center, how can we move them there?

Now I know – at this point – lots of you ought to be saying, “Yeah, we get the point, BUT . . . But, Nelson, let's be realistic. We're providers of clinical services to troubled families. We're working to turn around troubled youth. We're doing treatment foster care. We're supporting adoptive families – we aren't in the economic opportunity, economic justice business. We're not in the employment and tax equity and/or affordable transportation business.”

Well, okay. Maybe, for some of us, “family economic success” is a stretch. Maybe, we ought to be satisfied with something closer to home. Maybe we ought to be content to say that our commitment to the importance of family is represented by our commitment to real permanence for every child – the promise we are making to assure the children who come into child welfare care are not just getting a temporary respite from danger and risk – but more importantly are getting a promise that we will connect or reconnect every one of them to a safe, caring, and lifelong family.

We, as a field, have talked a lot – and we know a lot – about the need for family permanence – in kids' lives. But the truth is, we have been awfully slow to act on it. We have been awfully slow to make this basic and obvious need our centerpiece.

For two decades permanence has been our official child welfare policy, but the unhappy truth is, only rarely has it been our predominant child welfare practice. We still have far too many of the 700,000+ children coming into care every year whose families could have been – should have been – held safely together by what are now well-proven and replicable family preservation interventions and supports.

And we still too routinely choose placements for children coming into care that not only don't facilitate permanence, but actually inhibit it. We've got to stop placing so many kids so far from their birth family, schools, and friends. We've got to quit overlooking and underestimating qualified relatives as appropriate caretakers or permanent guardians. We've got to stop separating siblings - and we absolutely have to stop using group and congregate care facilities as the default placement for older kids coming into care. Perhaps, most of all, we have to stop pretending there is any such a thing as “independent living” for 18-year-olds whom we let leave our systems without permanent families.

In the place of all these counterproductive patterns and practices, we need to embrace an authentic and effective commitment to restoring or recreating enduring families for every kid who enters foster care. At a minimum, this means vastly increasing the quantity and quality of supports we offer to reunifying families. For those kids who can't rejoin their birth families, it means mounting a far more aggressive effort to identify, recruit, enable and support the adoptive and guardianship families that they need.

It also means that we must make our commitment to seeking and finding permanence a truly inclusive and universal one. Kids with disabilities, older kids, and kids of color can no longer be treated as if they had a lesser claim on the right to a lifelong family.

Taking any of these steps toward achieving greater permanence has been and will continue to be challenging. And, truth is, little real progress will be made on this journey unless and until we are prepared to provide our frontline child welfare workers with the training, with the time, with the resources, with up-to-date information systems, and with the mechanisms for shared decision making that this extraordinary work requires.

Equally important, we will not approach the promise of delivering real family permanence until we routinely include, listen to, and hear the voices of both the children and the families we are seeking to serve. The fact is, it is these kids (and their kin) that have the greatest stake in whether we succeed or fail in this difficult work, and the evidence is now abundant that their participation, their insights, and their aspirations can help guide us toward that success.

It is time that fulfilling the obligation of securing lifelong families for all the kids who need them be seen by all of us as a moral imperative. But just holding that view won't make it happen. What will make it happen – and the only thing that will make it happen – are deep changes in our missions, programs, practices, and the way we measure success – changes that focus on ensuring all kids can remain or become part of caring, competent, safe, and resourceful families.

That is the obvious and the transformative principle that I think must reshape the children-serving world – both public and non-profit – in the decade ahead. Of course, it won't be easy. The fact that it's obvious, fundamental and compelling doesn't – I'm sorry to say – make it easy. And the obstacles to adopting a genuinely family-centered approach to serving vulnerable kids are many.

We're used to serving kids as if disconnection were their fate. We're used to blaming parents and families as the source of problems rather than enabling them to be part of the solution. We're used to thinking kids' interests and parents' interests are antagonistic. We're used to public funding streams and grant requirements that don't really reward working with families or allow for the investments that are often required to find, support, strengthen, and sustain lifelong families for kids.

Now let me acknowledge right here that I'm acutely aware I'm calling for this increased commitment to family-focused work at a time when non-profit agency endowments are getting hammered, when too many foundations and local United Ways are scaling back their grant support, when state human service budgets are being undermined by deficits, and when low-income families are at risk of being further weakened by the impacts of a frightening economic downturn.

Daunting to be sure, but maybe not insurmountable. In this very tough environment there are some favorable variables. Just this month, thanks in significant part to advocacy by this

Alliance, Congress enacted and funded the landmark Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act. That legislation promises significant new resources to help states and providers seek and find families for more kids by enabling greater reliance on kin, by giving incentives for permanent legal guardianships, and by enabling states to keep support and permanency promises to youth older than 18. It's not everything – it's not responsive enough to our need to expand family strengthening, family preservation, and reunification support – but it's a big step toward taking permanence more seriously.

It also comes on the eve of what may be a truly transformative national election – one that may bring a new and sincere priority on reducing child poverty; on reducing the income, housing, and food insecurity of poor and working families. It may usher in a new set of priorities that will not tolerate the disparate and lousy opportunity and outcome burdens still borne by too many children and families of color.

The federal government, however, is not the only stage setter for change. States have a critical role to play. Governors and legislators are in a position to make a big difference on the family economic security front. Their decisions on child care subsidies, use of employment and training dollars, adoption of state EITCs, child support policies, emergency assistance, and affordable housing can determine how many low-income families have a fighting chance to provide for and protect their kids during tough economic times.

States also can do much to make families and permanence the real heart of their publicly funded children's services. State budget and policy decisions will determine how much impact the newly passed Fostering Connections Act will actually have on real kids and their chances for stronger family connections.

States' political will can also propel real, difference making reform – reforms that move preventive services, protective services, family services and foster care into bona fide vehicles for returning kids to strong and lasting families.

This isn't just wishful thinking. The State of Maine is reducing admissions to foster care, keeping placed kids closer to home, keeping more siblings together, reducing reliance on congregate care, shortening lengths of stay, and seeing more kids exit care with legal permanence. Other states, including Louisiana, Illinois, Utah, Indiana, Maryland, and Virginia, are making dramatic progress on some or all of these fronts as well.

All these developments – the possibility of new federal leadership, the clear progress of reform-focused states, and the examples of truly family-centered program and practice being demonstrated every day by our most creative service providers – including many represented in this room – all these developments are heartening signs of – if I can borrow an expression – heartening signs of “the change we need.”

But we still have a long way to go. Fact is, I have chosen to use the privilege of my time with you this morning to share this clumsy sermon on the importance of family because I can think of no other group, no other audience better positioned to move this agenda forward than

those gathered in this room and the thousands of others who work in your organizations and agencies.

Alliance members know the children in this country who are being left out or left behind. As advocates, you bring the kind of moral and political credibility to the issues facing these kids that can only come from professionals like yourselves – people who have devoted their lives to meeting children’s needs.

And, I know that you know the greatest of those needs. You know that every single child needs and deserves a family that is safe enough, stable enough, secure enough, connected enough, and supported enough to love, protect, and provide for them. You know it because we know what family means to us and to our own children.

In this next decade, all of us who care about kids need to come together and redouble our determination to see that millions more American children are assured of their most fundamental and obvious right – the right to belong to a safe and permanent family.

The Casey Foundation looks forward to continuing its support of the Alliance and its leadership in this most important work on behalf of kids and families.

Thank you for inviting me here today.