The Pennsylvania Commission on Crime and Delinquency (PCCD) has tapped the Field Center to assist in the planning of new Child Advocacy Centers (CACs) across the Commonwealth. Arising from the recommendation of the Pennsylvania Task Force on Child Protection’s recent recommendation that a Child Advocacy Center be within reach of every child victim in Pennsylvania, PCCD is seeking technical assistance in identifying where to establish new CACs. Convened in the wake of Jerry Sandusky’s indictment for sexually abusing a number of young boys in Pennsylvania, the Task Force has been instrumental in calling for systemic reform.

Task Force Chair, the Honorable David Heckler, stated in the introduction of Child Protection in Pennsylvania: Proposed Recommendations – Report of the Task Force on Child Protection that, “if a Child Advocacy Center......had existed in Centre County at that time, Sandusky’s crimes would have been brought to light at the beginning of this millennium, sparing his victims ten or twelve years of misery. We......(believe) that a Child Advocacy Center should be reasonably accessible to every child in this Commonwealth.”

Child Advocacy Centers provide a child-friendly, coordinated process of interviewing victims of suspected child abuse by a trained forensic interviewer on behalf of the child welfare, law enforcement, victim advocacy, district attorney, medical, and behavioral health systems. This model of investigation minimizes the need for child victims to tell their story over and over to different people, and offers them a safe and supportive environment to talk about their abuse. A multidisciplinary team provides coordinated case planning, a more efficient and family-friendly method of response. Additionally, victim advocates support the family through the process. Medical examinations are conducted by trained medical experts, and behavioral health services to help the child heal are trauma-informed and geared specifically for victims of child abuse. CACs primarily serve victims of child sexual abuse, but many also serve victims of physical abuse or witnesses to violent crime. They may serve children referred to the child welfare system, local police departments, the district attorney’s office for potential prosecution of sexual offenses against children, or a combination.

The National Children’s Alliance (NCA) is the national accrediting body for Child Advocacy Centers. They establish standards of practice by which child advocacy centers are measured. Child Advocacy Centers may be structured differently, be housed within one or more partner agencies or as an independent organization, and vary in their composition. However, each is held to the same standards to assure adherence to the principles and processes required. Currently, there are 12 nationally accredited Child Advocacy Centers in Pennsylvania. The Field Center will be researching county-by-county child abuse reporting and investigation data in addition to data on the criminal prosecution of child abuse cases to help inform its recommendations. Additional research will identify potential resources to support the development of new CACs.

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According to the Department of Health and Human Services’ Fourth National Incidence Study of Child Abuse and Neglect, between 1.25 million and 3 million children experienced some form of abuse, neglect, or maltreatment in 2005-2006.1

Not all of this abuse or neglect is known beyond the victim and aggressor, but the abuse that does come to light is often revealed through reports to state or county agencies tasked with investigating suspicions of child abuse. For example, in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, the Department of Human Services (DHS) investigates these allegations and provides services to families and children, including foster care and community-based services.2 These reports come from concerned neighbors, family members, daycare providers, teachers, pediatricians, and emergency room nurses or doctors. That report may generate an investigation into the child’s injuries or home life. When the child’s injuries meet the state law definition of abuse or neglect, DHS may (or when the child’s continued safety or well-being is at risk, must) file an emergency petition with the Family Court to have the child removed from his or her parents.

After DHS removes a child from the home because of abuse or neglect, DHS must make reasonable efforts to reunify the child with his or her family of origin. These reasonable efforts may include services such as parenting classes, substance abuse treatment, or therapy. However, in the severest cases, federal law provides that social services may be excused from these reasonable efforts very early in the life of an abuse case. Declining to provide reunification services to parents is a substantial step toward terminating parental rights, particularly given the long duration of most child welfare cases. Once the Family Court terminates parental rights to a child, that child can be adopted by another family.

If DHS is no longer planning for reunification, then it must have another plan for the child’s ultimate permanent placement. While permanency can mean a termination of parental rights and then adoption, sometimes permanency may mean guardianship or another planned permanent living arrangement (APPLA). Guardianship may mean another adult has permanent legal custody of a child, but the Family Court has not terminated parental rights, so parents may still have a non-custodial relationship with their child. APPLA, reserved for older youth, usually involves some combination of foster care, group homes or living arrangements, and independent living services that anticipate the child will age out of foster care without a guardian or adoptive parent.

When infants are removed from their parents by DHS because of suspected abuse or neglect, usually the goal is to return the child to his or her parents as soon as a Family Court Judge determines that the child’s home is a safe and appropriate placement. Indeed, the local agencies are tasked with providing services to the parents to facilitate the child’s return to the home. Sometimes, however, there are no circumstances under which an infant can be returned home because of the nature of the abuse or neglect that brought the child into the system in the first place. These extreme cases of torture, abandonment, chronic neglect, or unexplained serious injury are referred to in the law as “aggravated circumstances.” In these aggravated circumstances, abused infants’ permanent placements will usually be in adoptive homes, and there is a legal mechanism for expediting that process.

Aggravated circumstances can be an important tool in cases where an infant (zero to twelve months) has been injured seriously under unexplained circumstances. Often, no one caregiver can be identified as the perpetrator of the serious injury; one or more caregivers may have been separately or jointly responsible for inflicting the injuries or failing to prevent the infliction of the injuries, and no caregiver will take responsibility for the act or identify the perpetrator. When the injuries are serious and the home is unsafe to return the infant to because of the unresolved perpetrator issue, a finding of aggravated circumstances allows social services to plan for that infant to be moved to a permanent placement outside the home after a termination of parental rights.

Delays in finding permanency for infants may harm infants more than such delays for older children; however, my initial research suggests that identifying infants who are candidates for a finding of aggravated circumstances is difficult. Infants, pre-verbal and completely dependent, cannot describe how they have been injured or identify who has injured them. What has happened to them must be recreated after the fact, by interviewing caregivers and those who have seen the infant, and sometimes by investigating their physical surroundings. Uncovering how an infant has been injured, and whether that injury was accidental or not, requires multiple forms of expertise rarely found in a single individual. Further, making the case to a Family Court Judge that such an injury has been inflicted and qualifies as an aggravated circumstance requires that a DHS city solicitor present to the judge, through those professionals and other witnesses, the case explaining what has happened.

If the DHS city solicitor files a petition in Family Court asking for a finding of aggravated circumstances, and the Judge grants the petition, DHS is legally allowed to forego planning with parents and instead plan for

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The Field Center’s Multidisciplinary Student Training Institute provides internship, field placement, and training opportunities for students from the multiple disciplines that are involved with the child welfare system. Established with a founding gift by Edith and Marvin Schur, the Multidisciplinary Student Training Institute brings together the teaching and learning experiences of Field Center-affiliated trainees under one umbrella.

On April 10, 2013, the Field Center was pleased to host its inaugural Multidisciplinary Student Training Institute Symposium, featuring presentations reflecting the broad range of work and experiences completed by these promising men and women. A reception followed this capstone event.

The following program was held at Penn’s Houston Hall and was well-received by those in attendance:

- **Montgomery County Foster Care Social Media Campaign:** Foster Care Awareness Month
  Kelsey Colburn, BSW student

- **Project Penn and the Child Advocacy Clinic**
  Nicole Royer, MSW student (practice)

- **Child Advocacy Centers & The Delaware County Needs Assessment**
  Renee Manson, MSW student (macro)

- **Expulsion: The Hidden Problem of Pre-School**
  Clement Gyan, MSW research assistant

- **Factors that Affect Linkage to Mental Health Treatment After Sexual Abuse**
  Hiu Fai Fong, medical fellow, Children’s Hospital of Philadelphia

- **Timmy Fell Off the Bed: Utilization of Aggravated Circumstances from the Adoption and Safe Families Act**
  Harper Seldin, law student and Alan Lerner Fellow in Child Welfare Policy

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**Achievement Gap: Assessed in Terms of the Educational Needs of Children and Youth in the Child Welfare System**

by Nicole Royer

Education is a gateway and lifeline for a child’s future success and every child is entitled to quality education that will help support them throughout their lifetime. Children spend the majority of their time at school, with their peers, teachers, and school counselors and their intellectual, social, physical, and emotional growth and development are partly reliant upon their educational experiences. Unfortunately, despite the importance of education, achievement gaps continue to prevail throughout the educational system (Achievement Gap 2004).

Especially notable is the achievement gap amongst children involved in the child welfare system. Children and youth in foster care are at a significant disadvantage when it comes to educational advancement and success. Studies have shown that the high school graduation rate for youth in foster care is 30-50%, compared to the overall 70% graduation rate for high school students in the United States (Snodgrass 2010). Additionally, children in foster care place 15-20 points behind their peers on state standardized tests (Snodgrass 2010). Children in foster care face greater disadvantages, because of the instability and trauma they have lived through. However, positive educational experiences can help to mitigate the impact of these experiences. “Success in school can be a positive counterbalance to the abuse, neglect, separation, and impermanence experienced by the children and youth in foster care” and a supportive education has the “potential to markedly improve their life chances and their ability to contribute to society as productive adults” (National Working Group on Foster Care and Education, 2011).

Despite the large amount of time children spend in school and the positive results that can be achieved when foster children are in stable and supportive school environments, there is often poor collaboration between the educational system and the child welfare system (Altshuler 2003). From frequent school changes, to school officials not being fully aware of which students are in foster care, children in care are not given the consistent support they need for educational success.

The National Working Group on Foster Care recently cited changes in schools and delays in school enrollment as major factors in diminished school performance for children and youth in foster care. These factors cause students to make less academic progress than their peers and are correlated with lower test scores. In addition to these factors, research has shown that inability to address the educational needs of and support for children in foster care increases behavioral problems in school, which can subsequently lead to truancy, grade retention, and barriers to graduation (National Working Group on Foster Care and Education, 2011). The working group emphasized that a “concerted effort” is necessary if a change in educational outcomes is to be seen (National Working Group on Foster Care and Education, 2011).

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It goes without saying that when schools are faced with budget cuts, both fine and performing arts are one of the first things to go. After No Child Left Behind was passed in 2002, schools increased focus on English and math, as a result of the national testing and accountability standards that were put into place. However, due to this increased focus as well as the recession of 2008, schools have begun to cut time and funding from art, performance, history, and science. English and science are, of course, vital in a child’s life. However, the importance of these subjects should not conflict with the positive outcomes students experience when art programs are included in school curricula. As First Lady Michelle Obama reminds us, “…arts education is essential for building innovative thinkers who will be our nation’s leaders for tomorrow.”

The importance of the arts is especially relevant for children in foster care. If not given the right tools, research shows that young people who age out of foster care are far more likely than their peers in the general population to endure homelessness, poverty, compromised mental and physical health, insufficient education, unemployment, incarceration, and early pregnancy and parenthood. Positive alternatives and outlets can make a lasting impression on at-risk youth.

For foster youth, who often have little voice in the foster care system and who may ultimately experience the “school to prison pipeline,” the arts go a long way to promote empowerment and give youth a voice. In California, it currently costs taxpayers approximately $8,000 per year to educate one youth based on the average daily attendance, while it costs around $90,000 per year to incarcerate one youth in a state corrections system.

The arts are an alternative form of expression for youth who feel they are not being heard, and who consequently may turn to violence, anger, or suicide. By giving youth an outlet through art, we are thus lessening both the emotional and fiscal cost of juvenile detention, as well as promoting healthier and more resilient youth. In New Orleans, art and performance programs have found success in diverting youth from violence, dropping out of school, gangs, incarceration, and drugs. It has been found that through these programs, youth have a positive creative outlet, rather than using their free time to commit acts of deviancy. Performing arts program participants are less likely to drop out of school, are more likely to attend college, and are less likely to commit crimes.

Until they are eighteen, youth are not often given the option to speak for themselves; adults do that for them. For foster kids, this is amplified due to a lack of long-term stable adult presence and frequent placement changes. The ability to tell their stories, and a positive outlet through which to do so, is absent in the lives of many youth. A solution? What better way to give kids a voice, than to give them a stage.

Through stage and performance, youth, especially youth in foster care, are provided with a venue to express emotions, challenges, and the unique difficulties that they face in the system – all with a captive audience. They are empowered to speak, to be heard, and to develop confidence in their own voice and their ability to tell a story.

One such organization has devoted twenty years to giving teenagers an outlet through theater. The Possibility Project is a nonprofit organization that operates three programs for youth in New York City: a Saturday program, an after school program for teens aged 13-19, and a program specifically geared towards foster youth. Overall, the organization serves approximately 150 teenagers in New York ages 13-21. Each season is a year long, and throughout the process the teams build and perform three original musicals that combine song, dance, and acting based around issues the students see as critically affecting teens today.

During a visit to the Possibility Project, Artistic Director of the foster care program, Kenny Phillips, said that in terms of experience, no prior performance skills are needed. In fact, Mr. Phillips acknowledged, “I would rather have somebody who has always wanted to act and has never done it but is courageous enough to come to the auditions.” Diversity is also a large part of the equation – diversity of ages, backgrounds, experiences, and gender make for a thriving learning environment. Final products have included musicals based on cyber bullying, dating violence, child abuse, rape, and homelessness. Nothing is taken off the table, because, as Mr. Phillips said, “the idea of using their literal voice on stage directly coincides with being heard in the world.”

What appears to be unique about this type of theater experience for youth is the true collaborative effort between students, staff, and volunteers. In many ways, the theater answers to the students and their needs, and the adult’s job is to listen. If you really dig past the surface level, teens truly know what they need, and they know what they want the world to hear. By allowing youth to steer the outcome, the end product is more raw, truer, and empowering.

Every foster child comes with a story, and these are stories that American culture tends to overlook. For foster youth who may be at greater risk of being unrepresented and unheard, through the theater, they are given an outlet. Through performance they have the ability to unleash emotions in a safe place. Both their frustrations and their joys have a place on the stage, and for many youth, this may be the first experience they have where both adults and peers desire to listen. Hopefully the result is a strong, resilient youth with the means and attitude to take control of their future.

Ty, a nineteen year old three-year veteran of the The Possibility Project, says that the organization has changed his life. He stresses that his friends feel a sense of family, and for some, this is more of a familial environment than they’ve ever experienced at home. The organization is a safe place where kids are free to discuss the issues that are troubling them with very few limits, and they know that it will be an understanding environment without having to fear being shut down. Ty elaborates, “When I see things on the news about kids committing suicide, or who are the victims of abuse, I’m happy to be with [the theater], because I’m giving those kids a voice.”

In the end, getting youth to open up about their experiences is about the questions adults, directors and leaders ask, but it quickly becomes about the questions students ask each other. The opportunity to perform their own stories allows youth to know how capable they are, and how their voices and experiences truly matter. Through theater, students can gain resilience, leadership skills, cross cultural competencies, and the ability to resolve conflict in their lives. Projects such as this have proven that performance can give kids hope for their future, and confidence that they are worthy of being heard. They have the strength to promote change.

1 “As the Majority of School Districts Spend More Time on Reading and Math, Many Cut Time in Other Areas,” Press Release, Center on Education Policy, July 25, 2007
2 California Department of Education – School Fiscal Services Divisions. 2011-2012 Current Expense Per Average Daily Attendance
4 Child Trends Data Bank, 2011
5 http://www.americansforthearts.org/NAPD/files/9209/Arts%20Programs%20for%20Youth%20At-Risk_Pamphlet.pdf
THANK YOU TO OUR SUPPORTERS!

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Your tax-deductible donation to the Field Center for Children’s Policy, Practice & Research enables us to continue our critical work. Thanks to a challenge grant from the Joseph and Marie Field Foundation, gifts are matched on a dollar-for-dollar basis. An envelope is attached for your convenience, or you may give a gift online by visiting www.fieldcenteratpenn.org.

For more information, please contact Field Center Executive Director Debra Schilling Wolfe at (215) 573-5442 or dwolfe@sp2.upenn.edu.
another type of permanency. For infants whose cases might constitute aggravated circumstances, timely filing means that they spend less time in foster care with potentially fewer different caregivers before finding their permanent adoptive home. Using a survey of scale questions and semi-structured interviews, this author’s study identified three barriers to identifying such infants and filing for aggravated circumstances in their cases. A convenience sample (n=12) of Philadelphia child welfare professionals and graduate students in different disciplines suggested that disorganized scheduling, difficulty communicating material facts across professions and agencies, and a lack of accountability created barriers or disincentives for DHS city solicitors to file for aggravated circumstances.

These initial findings indicate several possible interventions that might improve timely and appropriate filing of petitions for aggravated circumstances. For example, the DHS city solicitor could implement policies mandating early investigation into possible aggravated circumstances in infant injury cases, and teams of senior DHS solicitors and social workers could be assigned to screen infant injury cases for aggravated circumstances at the first instance when the case is reported to DHS. Furthermore, specialized multi-disciplinary response teams could be dedicated to these most serious cases of abused infants to ensure that the multi-disciplinary conversations and focus on aggravated circumstances is front and center from the beginning of the case. It is clear that further research into the frequency of aggravated circumstances filings, the success rates of such petitions, and outcomes for similarly situated infants whose cases either included or did not include such petitions would be incredibly beneficial for guiding more targeted policy recommendations and ensuring permanency for the most vulnerable children in the child welfare system.

In the Next Issue....

- Foster Care to College: Strategies for Success

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2 http://www.phila.gov/dhs/childProtection.html
Considering the developmental, emotional, and behavioral needs of children in foster care, there are several promising practices that can help to close the achievement gap for children in foster care, including early intervention. One promising program is the Ready to Succeed Initiative, which focuses on young children, in California, who may be at an early risk for failing (National Working Group on Foster Care and Education 2011). Prior to the program being in place it was found that children under the age of five, in Fresno County, "were not routinely accessing early intervention programs or preschool despite qualifying for services due to their high risk of developmental delays" (National Working Group on Foster Care and Education 2011, p 5). In response, the Fresno County child welfare agency assigned an education liaison to toddlers and preschool-aged children resulting in the percentage of children enrolled in preschool increasing from 42% to 59%, between 2009 and 2011.

While this program may increase school enrollment, early intervention programs are complicated to initiate if schools and the child welfare system do not collaborate. Understanding that multiple moves between homes and schools are an unfortunate reality for many youth in care, another innovative practice is creating an “educational passport” for every school-aged child in care. “This confidential, online passport would serve as a way to keep track of school related information when a child moves to a different location. The passport would contain a profile of medical records; special education services needed/recommended (IEP records) behavior/citizenship reports, current work completed with necessary credit given, and current (expedited) transcript records of the child” (Snodgrass 2010).

A educational passport would increase coordination between systems by tracking foster children’s school attendance, performance on state standard testing, number of school changes, grades repeated, and behavioral problems (Snodgrass 2010). These indicators can help teachers, school administrators, and caregivers recognize educational barriers and provided the necessary attention and preparation that children in foster care need for academic improvement.

To help facilitate and initiate these measures, professional training and development programs for teachers, caseworkers, and caregivers on the unique circumstances experienced by children in foster care are necessary. School officials and teachers should create a welcoming atmosphere for caseworkers to exchange information; caseworkers should build relationships and interact within the school systems; and both systems should work to incorporate and include caregivers in this communication process (Altshuler 2003). This partnership would encourage and build an environment for educational advocacy for youth in foster care. Ideally, this advocacy would include the provision of academic counseling, mentorship, early intervention and special inclusion in educational policy reform.

With this in mind, The Juvenile Law Center and Education Law Center created training to assist teachers, administrators, and counseling staff with meeting the educational needs of students in the child welfare system. The training encourages teachers to welcome students and ensure they have school supplies, advises teacher to communicate with the child’s education decision maker, and emphasizes the importance of engaging students in the school community and activities. School officials and teachers are also called upon to advocate for students in need of support and guidance, and to create a long-term education plan for students over the age of 14. A common thread throughout the training is the need for interagency collaboration to create a supportive plan of action on behalf of students.

Another unique local response to the difficult educational experiences of youth in foster care was the opening of Arise Academy Charter High School, in 2009. Arise Academy combines education and supportive services for youth, between the ages of 14 and 21, who will eventually, age out of foster care. Small by design, capped at 200 students, Arise is the only charter school designed specifically to serve children in foster care. Gabriel Kuriloff, CEO of Arise Academy, says the school is designed to reach the different layers of trauma, social and emotional support needed by youth in foster care and provide individual growth planning. The plan is for every student that enters Arise Academy, to have a DHS worker, a provider agency worker, and a care giver who share information and are incorporated into the students’ educational plan. It is hoped that this communication will eliminate the gap created by the lack of collaboration between the educational system and the child welfare system.

As promising practices continue to emerge it is without saying that there must continue to be collaboration between systems to help ensure that youth are able to maintain educational stability, feel comfortable in their school environment and have increased social and educational support. Children in care may see their provider worker once a week, the DHS caseworker may see them once a month, and the child advocate may see them every other month—but school officials see children for almost eight hours every day. The opportunity to use this prolonged contact within the school setting to apply interventions that will improve educational outcomes for children in foster care should not be missed.

The Field Center will be utilizing the resources of the University of Pennsylvania’s Cartographic Modeling Lab’s (CML) mapping technology in developing its recommendations. Penn’s Cartographic Modeling Lab specializes in spatial analysis using Geographic Information Systems (GIS) technology. CML services include mapping and other visual displays of data, developing web-based information systems, and performing innovative analysis using administrative data.

The CML will use spatial optimization modeling to determine the optimal location for new Child Advocacy Centers throughout the state as well as the projected client demand that will be served by each. Geographic information system (GIS) software will upload data, including countywide utilization rates, demographics, potential CAC resources, and roads and travel times, resulting in the production of high-resolution maps.

Once the future locations of new CACs are determined, stakeholders within each community will design and develop their own CAC model and structure in accordance with national standards.

For more information, please contact the Field Center’s executive director, Debra Schilling Wolfe, at fieldctr@sp2.upenn.edu.
Newsletter Highlights...

- Bucks County DA David Heckler to receive 2013 Alan Lerner Child Advocacy Award
- Field Center Unveils New Logo
- A Child Advocacy Center for Every Child Victim: Field Center Awarded Statewide Planning Contract