

When Gordon Johnson left the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services in 1990, most people expected him to take a well-deserved rest. For more than 20 years, Johnson had led statewide public foster care programs, seeing time and again the trauma of children being taken from their homes, often compounded by the distressing separation of siblings.

Instead, he went on to work full time in a program he created in 1994 that used a new approach to foster care called "Neighbor to Neighbor." Today at 74, he shows no signs of slowing down and no decrease in his passion for improving the child welfare system.

Today, another program he created, "Neighbor to Family," which evolved from the Illinois program, provides services from Daytona Beach to Miami and Orlando in Florida; seven counties in Georgia; Baltimore; Waynesville, N.C. and Norfolk, Va., working with an annual budget of \$30 million and employing 550 people caring for more than 2,000 abused and neglected children each day.

How did he do it? "Because I care," said Johnson. "When I was working in Illinois, I was deeply concerned about the quality of foster parenting. I was deeply troubled by the danger to the foster kids by some of the foster parents whom I saw.

"I saw that the system wasn't able to guarantee the kids' safety. Siblings were placed in separate homes. They didn't see each other for a long time. They were taken from home. They didn't know what's going on. Foster parents not knowing what's going on. The pain really struck me."

Johnson first came in contact with the concept of foster care in his teens, when the mother of his two nephews

and two nieces died. Their father was an alcoholic and unable to care for them. Johnson's father took the four children in.

Johnson, a native of New Jersey, began his career in 1959 as a cottage officer at that state's Jamesburg State Home for Boys. He witnessed youngsters in hand and leg cuffs being beaten by officers who were supposed to care

The Man Who Brings Neighbors And Families Together

for them. He remembers the feeling that, in some cases, the children were in a worse place than where they had come from.



Gordon Johnson

Meanwhile, he worked his way through the ranks of the child welfare agencies in Pennsylvania, New York and Florida, and in 1983 he became the director of the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services, responsible for 600,000 children in state custody. He was determined to fix the broken system, but he knew that the only way he could change the traditional foster care system was to start from scratch.

Faced with more than 1,000 African-American children needing adoptive placement, Johnson joined efforts with the faith community for an innovative approach to this crisis – to find one family in one church to adopt one child. Thus the "One Church, One Child" program was born. The program was chosen by the Ford Foundation and the John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University as one of the best government partnership programs in the county.

In 1990, Johnson left the Illinois DCFS to become president and chief

executive officer of Jane Addams Hull House Association in Chicago. There he created the Neighbor to Neighbor approach. The program's strategy:

- Sibling groups would be placed together in a single home;
- Birth parents would be held accountable for the long-term well being of the children;
- The role of the foster parent would

be professionalized – they would be trained;

- Permanency planning would be a consistent, purposeful team effort
- With this innovative approach, foster parents are paid a salary and benefits for their role as full-time parents with full accountability.

In 1998, Johnson was asked to bring the Neighbor to Neighbor program to Daytona Beach, where it was incorporated as the private-not-for-profit organization, Neighbor to Family Inc. He retired from Jane Addams Hull House in 2000 and assumed full-time leadership of NTF.

"Neighbor to Family works to keep everyone in the loop with the goal of achieving quick and longer-lasting family reunification," said Johnson.

Over the years, Neighbor to Family, the program that evolved from the Neighbor to Neighbor technique, has helped 4,500 children, 4,100 of whom have been siblings. The remarkable thing about this program is that these children have spent 75 percent less time in foster homes than children in state-run programs. It reversed the national pattern of 80 percent to 90 percent turnover among foster parents. In his program, 85 percent of the foster parents stay in the program. ◀