

## Keeping Siblings Together in Foster Care

State legislation and private programs try to bring brothers and sisters together.

By Ed Finkel

Best practice theories hold that foster children should maintain contact with their biological parents unless there's strong reason not to. Until recently, however, little thought was given to maintaining what is often the longest-lasting relationship of a person's lifetime: the one with siblings.

"The system's just not set up" for siblings to stay connected in foster care, says Gail Biro, vice president of the Neighbor to Family child welfare agency in Daytona Beach, Fla. "It's like you're on a farm, and you have a litter of kittens, and it's a 'whoever-will-take-one' kind of thing."

But "the whole issue of siblings has been coming to the forefront since about '02," says Millicent Williams, director of foster care for the Child Welfare League of America (CWLA). "The issue of sibling placements and the strong bonds and connections probably started in the adoption field. Then it moved into looking at the initial placement of kids in foster care."

Last October, Casey Family Programs convened the Foster Youth and Alumni Leadership Summit, bringing together foster youths who have siblings and leaders in the child welfare field. The youths noted "that they were not placed together" with their brothers or sisters, said the summit report, "and many did not know where their siblings were and had not seen them for years."

The report recommends that siblings be placed together or, when they cannot be, that courts order visits between them. In cases of separation, the report also suggests giving the youths phone cards so they can call each other, and updates when the contact information changes.

Siblings aren't placed together for several reasons, including the simple fact that child welfare managers haven't focused on trying. There's also the issue of whether foster care facilities have enough room to take groups of youths and keep them together. Agencies have to follow regulations "about what you're allowed and not allowed to do in terms of room size, number of people to a home, all those kinds of things," says Bob Friend, assistant director of the California Permanency for Youth Project.

Several programmatic and legislative efforts are helping to keep foster siblings connected.

Among the first organizations to make sibling connections was Camp

To Belong, which began in Colorado in 1995 and has expanded to six locations in the United States and Canada.

"It's one thing to be separated from your parents," says founder Lynn Price. "But we usually are closer, even, with our siblings. You have to look to each other to survive."

Other privately run programs – like Neighbor to Neighbor, based in Chicago, and Neighbor to Family, based in Daytona Beach, Fla. – look to fill that void year-round. The programs pay foster parents extra, through salaries and benefits, to take in sibling groups. "We're hoping this catches on," says Gordon Johnson, CEO of Neighbor to Family, who founded the Chicago-based program when he worked at the Jane Addams Hull House Association in 1994. "It doesn't have to be our program."

Founded in the wake of a lawsuit filed by the American Civil Liberties Union, Neighbor to Neighbor differs from its larger cousin in Daytona Beach in that it strives to accept sibling groups only of four or more – an especially pressing need in an urban area like Chicago, says Vanessa Lankford, director of Neighbor to Neighbor.

Program founder Johnson led the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services for seven years, ending in 1990, after working in the New York and Pennsylvania child welfare departments. "Through all those collective experiences, we tried through the bureaucracy in many ways to address foster care concerns," he says. "I found the bureaucracy itself could not do it. We needed some new, innovative ways from the outside."

"It's absolutely insane that we don't have the common sense to keep families together," says Kathleen Bushong, a foster parent with Neighbor to Family. "Keeping sibling groups together helps heal the family faster."

### Government Action

Twenty-eight states have passed legislation focused in some fashion on

maintaining sibling connections, according to Williams at CWLA. Among the examples:

- Maine passed legislation last year that gives judges the authority to order sibling visitation during semiannual case reviews. The law was inspired by Kala Clark, a foster youth in high school who wrote to Gov. Tom Baldacci as part of a class assignment.

- She had experienced being apart from her brothers, having different guardians – and if one guardian said they weren't going to visit, they wouldn't visit," says Penthea Burns, who coordinates the youth leadership advisory team at the University of Southern Maine's Muskie School of Public Service, where Clark, now 19, works as a researcher. "She wanted siblings to have legal rights to vis-

California Youth Connection see the state law as a first step, says Associate Director Tiffany Johnson.

While she believes the law needs more "meat," Johnson calls it "a value statement about people recognizing the importance of sibling connections. It is really hard to get that value embedded into a system."

- Iowa has legislation in the works that would require the state Department of Human Services to make "reasonable efforts to always place kids together" or "reasonable efforts to ensure visitation," says Jerry Foxhoven, director of the Middleton Center for Children's Rights at Drake University.

"It isn't that [decision-makers] are necessarily opposed to visitation right now," he says. "The issue is,



**Rewarding moment:** Former foster youth Kala Clark (second from right) stands next to Maine Gov. John Baldacci as he signs a sibling visitation law that she helped to create. Standing with them are (left to right) Clark's grandmother, Kay Smith; her mother, Catherine Hodgkins; and Maine Department of Health and Human Services Commissioner Brenda Harvey.

it each other and [a law to] give judges the authority to order it."

The legislation relies on court-appointed special advocates or guardians ad litem to raise such issues at the judicial reviews, Burns says.

Clark, who lives 15 miles from her two younger brothers, says the law has not helped her, because she turned 18 a week before it passed, and her siblings live with their biological mother. Nonetheless, "it was a pretty good birthday gift," she says. "If one of them were in foster care, they would be able to petition the court to see me."

- California passed legislation in 2000 that requires social workers to include in their court reports a section on sibling visitation plans. Members of policy advocacy organization

they're not focused on that. This forces them to focus on that, and it forces them to implement it or explain why they aren't."

The Middleton Center worked with a youth group called Elevate 2 Inspire in crafting the legislation, Foxhoven says. "What a novel idea," he says with a laugh. "Let the youth in the system decide what needs to be changed about the system."

Following are examples of efforts to keep siblings together or to reconnect them after they've been separated by foster care.

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