

Children And Families

A Foster Care Call To Action

(NAPSA)—There are many ways Americans improve the future of children in foster care—and many reasons foster children deserve a better chance at a stable life.

Many people often think of children in foster care as the responsibility of the child welfare system or the government, and as children whose future is bleak due to parental failure, but William C. Bell, an expert and national authority on foster care, would like people to think of these vulnerable youth just like they would their own children.

Bell, president and CEO of Casey Family Programs, a foundation dedicated to providing, improving and ultimately preventing the need for foster care, put out an urgent call to action for adults and families to play a role in the lives of youth in foster care at the organization's 40th anniversary celebration.

In 1966, Jim Casey, the founder of United Parcel Service (UPS), established Casey Family Programs. Its mission: to create stability, security and a sense of permanence for children in need of a caring family home.

Today, more than 500,000 children and youth are in foster care—roughly double the number just two decades ago. The foundation, with its nearly \$2.3 billion endowment, is leading the charge to raise awareness about the urgent needs facing children in foster care.

“Our most disadvantaged children, who enter a system through no fault of their own, should be our nation's number one priority, but sadly, they are not,” said Bell, who recently outlined his organization's “2020” strategy to improve the lives of

Children in foster care deserve the same chances as other children, says the president of an organization dedicated to improving children's lives.



children in foster care, which included a pledge to invest \$1.67 billion to this end over the next 15 years.

According to Bell, evidence of our nation's apathy is clear when examining what happens to children after they leave care.

A recent study by Casey Family Programs and Harvard Medical School found that, of the youth formerly served in foster care, less than 3 percent graduated from college, one in five were homeless within a year of leaving care, and one in four had post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), a rate twice that of U.S. war veterans. Bell also pointed to recent cuts to Medicaid as proof that children in foster care are not a national priority.

And things could get much worse. By the year 2020, 9 million more children will experience the foster care system, with 300,000

of those children “aging out” of the system when they turn 18 or 21.

Of that 300,000, 75,000 former foster youth will experience homelessness and a mere 9,000 will graduate from college.

Casey's goals also include reducing the number of children in foster care by 50 percent by the year 2020 and improving life for those in care by increasing high school and college graduation rates, increasing employment experience for youth during and after care, and increasing access to mental health services.

“Government cannot solve the crisis facing the foster care system alone,” Bell added. “That is why we are challenging concerned community members to step up and do something to improve the lives of youth in foster care. They are waiting for our action, our commitment and our focus.”

In his call to action, Bell often quotes Estakio Hassan Beltran (age 22), who spent most of his life in foster care and attended five high schools before he found a stable home during his senior year and now works for a U.S. senator. “Children in foster care don't belong to a government agency or a county, they belong to you and me. We must all apply what I call the standard of your own children. If it's good enough for your child, it's good enough for me.”

For more information about how to get involved, visit www.casey.org.