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Foster care has room for improvement

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Right now there are half a million children in foster care in this country through no fault of their own. Foster care is vital for the protection of seriously abused or neglected kids, but many of these children stay in care far too long or move far too often from one temporary home to another. Tragically, thousands of children continue to languish in substitute placements despite national and state initiatives aimed at eliminating foster care "drift."

The problem is compellingly illustrated by a recent three-year assessment of child-welfare system performance conducted by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. The outcomes of the review are grim: Not one state satisfied the federal child-welfare standards. Indeed, 16 states, Ohio among them, failed to pass even one of the seven federal standards considered most important to child safety, stability and permanency.

Over the past decade, Ohio's judges and child-welfare agencies have attempted to break down barriers preventing kids from finding permanent homes. The Hamilton County Juvenile Court was one of the first to implement model guidelines for timely case processing. Cincinnati Model Court's "one family, one judge" approach, with one judge handling a case from filing through disposition, allows judges to become familiar with the kids, families, foster parents and others involved in their cases. Public child-service agencies have attempted new strategies, such as providing intensive home services to try to keep families together while concurrently planning for adoption or other permanency options, should they become necessary.

Despite efforts like these, for every child in this country who finds a permanent family, there is another who waits too long in care or is bounced from one foster home to another. The national statistics shock the conscience: 40 percent of the hundreds of foster children who stay in the system until adulthood rely on public assistance after leaving foster care. Another 25 percent are homeless and, incredibly, one out of five lands in prison.

While Ohio should continue efforts already begun, what is needed to turn these statistics around is a concerted, comprehensive national approach to foster-care reform, an approach focused in great part on court management practices. Every day judges make difficult, life-altering decisions. They decide whether a child should be removed from home or reunited with a parent. They oversee services provided to children and their caregivers. Courts must also ensure that crowded dockets and delays do not overshadow the needs of the children they serve. The tasks are daunting.

Because of their awesome responsibilities, judges who determine the fates of abused or neglected kids must be guided by practices based on careful collection and analysis of data, rather than on anecdotal or experience-based assumptions only. Approaches aimed at reducing permanency delays, for example, should be based on information on the amount of time elapsed between court events, such as hearings and filings; on the number of cases that are not completed within prescribed time frames; and on other specific measurable outcomes.

Many failed reform efforts based solely on plausible theories of cause and solution could have been avoided if had they been based, instead, on facts and data. Courts must adopt standards to ensure timely, safe and permanent placements. They must also be committed to gathering and analyzing data that will demonstrate whether reforms they institute are actually improving outcomes for kids in care.

Two initiatives are working in tandem to encourage such reforms in the nation's courts. Fostering Results, a national education and outreach initiative, recently launched a campaign to encourage dialogue among judges and court personnel on ways to manage individual cases and caseloads. At the same time, the Pew Commission on Children in Foster Care is considering recommendations for policy changes that will support and encourage effective case-management practices.

Given their historic commitment to improving our child-welfare systems, Ohio juvenile-court judges are a natural source of leadership for such an initiative. Our courts must continue to strengthen their current efforts toward improving case management by embracing these new strategies. Let us begin to create a national standard for best case-management practices because this month, National Foster Care Month, and every month, all kids in foster care deserve safe, stable, permanent homes.

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