



THE BUFFALO NEWS

Another Voice: New federal law aims to increase family-based care

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By **William T. Gettman Jr.**

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It's heartening to see that for the first time in years, reports of opioid overdoses declined in Buffalo. However, in Western New York, opioids continue to force large numbers of children into foster care and we don't have enough families to care for them. This trend is consistent with a recent Brookings Institution report. This situation is deeply concerning. We can do better.

Forced separation from family is traumatic for children, and painful for the parents, too. When we choose to separate children from parents, we owe them the best possible care. In these instances, a family is the best choice. The familiarity and love of family help children feel secure and hopeful while parents receive the help necessary for the family to reunite.



Unfortunately, New York is excessively reliant on residential care for foster children. In the state's counties outside of New York City, 26 percent of children are placed in residential care, compared to 13 percent nationally. For some, these placements are necessary, but for far too many, residential care reflects the system's failure to identify kinship foster homes or to recruit sufficient foster families.

A new federal law, the Family First Prevention Services Act, aims to change the status quo. The FFPSA prioritizes kin and foster families over high-cost – and sometimes unnecessary – residential care.

This new law is an opportunity for New York to increase family-based care here in Western New York, and across the state. As the CEOs of two New York residential providers and a New York foster care foundation, we know that these changes are achievable. We have led meaningful improvements at our organizations and in New York counties, and have achieved results in a relatively short period of time.

Northern Rivers Family of Services is launching a “30 Days to Family” initiative in Albany County. Through this program, birth families are engaged to help identify suitable kinship foster homes, which are then supported by the Northern Rivers foster care team.

The Children's Village, one of the oldest residential care organizations in the country, is explicit in its position. Residential care cannot be a destination. It is a well-resourced emergency room where children receive time-limited

treatment and the only long-term solution is a place of unconditional belonging – with a loving family, not a long-term residential bed.

The Redlich Horwitz Foundation has partnered with Westchester, Onondaga and Dutchess counties to become more family-focused in their foster care practices. In Westchester, residential placements were reduced by 21 percent in six months due to case-review practice adjustments and requisite senior-level approval for any nonfamily placement. And in Onondaga, family-care placements increased by 7 percent in one year.

Let's use the Family First Act to ensure that our children in foster care are placed with loving families who can support them to thrive.

William T. Gettman Jr., chief executive officer of Northern Rivers Family of Services in Albany, co-authored this with Sarah Kroon Chiles, executive director of the Redlich Horwitz Foundation, and Dr. Jeremy C. Kohomban, president and chief executive of the Children's Village.