

COMMENTARY

Family First renews focus for children in foster care

By William T. Gettman Jr.
and Jeremy C. Kohomban

When a child is removed from a family home and placed in foster care, both the child and family suffer. Forced separation

from family is incomprehensibly traumatic for children, and painful too for the parents, even when the intervention is necessary. But moving a child to a relative — a grandparent or aunt who is known and trusted — lessens

this pain and trauma.

The familiarity and love of family help children feel secure and hopeful while parents receive the services necessary for the family to reunite. And parents can rest assured in the

knowledge that their children are with loving adults. This is what any parent would want for their child, and it is what New York should prioritize for children in its foster care system.

New York has become excessively reliant on group facilities for foster children rather than placing them in a home with kin who receive training and finan-

cial support to care for their relative children. While nationally, 13 percent of children in foster care live in residential care, 26 percent of children in New York counties outside of New York City are placed in group care. For some, these placements are a necessary and time-limited intervention designed to be

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► *William T. Gettman Jr. is the chief executive officer of Northern Rivers Family of Services. Jeremy C. Kohomban is the president and chief executive of the Children's Village. Also contributing to this article was Sarah Kroon Chiles, executive director of the Redlich Horwitz Foundation.*

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therapeutic and stabilizing. But for many, group care reflects the system's failure to identify a kinship foster home or to recruit sufficient foster families.

We can and must do better. A new federal law with bipartisan support, the Family First Prevention Services Act, renews the focus on family-centeredness in foster care. The act provides federal funds for preventive services aimed at keeping families together. Most importantly for New York, the act reforms federal financing to prioritize kin and foster families over high-cost — and sometimes unnecessary — residential care. Given the data, New York state must be proactive now.

This new law will require big changes for business as usual. 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 counties across the state, 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.

The Family First Act is unprecedented in the level of policy and practice changes necessary to meet its residential care requirements. Nonetheless, its vision is achievable for New York. We believe that by focusing on placement practices, child-centered recruitment, caregiver support, and community-based programs, New York can meet the act's requirements and do what's best for our children and families. But we must act with urgency now to ensure that our children in foster care are placed with families who can support them to thrive.