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Too many children in U.S. child welfare systems not living in families; DC provides a model for placing children in families

Washington, DC – For the over 1,200 District children engaged with the child welfare system, the love and support of a family is vital for helping them overcome the trauma that they have faced in their lives. Although the vast majority of children in the D.C. foster care system are placed in family settings, over 110 children are placed in group homes or therapeutic placements.

In its latest KIDS COUNT[®] policy report, *Every Kid Needs a Family: Giving Children in the Child Welfare System the Best Chance for Success*, the Annie E. Casey Foundation highlights the urgent need to ensure, through sound policies and proven practices, that everything possible is being done to find loving, nurturing and supportive families to help raise more of these children.

Specifically, *Every Kid Needs a Family* emphasizes making and keeping a lifelong connection to a family. This national report also highlights the promising ways that state and local government leaders, as well as policymakers, judges and private providers can work together as they strive to help about 57,000 children who are living in group placements around the U.S. These placements have been shown to be harmful to a child's opportunities to develop strong, nurturing attachments. Group placements can also cost seven to 10 times the amount it takes to place a child with a relative or foster family.

The report hails the District of Columbia as a model for placing children with relatives as quickly as possible. The DC Child and Family Services Agency's *KinFirst* program is a rapid-response program that locates and licenses relatives day or night. Kinship placements provide children with the comfort of existing relationships and familiar environments that can reduce the impact of trauma and make the eventual reunification with parents easier.

"We all believe that every child deserves a family," said Brenda Donald, current deputy mayor for Health and Human Services and former director of the Child and Family Services Agency. "Long before there was a public child welfare system, families stepped up when they could to take care of their children. While we have built a system with wonderful foster parents, our first choice is to place children with their own family whenever possible. It is so important to the child's psyche to provide a safe haven that is familiar and loving and as close to normal as possible."

Research shows the secure attachments provided by nurturing caregivers are vital to a child's healthy physical, social, emotional and psychological development throughout his life. Young people who do not grow up in families are at greater risk of being abused in group placements,

and of being arrested. Despite this, many children – especially teens – are sent to a group placement as their very first experience immediately after being removed from home.

The Foundation reports that common-sense policies and practices can safely reduce use of group placements, and that these placements should be limited to situations in which caseworker feel they cannot find an appropriate family quickly. Jurisdictions that employ strategies to improve decision making, for example, see more children safely return home; use of kinship care often goes up as group placements go down.

Policy and practice change can improve in four ways:

- **Increase service options.** Communities that provide a wide range of services have more options that enable children to remain safely in families.
- **Strengthen pool of families.** Public and private agencies should do more to find families for children and to make sure those families have the support they need to help children thrive.
- **Keep residential treatment short, with family in focus.** Residential treatment should be strengthened to meet children's acute needs in a customized, short-term way that equips young people to live in a family and to maintain family connections throughout treatment.
- **Require justification for restrictive placements.** Substantial justification should be required by child welfare systems and by the courts before young people are sent to group placements.

Every Kid Needs a Family will be available May 19 at 12:01 a.m. EDT at www.aecf.org. Additional information is available in the [KIDS COUNT Data Center](#), which also contains the most recent national, state and local data on hundreds of indicators of child well-being. The Data Center allows users to create rankings, maps and graphs for use in publications and on websites, and to view real-time information on mobile devices.

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The Annie E. Casey Foundation creates a brighter future for the nation's children by developing solutions to strengthen families, build paths to economic opportunity and transform struggling communities into safer and healthier places to live, work and grow. For more information, visit www.aecf.org. KIDS COUNT® is a registered trademark of the Annie E. Casey Foundation.

Founded in 1992, DC Action for Children (www.dckids.org) is a nonprofit organization focused on improving conditions and outcomes for the District's children, youth and families through public awareness, policy, research and technical assistance. DC Action is the KIDS COUNT grantee for the District, tracking key indicators of child and youth well-being and neighborhood well-being for children and youth. Follow us on Twitter at [@ActforDChildren](#) and like us on Facebook at <http://www.facebook.com/dcaction>.