

# Fostering Change

*A Critical Eye on Foster Care  
in Massachusetts*

From Executive Director Jane Lyons

## Emerging, Stronger.



Welcome to *Fostering Change*, the freshly reimagined newsletter here at Friends of Children. The name *Fostering Change*

succinctly captures the spirit of our work—taking action to achieve meaningful change for young people in the child-welfare system, both through our award-winning direct-service programs and through our tireless advocacy for policy reform.

Throughout this extraordinary year of tumult, loss, and uncertainty, we've maintained an unwavering focus on the precious and vulnerable young people who need us more than ever—children, teens, and young adults in foster care. Like so many organizations during the pandemic, we too, have found new ways to connect, communicate, and serve during this challenging time—and we're excited to share those stories with you here.

You'll learn in this issue of *Fostering Change* what a pivotal moment this truly is for child-welfare reform, both in Massachusetts and in the nation.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 4



## A Pivotal Moment for Child-Welfare Action

As a leading independent voice for young people involved in the child-welfare system in Massachusetts, Friends of Children serves as a unique and powerful agent for policy advocacy—and your support means more than ever at this critical juncture in child-welfare reform.

The COVID-19 crisis has amplified issues already facing the staggering number of children and youth involved with the Department of Children and Families (DCF). In 2020, 15,584 children, youth, and young adults were in out-of-home placements in Massachusetts—and an additional 86,315 parents, caregivers, children, and young adults were involved with DCF (*DCF Foster Care Review Report FY2020, DCF Annual Report FY2020*).

**We must ask the right questions. Policy and operations must be viewed through the lens of child and family well-being.**

CONTINUED ON PAGE 2

*A Pivotal Moment for Child-Welfare Action* / FROM PAGE 1

We have arrived at a pivotal moment for child-welfare action:

- Our state legislature is currently considering a child welfare Accountability bill that should not be rushed through the process.
- On March 31, the Office of the Child Advocate released a report of the investigation into the tragic death of David Almond, 14, whose family was involved with DCF. The report, which chronicles the systemic failures in the child-welfare system prior to Almond’s death, sounds a cry for significant legislative action.
- Although advocates are rightly concerned about the decrease in reports of suspected child abuse and neglect, decision makers cannot lose sight of the needs of young people already involved with DCF.

This is a unique time, a confluence of harsh realities that presents an opportunity for transformative policy

**The effectiveness of Family First, which mandates action at the individual state level, will rest in its concrete implementation here in Massachusetts.**

change. We must ask the right questions. Policy and operations must be viewed through the lens of child and family well-being.

Family well-being is also intended to stand at the center of the Family First Prevention Services Act, child welfare legislation passed at the federal level in February 2018. The effectiveness of the Family First, which mandates action at the individual state level, will rest in its concrete implementation here in Massachusetts. This is a complex piece of legislation that requires states to implement reforms using specific research-based criteria. To learn more about what Family First is intended to mean for our children nationwide, visit Children’s Defense Fund at [www.childrensdefense.org](http://www.childrensdefense.org).

To learn more about our comprehensive efforts at Friends of Children in the statehouse and beyond, visit our policy advocacy page at [friendsofchildreninc.org/policy-advocacy](http://friendsofchildreninc.org/policy-advocacy). We’ve also listed a few resources on this page to help you learn more about child-welfare reform at the state and federal levels.

A few years from now, when the thousands of young people in our child-welfare system today look back on the end of the pandemic, can we dare to imagine that they might remember a time when life got better, when the system improved their situations? The time is now.

Your support of our policy advocacy work today means a better future for our children.



## Become An Informed Advocate for Child-Welfare Action

### AT THE STATE LEVEL

Friends of Children  
[friendsofchildreninc.org](http://friendsofchildreninc.org)

Children’s League of Massachusetts  
[childrensleague.org](http://childrensleague.org)

### AT THE NATIONAL LEVEL

The Annie E. Casey Foundation  
[aecf.org/work/child-welfare](http://aecf.org/work/child-welfare)

Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago  
[chapinhall.org](http://chapinhall.org)

Children’s Defense Fund  
[childrensdefensefund.org](http://childrensdefensefund.org)



*Kathie (R) with her husband, Richard*

## Honoring the Memory of Kathie Stewart, Adored CASA Volunteer

When the perfectly coiffed CASA volunteer walked into the Friends of Children conference room, it lit up! Her smile, eagerness, and warmth made talking with her so easy—even when the topics were anything but easy to discuss. Kathie Stewart volunteered with the Hampshire/Franklin Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA) Program at Friends of Children for over 12 years. In an interview she gave to *Paradise City Press* in 2014, she was described as a “protector of vulnerable children” and remarked that being a CASA volunteer was “one of the most personally rewarding experiences I’ve ever had.”

Kathie taught middle-school students for more than 35 years before she retired. Her love of youth sports was clear, and she enjoyed (among many other things) refereeing swim meets. Cheering on young people was something she did well, and she was cherished for that at Friends of Children. Her belief that children and youth should be given opportunities to thrive - no matter how difficult their circumstances were - was admired by us all, and she served to inspire us on darker days.

**Kathie Stewart’s gifts of service as a CASA volunteer will echo through generations of young people.**

We were heartbroken to learn that Kathie passed away suddenly on January 28, 2021. When news of her death was given to one young man for whom Kathie served as advocate for many years, he grew quiet, saying only “she was a nice lady.” After that, he could not utter any more.

Kathie’s family, of whom she was so proud, requested that in lieu of flowers, donations be made to Friends of Children. With those funds (over \$2,000 to date) and as an ongoing tribute to her memory, Friends of Children is creating *Kathie’s Fund* to provide support for extracurricular opportunities to school-aged children in our CASA Program. These are children who often don’t have the chance to participate in these activities that are so critical to their growth and development.

Kathie Stewart’s gifts of service as a CASA volunteer will echo through generations of young people. The creation of *Kathie’s Fund* stands as an ongoing tribute to a radiant spirit who is missed terribly and who gave significantly to the lives of young people.

If you are interested in contributing to *Kathie’s Fund*, please visit our website at [friendsofchildren.org/kathies-fund](http://friendsofchildren.org/kathies-fund).

**Kathie made a difference in so many lives. You can make a difference too.**

Please contact us to learn more about being a volunteer with CASA.

[friendsofchildreninc.org/casa](http://friendsofchildreninc.org/casa)



*Emerging, Stronger* / FROM PAGE 1

And you'll view and read stories of incredible strength and hope—stories like the powerful video of Eva and her new adoptive mother, Dianne, who have become family with the support of CASA volunteer Jo-Anne Vanin. *Fostering Change* also delivers inspiration through our tribute to the life of Kathie Stewart, whose gifts of service continue to ripple through young lives.

Your support of Friends of Children concretely means that many young people in foster care are now able to dream hopeful dreams and live better lives. We are not the same people, communities, state, or country that we were before the coronavirus. But we have held on to that which matters most, and we're emerging now, stronger. Here at Friends of Children, we're doing everything in our power to make sure that children are emerging stronger, too.

Thank you, on behalf of our young people, for your support in Fostering Change.

Warmly,



Jane Lyons  
*Executive Director*

**P.S. Please forward this newsletter to colleagues and friends who may not know us yet—the wider our circle, the greater our capacity to care.**



Dianne

## CASA Changes Lives

This amazing story sheds light on the impact a CASA advocate and the right foster parent (now adoptive parent) can have on the life of a child. We are honored to have Eva and Dianne share their journey and Jo-Ann Vanin, their CASA, share the critical role a CASA can have.

**We hope you will take a few minutes to watch online at [friendsofchildreninc.org/casa-changes-lives](https://friendsofchildreninc.org/casa-changes-lives)**

### Board of Directors

2020-2021

PRESIDENT

**JoAnne Vanin**  
*Retired Dean of Students, UMASS Amherst, 15 year CASA volunteer Amherst*

VICE PRESIDENT

**Jeff Masarjian**  
*Retired Director, DARE Retired ED, Armenian Tree Project South Deerfield*

TREASURER

**Susan Karas**  
*Immediate Past Board President Retired Child and Adolescent Director, ServiceNet Florence*

SECRETARY

**Antonia Krell**  
*Special Education Tutor, Former CASA volunteer Florence*

**Yogesh Malik**

*Greenfield Savings Bank Greenfield*

**Spencer Fox Peterson**

*Berkshire Seafood Holyoke*

**Jessica Phaneuf**

*Owner, Fitness Together Hatfield*

**Jan Weiss**

*Therapist, Former Financial Advisor Northampton*

**Dr. Karen Zilberstein**

*Clinical Psychologist, Children and Families Amherst*



245 Russell Street, Hadley, MA 01035  
(413) 586-0011 · [friendsofchildreninc.org](https://friendsofchildreninc.org)



*Founded in Massachusetts in 1990, Friends of Children, Inc., is an independent 501 (c) 3 non-profit leader in child-welfare-related issues. We help vulnerable children and youth who have experienced foster care overcome adversity and thrive—with innovative direct-service programs and through state-level advocacy. We champion critical changes needed for at-risk children and youth—and for the systems entrusted with their well-being. We speak the truth to prompt meaningful action. When truth is identified and appropriate actions are taken, enduring change can occur.*

*Enduring change supports our vision: The vision of resilient and flourishing young people who have experienced the child-welfare system, woven into a fabric of meaningful connections and community life.*