

Fostering Change

*A Critical Eye on Foster Care
in Massachusetts*

From Executive Director Jane Lyons

The Not-So-Carefree Days of Summer



As restrictions relax nationwide and people begin to travel and to reunite with loved ones in person for the first time in a very long time,

I've heard the word "carefree" to describe the coming days of summer.

But for many of the thousands of children, youth, and young adults in out-of-home placements in Massachusetts, this summer will be anything but carefree. We may never know the extent of the disruption to their care caused by the pandemic, but we do know, as we so pointedly shared in our recent groundbreaking report *Failing Our Kids: Measures of the Broken Child Welfare System in Massachusetts*, that the outcomes in our state are so poor, these young people would do better to live in almost any other state. For our children in the child-welfare system, summer may bring their first in-person visits with social workers in more than a year. Summer will bring reminders of so much that has been lost.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 4



Groundbreaking Report From Friends of Children Draws Significant Attention to Broken MA Child Welfare System

A damning report released by Friends of Children in late April continues to reverberate among policymakers statewide. *Failing Our Kids: Measures of the Broken Children Welfare System in Massachusetts*, which was first published on April 30, garnered front-page coverage just days later in the *Boston Globe*. Shortly thereafter, the report may have been on the minds of state lawmakers during an extraordinary day-long hearing conducted on May 4 by the Joint Committee on Children and Families to hold accountable child welfare leaders in the aftermath of the deaths of several young people while in custody of the Department of Children and Families (DCF).

Failing Our Kids, which lays bare the nightmarish cycle of child-welfare fatalities, ineffective reforms, and systemic failures of the child-welfare system in Massachusetts, was conceptualized, researched and led by June Ameen, policy director at Friends of Children with the collaboration of Kate Lowenstein, the multisystem youth project director at Citizens for Juvenile Justice. Writer Joan Montgomery Halford and graphic designer Seth Gregory helped bring the report to life.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 2

Groundbreaking Report / FROM PAGE 1

Failing Our Kids uses publicly available data to serve as the irrefutable voice for the more than 15,000 young people in foster care in Massachusetts. Advocates have asked for transparency on these issues for a long time. Friends of Children identified a major opportunity to draw attention to the systemic failures here using existing federally reported Child Trends data and the data that actually are available from Massachusetts.

The report’s compelling visual presentation of the hard data surrounding the child-welfare system, along with its extraordinary visual timeline, delivers significant, complex, and painful realities to a general audience in a format that underscores the urgency and severity of the situation for young people in foster care in Massachusetts.

“Ultimately, *Failing Our Kids* has been a powerful and effective way to give voice to the most vulnerable children in our state—the children, youth, and young adults in our foster care system. Given the terrible current outcomes

We intend to maintain a tireless and unrelenting campaign to overhaul this broken system. Their lives and their futures are at stake.

here right now,” said Jane Lyons, executive director of Friends of Children, “we intend to maintain a tireless and unrelenting campaign to overhaul this broken system. Their lives and their futures are at stake. They deserve nothing less than our loudest advocacy.”

Your ongoing support of Friends of Children helps effect significant change in the halls of our statehouse, and *Failing Our Kids* has been a significant part of that policy advocacy work.

Read *Failing Our Kids* (friendsofchildreninc.org/failing-our-kids) and become part of our policy advocacy network.

Donation Finds Many Homes

This spring Angel Flight NE (www.angelflightne.org), a nonprofit that schedules free air transportation for children and adults requiring specialized medical care outside of their geographic area, reached out to Friends of Children with a unique and generous offer.

They had more than 1,000 new cloth satchel bags that they no longer needed. Instead of discarding them, Angel Flight NE wanted to donate the bags to nonprofits that would benefit from them. While Friends could not use the entire donation, these bags found homes with the Northampton Survival Center and Cathedral in the Night where they will be put to great use. Thanks to Reverend Michael McSherry, Edwards Church for helping us pick the bags up from North Andover and to Angel Flight NE for this amazing donation. We are a community of many needs, and it’s great that we can support one another.



Kathie’s Fund Raises \$2,200

In our last edition of *Fostering Change*, we honored beloved CASA volunteer Kathie Stewart with the creation of Kathie’s Fund (friendsofchildreninc.org/kathies-fund), which makes it possible for children supported by CASA to enroll in sports programs. Through generous donations, we have raised more than \$2,200. CASA volunteers are reaching out to enroll their youth in sports, and we will keep you updated about the meaningful opportunities created for our young people to honor Kathie’s legacy.



Susan Swift (C) with Larry Camelin (R), Director and Heather Dilorzio (L) of Angel Flight NE



Northampton Survival Center, Sarah Pease, Program Director



Cathedral in the Night, Pastor Stephanie Smith

Leveling the Playing Field With Basic Resources for Kids in Foster Care

Foster children often arrive with a plastic trash bag of clothing, confused and scared. They stay for a week--and that week may become a year. What does it say to them about their worth, that the few things they own are kept in the same bags used to take out the trash?

Beyond the meager belongings gathered quickly in a fraught situation, foster kids often appear at the door with emotional and psychological anguish. Foster families are meant to provide loving arms, physically safe homes, warm meals, and emotional support--to help young people in foster care begin healing.

But helping a child heal also includes helping them feel “normal,” doing and having things that other kids have. New shoes that fit for the first day of school. Soccer practice. Supplies to complete a school project. Driver’s ed. To many of us this is “nothing special,” but to kids in foster care, tangibles and opportunities that make them feel less “other” can give them the hope that life can be OK.

For all kids, tangibles and opportunities do not eliminate emotional and psychological needs--but they do provide simple day-to-day support that helps young people move through the world with dignity. Dignity says: “I am worth something.”

Foster Dignity--Because All Children Deserve Dignity

Foster Dignity was launched 15 years ago by Northampton foster parents to nine children who had first-hand experience with kids who arrived with their belongings in a trash bag. Friends of Children was later approached to continue this work, and we have expanded the program to include children, youth, and young adults aging out of foster care.

Foster Dignity teams with individuals and organizations to provide:

- New backpacks filled with school supplies so that children and teens can walk in that first day just like everyone else;
- New duffle bags with a “lovey” that is all theirs;
- Gift cards to buy clothing and other necessities;
- Monies so that children and youth can join sports leagues and summer programs just like their peers;
- Monies to cover driver’s education and license fees;
- Monies to cover co-pays for much-needed therapy for young adults;



- Donation of needed new cooking items (pots, pans, spices, etc) so that our young adults can take a cooking class as part of our FOCUS program;
- And so much more.....

At the heart of Foster Dignity is the belief that children’s basic needs should be met and that the right resources can help level the playing field. Children in child welfare, who are inherently vulnerable, need and deserve connections to tangible resources and opportunities to experience things that enhance life and well-being. Sports, dance classes, music lessons, after-school and summer programs should not be out-of-reach for our foster kids. These opportunities improve their chances for a life of well-being and success.

Friends of Children has supported more than 7,000 children through Foster Dignity, with an average of 700 children, youth, and young adults receiving support each year. And there are so many more out there who need us.

And you can help.

Friends of Children has many ways that you can make a difference.

- **Sign up for our Backpack Program** (friendsofchildreninc.org/backpack)
- **Supporting activities for foster children by donating to Kathie’s Fund** (friendsofchildreninc.org/kathies-fund)
- **See other opportunities to donate** (friendsofchildreninc.org/giving)
- **Or contact our Development Director, Susan Swift, directly** (friendsofchildreninc.org/contact-susan-swift).

Because all children deserve to walk in this world with dignity.

The Not-So-Carefree Days of Summer | FROM PAGE 1

And so we persist at Friends of Children, tirelessly, in *Fostering Change*—the name of this newsletter, and the purpose of our work.

Later this summer, too many young people in foster care will also face an annual harsh reminder that they are different, and that reminder will come at back-to-school time, as their peers arrive for a new year with new backpacks, clothing, and gear—and they do not. For children in foster care, leaving their family of origin is inherently traumatizing—and the challenges of fitting in at a new school often add to that distress. Having basic gear like backpacks, school supplies, shoes, and clothing goes a long way toward helping children in foster care feel like they belong. The comprehensive and important Foster Dignity program here at Friends of Children addresses precisely this need.

You’ll learn more about our Foster Dignity program—and about how you can get concretely involved in this issue of *Fostering Change*. You will continue to learn more about Sergio, a young adult in our FOCUS program. And you’ll stay informed about the momentum we’re gaining with policymakers since the release of *Failing Our Kids*. You’ll also read about the outpouring of support for Kathie’s Fund, and about how a simple donation from Angel Flight NE has spread throughout our community.

Carefree. Far from being a lighthearted descriptor of summer days, this word embodies our fondest wish for our young people in foster care. **Carefree.** Thanks to your support of Friends of Children, each day, no matter the season, we edge closer to realizing that dream.

Warmly,

Jane Lyons
Executive Director



Sergio: Success with FOCUS

In this powerful story, Sergio shares the impact of having mentors through our FOCUS program, a program for young adults aging out of foster care. Sergio shares how the support he has received is helping him take control of his life. As Sergio so heartfully says, “I am the future.”

We are grateful that we can share Sergio’s story with you. **Please take a few minutes to watch online at friendsofchildreninc.org/focus/#sergio**



245 Russell Street, Hadley, MA 01035
(413) 586-0011 · 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.