

Fostering Change

*A Critical Eye on Foster Care
in Massachusetts*

From Executive Director Jane Lyons

With Purpose, We Thrive



As this strange winter sees so many of us continuing to cope with the various challenges imposed by COVID, I can't help but think how important it is to keep raising our heads and moving forward. I learned this from my grandmother who, with her two brothers, endured severe poverty and significant physical limitations, including polio and multiple sclerosis—but who kept moving forward with a keen sense of reality, humor, and responsibility. They did not burrow their heads in despair for any long length of time, but thrived, helping one another, and making certain they were always helping others. They had purpose.

Friends of Children works in much the same way. Our purpose is steeped in creating sure pathways for children and young people involved in the larger child welfare system. We want to make sure they are safe, are well, and have opportunities to thrive. **We want them unbound from circumstances they did not create.**

CONTINUED ON PAGE 4



DCF FY2021 Annual Report Raises More Serious Questions Than It Answers

Friends of Children conducted a review of the recently released FY2021 Annual Report of the Massachusetts Department of Children and Families (DCF)—and the problems with the report itself, much less the child welfare system, are a continuation of the same issues with transparency and accountability that have existed for years.

As specified in the Friends of Children review (find online at friendsofchildren.org/DCF-fy2021-annual-report-raises-questions), which was submitted to the Chairs of the Joint Committee on Children, Families, and Persons with Disabilities in the MA State House, the DCF report employs inconsistent year-to-year comparisons and uses less than all available measures to analyze DCF effectiveness on many key child-welfare indicators, including placement stability and permanency.

Further, the annual DCF report is the result of multiple years of meetings of a legislatively mandated Data Task Force, with task-force members chosen by the state legislature and co-chaired by the child advocate and the DCF commissioner.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 2

“The DCF annual report is further evidence of the alarming lack of standards held for some of our most vulnerable community members—children, youth, and young adults in child welfare. It obfuscates more than it reveals,” asserts June Ameen, Policy Director for Friends of Children. “The bottom line here is that the report offers far less meaningful information than it can or should.”

Key questions that are not addressed in the DCF report include:

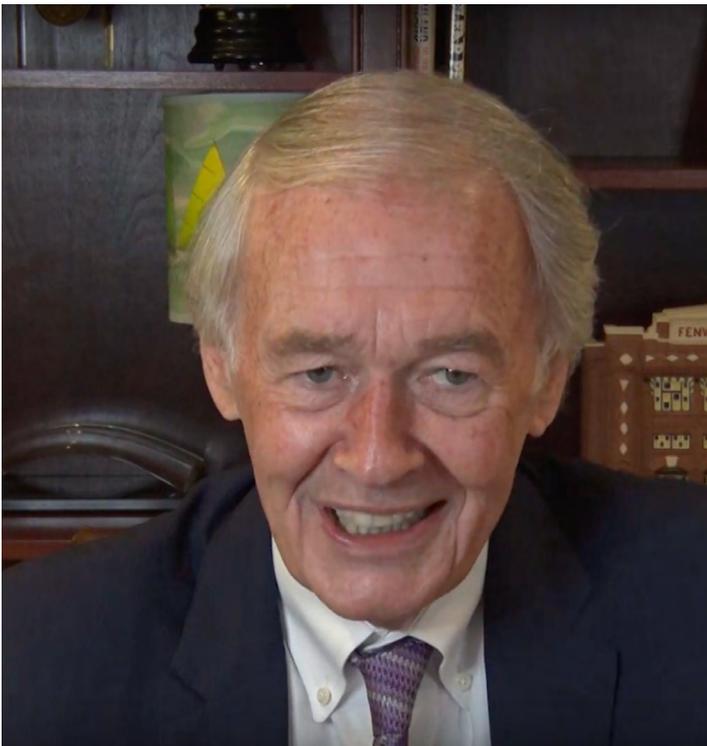
- *Are children, youth, and young adults better or worse off after involvement with DCF?*
- *What is the status of all placement options (foster parents, congregate care, etc.)? Where is the analysis of the appropriateness of placements and the number of moves per young person? What is DCF’s action plan to address placement issues?*
- *What are the data on staff turnover and the percentage of new and inexperienced staff? What is the impact of staffing challenges on child and family case management and outcomes?*
- *What is the status of services required for children, youth and families? What are the issues and what is DCF doing to address them?*

“The bottom line here is that the report offers far less meaningful information than it can or should.”

June Ameen,
Friends of Children Policy Director

- *Why isn’t DCF including measures reported to the federal government in this annual report?*
- *What are DCF and the Data Task Force doing to identify measures that help stakeholders, advocates, and the public understand the actual well-being of children, youth, and young adults in DCF care?*

“We must absolutely, fiercely push for transparency, oversight, and accountability in this broken system on behalf of the children in Massachusetts,” emphasizes Jane Lyons, Executive Director of Friends of Children. “We must keep the pressure on the existing child welfare oversight structure – the Administration, the OCA, the Legislature, and the Courts.”



Senator Markey’s Tribute to Friends of Children at National 2021 Angel in Adoption Award

Friends of Children is honored to receive the 2021 Angel in Adoption Award of the Congressional Coalition on Adoption Institute.

See Senator Edward Markey (MA) recognize Friends of Children on our website at: friendsofchildreninc.org/friends-of-children-receives-national-2021-angel-in-adoption-award

Dynamic New Staff Bring Expertise and Energy

Friends of Children is pleased to welcome several new key staff members, as we continue to strengthen our services to and advocacy for vulnerable children.



Jeffrey Rivkin, MSW, joined in autumn of 2021 as the Program Manager of the Focus Program, which serves young adults aging out of foster care. Jeffrey's multi-faceted background includes work in adolescent behavioral treatment, community mental health, crisis counseling, and most recently, a decade with the Massachusetts Department of Children and Families (DCF). At DCF, Jeffrey worked in the Rapid Response Workers Unit, which identifies placements for children coming into foster care, and the Missing and Absent Child Unit, which serves youth who are on the run or victimized by the commercial sexual exploitation of children. Jeffrey also served as a DCF Family Resource Supervisor.

Born and raised in western Massachusetts, Jeffrey has been involved with Friends of Children since 2011, when he began volunteering with the FOCUS program he now manages. He became a liaison between DCF and Friends of Children—and found himself inspired by Executive Director Jane Lyons and the organization's unique combination of direct services to youth and state-level policy advocacy. "Joining Friends of Children has felt like a natural progression," asserts Jeffrey. "I want to help to ensure that the needs of children, youth, and young adults in the child-welfare system are being met in fair and equitable ways."



Valerie Smart joined as Volunteer Coordinator in Spring 2021. She brings experience in marketing, journalism, and community outreach. After working in the corporate world for many years, she is grateful to be part of a team where her hard work can partner with her heart work. As a proud mom to two of the most amazing human beings to walk this green earth, she is inspired to make sure all children experience the love and support needed to be their best selves. Valerie is active in her local community of Agawam.

Valerie shares, "Each day in my work with Friends of Children I get to live the quote: The efforts of one person can't move mountains. It's the strength of all of us working together that makes a change. While connecting dedicated volunteers with the young people who are part of Friends of Children, I see firsthand how our collective dedication is making a difference for children and families in our corner of the world."



Sarah Segura, the new CASA Case Manager, brings a diverse professional background which includes international humanitarian work, a career with Massachusetts' Department of Transitional Assistance, and work as an interviewer for University of Michigan's Survey Research Center. She is currently pursuing her Masters in Social Work with focuses in clinical and trauma-informed care.

At Friends of Children, she is excited to support CASA volunteers in their ongoing efforts to serve children and families in Hampshire and Franklin Counties, through direct supervision and through organizing opportunities for continuing education. Sarah has seen firsthand the need for engaged, local individuals to advocate for children and youth involved with DCF, and she looks forward to lending her voice to the cause.

With Purpose, We Thrive / FROM PAGE 1

Friends of Children is clear that we can only help children and families when we all fully understand their needs, individually and collectively; when we ask them what is helpful; and when we all act in their best interests.

This is the moment where we need to reflect deeply on who we are, what we value, and what our value is to all children. Maintaining the status quo is not the way to do it. I hope you can join with us to truly foster change.

With Thanks,



Jane Lyons
Executive Director



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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.



Upcoming Events

friendsofchildreninc.org/events



CASA Training Series

The CASA (Court-Appointed Special Advocates) program will begin a six-week training series this month that lays the groundwork for volunteers to become CASAs. Upon successful completion of this intensive course, CASAs are sworn in by a Juvenile Court judge.

► [Learn more at friendsofchildreninc.org/casa](http://friendsofchildreninc.org/casa)



FOCUS Workshop Series

The FOCUS program, which helps young adults transition out of foster care into successful, independent lives, offers training workshops each month for participants and their mentors. Specialized sessions for mentors address trauma-informed care, motivation, and professional interviewing, among other helpful topics. This month will include a special training for Black History Month, as well as a course on “Language 101 for LGBTQIA+.” The FOCUS program also accesses external local and national resources to enrich the experiences of participants and their mentors.

► [Learn more at friendsofchildreninc.org/focus](http://friendsofchildreninc.org/focus)

Mark your calendar to attend two major fundraising awards events with Friends of Children this spring:

2022 Changemaker Award Dinner

Honoring Northwestern District Attorney David E. Sullivan.

Friday, March 25, 2022 | 5:30 pm
Garden House at Look Park
Florence, MA

2022 Friends of Children Gala

Honoring Dr. Eli Newberger with the Children’s Champion Award.

Thursday, May 26, 2022
Artists for Humanity Epicenter
Boston, MA



► [Learn more at friendsofchildreninc.org/gala-2022](http://friendsofchildreninc.org/gala-2022)

For more information on these important celebrations and for sponsorship opportunities, please contact Susan Swift, Development Director, at susan@friendsofchildreninc.org.