

Reunifying Families:
The Importance of Community Support for Broken Families
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Author note

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Abstract

It is easy to understand the need for children to be removed from unsafe and unhealthy living conditions. Yet studies reviewed for this thesis argued that children thrive emotionally, mentally and developmentally better in their families' dynamics. The question this paper will explore is how does the community help children return home to a safe and healthy environment that facilitates a thriving family? Children will experience foster care multiple times if they are returned home to unacceptable environments. Parents desperately want their children back, yet many are not prepared for their children's return. This back and forth pattern creates a cycle of abuse and neglect that is a community issue. This thesis shares the stories of broken families, explores the gaps in services, examines the long-term strains on the foster care system and offers a recommendation for communities to support parents who are willing to do the work required to have their children returned to them. ¹

¹ For personal communication citation all names are changed for the protection of the interviewees' identities.

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Section 1: Reasoning and Gap

Children and parents experiencing court have end results that do not necessarily place the children in safe and healthy living conditions. However, with some direction, the community has an opportunity to support these families by working with the parents and caring for the children, by providing a supportive community, and teaching the family unit how to work together to develop a healthy and safe home. After the cases are reviewed by the court, 53% are given placement plans to return the children to their homes (Children's Bureau, 2013, p. 5; Wulczyn, 2004, p. 100). With such a high percentage of children potentially returning to their homes, the court has an opportunity to support the parents and encourage the community to help reunite families. The focus of this thesis will be the care and support of the parents for the benefit of the family unit.

The focus of the foster system is the care of the children. However, DSHS, the court and the community need to provide more support for the parents than they are currently giving. About one-fifth of the children in foster care will return to their homes only to reenter foster care with a year; that is approximately 84,000 children a month who reenter foster care in the United States (Children's Bureau, 2014; Wulczyn, 2004). During my research, parents shared that they felt a lack of support from the court and their social workers. While focusing on the children is necessary for their care and development, it is only a band aid on a broken bone. All members of the families have needs to be met, yet it seems to me that in the community the parents' needs are less important than those of the children. This thesis was designed to tell the story of parents, and their children, who are generally looked down upon in this society.

The long-term goal for this research was to develop a program that would help fill a gap in the services provided by government, private, and community agencies. Additional services can be implemented to improve the success rate of children to be reunified with their parents permanently. Mulheir (2012) declared that “every child has a right to a family;” my argument is the same for parents. In our society, parental rights can be revoked. Nevertheless, parents deserve the opportunities, resources, and support that will earn them their rights to be the primary care givers of their children once again. That is, they will earn those rights if they are willing and able to do the work that comes with the opportunities to regain the custodies of their children. Parents who had their children removed from their care did not generally receive the support needed to help them on their journey.

The needed support for the parents will be more effective coming from within the community. Kratzman and McKnight (1993) stated that effective community development took place within the community, when the community was dedicated to the cause. Inviting aid from outside the community increases the long-term dependence on government resources. While the services provided by the government are helpful to families on short-term bases, the long-term use of these resources perpetuates the cycle of government services dependences. Ferguson (2009) asserted that “aid has helped make the poor poorer” (p. ix). My research does not specifically speak to the plight of the poor, not all children placed in foster care are socioeconomically impoverished. Nevertheless, the premise of the statement is valid. Communities who rely on outside aid will not become self-sustaining. Government resources are not useless as the community can utilize them to co-power the parents to be self-sustaining for the benefit of their families.

Author's Interest

My interest in family development stemmed from having seen my parents' need for community support. Growing up in an unsafe home environment afforded me a unique perspective on the life of children entering foster care. Starting in my mid-adolescence my family could be compared to a whitewashed tomb. On the outside people saw a wonderful family, with well-behaved and well-loved children. The reality was different than the people's initial perception. The well-behaved appearance stemmed from the fear of mistreatment and physical reprisal. Visitors were never invited to the house because of the filthy conditions. While never having been placed in foster care, my experience surviving abuse and neglect has afforded me an understanding of the lives of children in care; an understanding that drives my desire to prevent children from facing similar injustice.

Despite being abused and neglected, there were moments in my life when the community was safer than life home. School provided a community of educators who were supportive and encouraging with the events happening at home. Friends and extra-curricular activities provided an expressive outlet and no fear of rejection or retaliation. The church community was quick to respond when their members were needed help. For example: when the dysfunction at home became public knowledge, the church came together to support my parents by encouraging them to focus on God and seek out counseling. My father greatly benefitted from the support of the church community. He transformed from a man who was hated and feared by his family, to a man who was loved and respected. The same type of support should be available to broken and struggling families.

Until a few years ago my understanding of the government's attempt to care for abused and neglected children was limited. This limited understanding of the foster system became an

educational catalyst. Foster care is the system in which minors are removed from dangerous or neglectful living situations. The minors are then placed in a temporary (albeit sometimes permanent) home or shelter that has been qualified as safe and healthy by government or private agencies (S. Social Worker, personal communication, January 25, 2012). In the Children's Administration (CA), a department of the Department of Social and Health Services (DSHS), "the staff works with children and families to identify their needs and develop a plan for services that support families and assure the safety and well-being of children" (Washington State DSHS (WA DSHS), n.d., para. 1).

Initially the foster care system provoked thinking that led to the questions: where will the children be placed once they have been removed? When will they be returned home, if they are returned home? What are the chances of the children reentering foster care? The better question to have asked was how can the community provide supportive services to families so children can return home to safe environments? This thesis will discuss the foster care system and the families that are a part of that system, focus on the gaps that congest the system, and offer a recommendation.

The Gap

The most evident gaps in services are the adversities parents encounter once they have started the process or when their children are removed from their care. Parents were set up for failure with deficient understandings of the court's proceedings and challenging access to the resources and support needed to work through the system (U. Lawyer in court, personal communication, August 10, 2014). A high percentage of children reenter foster care if they are returned home to ill-equipped parents. Wulczyn (2004) stated that 28% of the children returned to their parents reentered foster care at least once within ten years; 70% of reentries occurred

within the first year after reunification (pp. 105-106). The Children's Bureau (2014) indicated that in 2012 3.8 million children in the United States had a duplicated experience in foster care (p. 2). The duplicated experiences accounted for each instance a child reentered foster care (Children's Bureau, 2014). This is compared to the Children's Bureau's (2013) count of 399,546 children in the United State who were in foster care in the month of September of 2012 (p. 3). The need for stable living conditions is elevated with such staggering numbers of foster care experiences for children.

The judges make the final decisions creating additional gaps in services. Judges are to remain impartial, abide by the laws, and maintain the system they are attempting to uphold. Periodically, this means judges will make decisions they do not agree with because it is the law. Moreover, there are instances when judges make decisions that do not make sense to those involved in the case. On occasion, the judges seem to make decisions they want to make despite the evidence before of them (T. Foster Dad, personal communication, August 26, 2014). An example comes from K—a foster mom—who said that a child in her care had been returned to a home environment that was less than ideal as she was sleeping on the floor in the living room, because her bedroom had been rented out (K. Foster Parent, personal communication, August 18, 2014).

K's story is but one example of children returning home to ill-equipped parents. Parents' lack of readiness when children return from foster care is only one reason children struggle once they have exited the system. Chambers, Saunders, New, Williams, and Stachurska (2010) discovered that nearly half of the children in foster care developed significant emotional or behavioral problems. The children have come from unstable home environments and have experienced the inconsistent character of the foster system; because of this the children do not

know the “appropriate” way to “behave”. Each care giver has different standards of appropriate behavior. When children transfer from one foster home to another, they carry with them the standards enforced at the previous placement with no indication of the expected standards of the new placement. The pressure of the varying standards and rules add to the stress of the neglect and abuse children encountered in their homes. Chambers, et. al (2010) specified that it is the combination of children’s experiences with “disrupted care, parental abuse, and neglect” that led to emotional and behavioral problems (p. 512). A consequence of disrupted care was that children were denied the opportunity to develop a primary attachment. This absence of a secure attachment led to emotional and behavioral problems. McLaughlin, Zeanah, Fox, & Nelson (2012) believed that children in foster care have less opportunity to fully develop primary attachments. In a study completed in Bucharest, Romania, McLaughlin et. al (2012) suggested that orphanages and institutions, which do not offer consistent and secure attachments, may be more suitable solutions than that of foster care. In foster care, children have small windows during which attachments can be made before they are taken to new placements. Essentially, every time children were moved to new placements they experienced emotional disruptions that affected their development which caused emotional and behavioral problems. McLaughlin et al (2012) suggested that attachments with employees in institutions were more emotionally and behaviorally stabilizing than bouncing around in foster care.

Securing a stable environment with the families the children were familiar with and loved prevented children from continually changing foster homes. If the parents who had their children removed from their care were supported and educated to provide stable environments for their children, the amount of children reentering foster care would decrease. This thesis will address the gaps in the system that are hindering the success of the families in foster care.

Section 2: Families and Foster Care

A family unit traditionally consists of a father and mother and at least one child. However, this traditional definition neglects to acknowledge the varying family types that are present in today's communities. The department—referring to the Children's Administration portion of DSHS—has the difficult obligation of defining family. For example: it is not uncommon to remove sibling groups with only one parent in common, such as three children with the same mother and different fathers. The decision to define the children as the same sibling group (depending on the mother) or separately (depending on the father) will affect the representation they receive in court and their foster care placement.

The following is my working definition of family, which includes all of the varying family dynamics:

- One or two genetic or legal parent(s),
- Legal guardians who may have a non-parental relationship with the minor, for example: adult siblings.
- Caregivers who do not legally have custody of the children but care for them with the genetic or legal parent's knowledge.

And

- One or more babies, toddlers, children and/ or adolescents
- Genetic or legal offspring
- Share both genetic parents or share one genetic parent
- Adopted children

As defined above, a family can have many dynamics. Each variable determines the court proceedings and the foster placement(s). Regardless of who is caring for the children, their families are the people in their lives who create their status quo.

Unfortunately, sometimes families do not live in the safest of conditions. In the United States when living conditions become dangerous the children in the family are removed and placed in foster care. While there are situations when foster care is a safer alternative for children than living at home, foster care is not always the best long-term solution. Foster care is disruptive to the entire family, especially the children. Children are taken from what they know and who they love when they are removed from their homes. This abrupt interruption to the children's lives can affect their development, particularly in the common situation of children bouncing from foster home to foster home.

The court system in Washington State prefers a kinship placement when a child is placed in care. Kinship care, as defined by the Child Welfare League of America (2013) is full-time care "by relatives, tribe or clan members, Godparents, stepparents" or adult who has a familial relationship with the child. Farmer (2009) stated children in kinship care develop at a more medically acceptable rate, develop fewer behavioral and mental issues, function at a higher rate in school, and the placement failure rate decreases. A placement failure is when a child is removed from their foster home at the request of the foster parent (WA DSHS, n. d.). Foster parents can request a removal for any reason, including but not limited to the behavior of the child and parent/ caregiver burnout. Farmer's (2009) study also stated that kinship placements fail because the caregiver was "struggling to cope" with the situation (p. 339). Kinship caregivers have less access to organization and government resources and support groups. Hussain (2007) discussed that foster care programs fail to care for and uphold the "rights of

kinship foster families” (p. 1). On the one hand it is better for the children to be placed in a kinship placement, on the other hand the kinship placements are not getting the support that they need from licensing agencies or surrounding communities.

The Parents

Furthermore, my field research emphasized important social justice matters: *abuse, neglect, and impoverished families are community issues*. Miles and Wright (2003) said it well, a child does not exist in isolation, “a child exists in context, in order to understand that child, we must also understand his or her context” and going on to say that a child “is born of a mother [in a family], which is part of a neighborhood, part of a community, ... and so on” (p. 3).

Advertisements for foster care and news stories about children removed from deplorable conditions evoke an empathetic response from the audience. The audience neglects to consider the cause for children being in such situations. Whatever the situations, when children are in need, there are also parents in need. While the needs are different, both needs can be met by the community.

During my fieldwork the needs of the parents were especially noticeable in court. More than half of the parents in court were very young, in their mid to late 20s. The parents were dressed very casually, leaving one to wonder if they realized the severity of the situation. Parents would talk to their lawyer in loud whispers and the judge would directly reply. These behaviors are distracting to the proceedings and impact the judge’s perception of the parent. There were parents who had emotional outbursts; this was especially surprising since three of the more than 20 cases observed had parents who were in court for the first time. “I just want my children back,” was a statement uttered by multiple parents before the court. This statement is supported by Mulheir’s (2012) TED talk. Mulheir stated that children in non-kinship care, she

learned that while societies “tend to blame the parents for abandoning,” abusing and neglecting their children, the truth is that “95% of these children’s [parents] ... want their children, and that the primary drivers behind [non-kinship care is] poverty, disability, and ethnicity” (Mulheir, 2012). Having the knowledge of how to conduct oneself in court should be the first topic discussed when parents are summoned before a judge. This conversation would help those 95% of parents make a better impression on the judge, the one who determines if their children will be returned to them (Mulheir, 2012)

A single parent, who is currently going through the court process with her two children, took the time to answer my research questions. Being a single parent, it is difficult to comply with the court’s attendance mandate and maintain steady employment. This parent, who had been sober for over a year and had been working multiple jobs, still struggled to make ends meet, was afraid she would not be able to have her children returned to her care because she felt the court makes it nearly impossible. As she stated, “No! I did not feel it was family supportive. As a single [parent] there wasn’t any one to help [me]. ” (R. W. Parent, personal communication, July 31, 2014). Her feelings of frustration from a lack of support are reflected by the Commission on Legal Empowerment for the Poor (2008) when they stated “existing power structures prevent poor people from taking charge of their lives and occupations and achieving upward mobility” (p. 276). The court did not consider the amount of time she needed to request off from multiple jobs.

The frustration of this mother was seen on her face and heard in her voice. There was much she did not understand about court. In this situation, the placement, a family friend, had brought the children to court, which generally speaking is not done unless the judge requests it. The placement assumed the children would go home, and there was no babysitter. In situations

such as this parent's situation, the consequences could be that her children remain in foster care for an indefinite amount of time or until she is able to remedy the situation.

The Children

Incidentally, when the single mother's children came to court they were two of the less than half-a-dozen youth present during 20 plus dependency hearings. Minors are welcomed to court if they are older than 12 or the judge desired to have them present. The state mandates that children age 12 to 17 receive legal representation, although this does not always happen when it should, if at all (C. Vgal, personal communication, August 22, 2014). Children's voices are ignored when they do not receive the representation they have a legal right to. It is imperative to the emotional well-being of children to be heard.

Over 800 children were served during my career caring for children who were entering foster care. A portion of my responsibility included the management of children's files. The focus of the organization was community care and the prevention of children needing foster care services. In my position I had the opportunity to review legal documents and social summaries that will follow children through their entire foster care experience. Children and their stories must be wholly represented in the foster care system. This is of particular importance for children who are under the age of 12, because they do not receive legal representation.

Throughout my research with children entering foster care, I've listened to the voices of countless children who have been removed from their homes. A large percentage of the children have said that they want to go home. As Mulheir (2012) stated, every child "has a right to a family, deserves and needs a family". While the definition of family can be flexible, being with their family has a more positive impact on the development of children versus bouncing around in foster care. Farmer (2009) stated that when a child is placed with family they experience a

more medically acceptable rate of strain and stress than children who are placed in out of kinship care. Placing children in foster care has long-term effect on the children, their families, and their communities.

Long Term Effects of Foster Care

In 2006 in the United States, over 26,000 young men and women were emancipated from foster care, this is commonly known as aging out (Munson, Narendorf, & McMillen, 2011). When preparing for adulthood, those who age out of the system are not usually as fortunate as those who are adopted or returned home to safe and healthy living conditions. Zetlin, Weinberg, & Shea (2010) stated that between living “away from their families and communities because of abuse or neglect in the home ... [and] moving from foster home to foster home and school to school” (p. 245) the now adults had little opportunity, if any, to build positive, stable attachments and connections with adults who had proven themselves to be reliable to the courts and to the children. The lack of consistency and security in the lives of children in care can leave them mentally unprepared and emotionally broken as they enter their adult lives.

It is beneficial for youth about to age out to have a stable support system established. The reality is that children in care do not receive the traditional support, guidance and stability that children who grow up in conventional homes do. Zetlin et. al (2010) said that “with no place to go, one in four of the youths who age out are incarcerated within two years of leaving foster care, one in five become homeless ... and just 51% have a job at age 21” (p. 245). Fortunately, the state of Washington has become aware of these trends of emancipating youth and has implemented the Extended Foster Care program for youths 18-21 who need additional time to prepare for adulthood (WA DSHS, n. d.). Youth apply for the program themselves,

essentially requesting an extension in foster care until they are 21. While this solution may not work for all aging out, it is an option for those who feel unprepared to be on their own as adults.

A high percentage of the youth who age out of foster care are entering their adult lives without completing their high school education. Jones (2011) completed a study that followed 16 teens that aged out, learning that “39% to 65% of youth in care earn a high school diploma” (p. 1919) or get their GED. A smaller 26% of graduates and GED earners go on to earn a higher form of education (Jones, 2011, p, 1919).

After reviewing the above statistics and being familiar with adults whose early years were spent in care and went on to higher education, I developed the question how can the number of children who earn their high school education or GED increase? What can be done to encourage those who have graduated or earned their GEDs to go into the military or some form of higher education, such as vocational training or college? Zetlin et. al (2010) stated that “children in foster care comprise a population of students at great risk for school failure” (p. 245). Zetlin et. al (2010) later suggest that parents, foster parents, teachers and social workers need to cooperate to help their children to reap the greatest benefit possible from their grade school and high school education. Zetlin et. al’s (2010) study prescribed that children and youth in care need support and encouragement from all angles in their lives. This support includes, but is not limited to, the department, family, school, foster family, and if applicable their religious affiliation, for example: church, mosque, or synagogue.

Zetlin et. al’s (2010) argument is that children and youth in care need support from various corners of their lives to be the most successful in the educational careers. A similar argument could be made for the parents. Parents who struggle to maintain safe and healthy living environments need support to be successful parents, as much as their children need

support for their education. It is the parents who have to maintain their own safety and health as well as the safety and health of their children. When parents do not receive the support they need—which can include, but is not limited to parenting skills, sobriety assistance, and emotional care—the chances of their children reentering foster care is nearly one in three (Wulczyn, 2004). The parents have the responsibility to ensure that they and their children thrive in life.

Parents' ensuring that their children thrive is difficult as both Chambers, et al (2010) and Jones' (2011) studies indicated that children in foster care are more likely to develop substance abuse problems than children who were not placed in care. Children in care, for example, develop substance abuse problems three to four times the rate of those in the same age group who did not grow up in foster care (Jones, 2011). With that said, children in care are less likely to develop a dependency on alcohol than those who were not in care (Jones, 2011). Mackie et al (2011) stated in the United States 37% of the children and youth in care have been prescribed psychotropic medication compared to about 4% in the general population. Children in care can receive potentially addictive medication at much higher rates and younger ages than children who are not in care.

Snohomish County, in Washington State, required all children entering foster care to have an initial health screen exam (Washington State Legislature (WSL), 2014)). Initial health screen exams occurs within the first 72 hours of children being in care and provides a baseline of the children's physical and sometimes mental well-being as they enter into the foster care system (WSL, 2014). The children are examined by a doctor or equivalent health care professional. Foster parents insured the exam occurred and the appropriate documents were filled out and

returned to the children's primary social worker. After being in care for about a month the child is taken in for another health screen to gauge the child's physical health.

Counseling and therapy are healthier solutions for children working through emotional trauma and behavioral issues. The resources in my research suggested that the preferred method of treating children for mental and emotional care issues is to medicate them. Children are prescribed medication for mental and behavioral disorders that could be prevented if more attention were given to develop stable living environments. Mackie et al (2011) noted that once children in foster care are emancipated from the system, there is no program in place to transition them from being medicated children to non-medicated adults.

Court

The court is a combination of various roles and responsibilities. In a Seattle City Hall meeting a speaker stated that the "court is the portal of social services" (Amara, conference proceedings, 2014). This makes the court the facilitator of services. If a family needs services, the court orders these needed services but it is the family's responsibility to follow through with the services. This is easier said than done.

During the courtroom proceedings a family court judge is assigned to facilitate the case. The judge's responsibility is to be the expert of the laws and of the case as it has been documented; he or she has the responsibility to maintain order, facilitate discussion, and to make the final decision. Decisions made by the judge are legally binding. If those in court do not follow through with the decision the judge has ordered, the judge can declare them in contempt of court. For example: if a judge determines that a parent needs to take parenting classes and the parent chooses to not attend those classes, the judge can and most likely will make a decision

that does not reflect the parent's wishes, extending their children's placement in foster care or revoking their parental rights.

The lawyers' responsibility was to be the expert of the law for their clients and to advocate for their clients' legal rights (N. Vgal, personal communication, August 22, 2014). Everyone involved in the case, including but not limited to the social worker, the guardian ad litem, the children if older than 12, each parent, has a right to legal representation. The communicated the requests their clients had a legal right to make to the judge.

The volunteer guardian ad litem (Vgals) have the responsibility of researching the children's lives and advocating for what is best for them. They are expected to be impartial and diligent in their research. The Vgals are vital to the success of a fair ruling for the children. The second Vgal coordinator interviewed stated that "interaction between the child and the Vgal is minimal" as most of the research consisted of interviewing people who were involved in the life of the child and his or her parents (J. Vgal, personal communication, August 22, 2014). Not all of the children received representation. The first Vgal coordinator interviewed noted that Vgals are usually invited to a case two-three months into the court proceedings. Prior to the introduction of the Vgals to the case, it was possible the child had no representatives to advocate on their behalf.

The social worker's role is to represent DSHS by investigating the accusations surrounding the case. In court, their primary objective is to speak for and represent DSHS. The Vgal and the social worker investigate and observe the parents and their interactions with their children. Unfortunately, these observations and investigations put pressure on the parents—pressure is caused by the power differential between the social work and the parent. Parents

know that the observation notes taken by the social worker impact the placement decision for their children.

Foster parents are the DSHS or privately licensed individuals or couples who welcome placed children in their homes. Foster parents are not typically invited to the court proceedings. K, a foster parent for over 60 children during her tenure, stated that foster parents are mandated to document behavior and the personality type of the children (K. Foster Mom, personal communication, August 18, 2014). They are a vital advocacy resource for the children, but they are rarely involved in the court proceedings.

Parents are mandated to be in court. Regardless of circumstances the parents need to be there. This can be difficult when some parents are not aware that attendance is mandatory. Often parents come into court casually dressed, exhibiting little to no knowledge on the codes of conduct. Most understand to speak only when spoken to by the judge, but even then there are mumbles, hysterical crying, and whispers to lawyers. These behaviors are distracting to the proceedings and impact the judge's perception of the parent. During my observations in court, in the circumstances of non-English speaking parents who were in court, there was not an interpreter, and the court was fortunate if the parents' representation could interpret. One parent exemplifies some of the challenges of the court proceedings.

A Story of a Parent in Court²

Twenty-five year old Jane³ had been called into court again. Her children were placed in care because a social worker decided that she was no longer a fit mother or at least that was what

² The story in this section is cited as follows (J. Parent, personal communication, July 31 2014).

³ Name and some details changed for confidentiality.

Jane thought. Jane did not have the confidence that her children would be returned to her since she believed the social work held the opinion that she was an unfit mother. As a child Jane came from an impoverished community, she had witnessed abhorrent acts and learned how to survive life from within an unsafe environment. She began abusing drugs young and had her first child shortly after. Staying addiction free was an issue for Jane. The isolation from the community around her because of her involvement with drugs made sobriety a difficult goal to reach. Despite the challenges of getting clean, her journey to sobriety was successful in that she had been clean for over a year.

Recently, Jane left her abusive boyfriend and found a safe place for her children to live. But getting a job was difficult because no one wanted to hire a recovering addict. Once she obtained a job it was difficult to keep, especially when she did not make enough money for child care. Because Jane was unable to establish suitable child care the department decided to remove her children yet again (at least this was what she believed). But Jane felt that she would never become a “fit parent” if she is not given the chance. The community around her did not support her because of her past mistakes and the environment she left would only hurt her and her children. That day in court she waited for the third judge to decide if she was to be given custody of her children.

The department removed Jane’s children for neglect. While this is not the story of all parents who have had their children removed, it is important to remember that much abuse and neglect are intergenerational and societal issues. Abuse and neglect are not personal problems. In our culture once a person has made mistakes, finding their way back into the good graces of society is nearly impossible. I have seen parents who come to a place where they and their

children are healthy and thriving, but these situations occurred with support from family, friends, and sometimes the most unlikely of people, such as foster parents.

Parents with children in care have an uphill battle ahead of them if they want to reunite their families. To have their children removed from their care and not know when or if the children will return home is painful (J. Parent, personal communication, July 31, 2014). Not knowing where your children are or if they are doing well is stress provoking (T. Vetted Parent, personal communication, November 6, 2014). It is terrifying to have one's parental rights revoked, yet parents face this scenario every day in the United States. Hearing the parent's stories is eye opening. They are beautiful creatures who need support yet seem to have been forgotten. Like their parents, the children in care are beautiful creations who face hardships that many adults cannot imagine. The story of one child in care exemplifies the experiences of many in the foster care system.

A Story of a Child in Care⁴

Children's voices are so often unheard in court. When the children and youth were heard in court they were adolescents or the proceedings were far enough along that decisions that affected the children's lives had been made and implemented. These decisions affected the children's mental and emotional well-being. When voices go unheard there is a breakdown in the system leaving families in a perpetual emergent state. When someone lives in an emergent state—whether physically, emotionally, or mentally—they cannot envision a future of being safe and feeling healthy.

Eight year old Susie⁵ lived in a working class neighborhood. She went to school but struggled. Her teacher assumed it was because she did not care and did not question her

⁴ Susie's story is a culmination of stories of children entering care.

difficulties focusing at school. Classmates noticed that she did not have lunch. Fortunately, her friend shared lunch with her every day. One week Susie did not come to school - no note, no phone call, and no sign of her. A social worker called the school counselor to inform the school that Susie was being held captive and eventually hostage as her father refused to let the police in the house because of the charges against him.

After Susie was held captive for almost a week, the police received authorization from the court (a warrant), to enter the home without permission from the occupants. They were finally able to secure a warrant to enter the home. There was crashing, banging, guns going off, police shouting, parents screaming, siblings hysterically crying, and more chaos. Susie hid in the corner of her living room, in a small apartment, because she did not have her own room to hide in. She watched the traumatizing event occur. The police arrested Susie's dad. Clothing found on the floor and a stuffed bear were thrown in a black garbage bag as the police forcefully removed Susie from her home. Her home was not much, it was not safe, but it was her home. Now it was gone.

Susie sat in her social worker's office. She listened as the social worker told her traumatic story again and again to foster parents who would not or could not accept her placement. Because there were so few foster homes available, Susie was placed in an over-capacity home for one night. Within days, Susie would be moved to a different foster home. O. Dashawn Patrick (2005) explained that the foster system is "over-burdened and under-funded," (p. iii) making it difficult to find a long-term safe placement. Susie would probably bounce between multiple houses because of a lack of foster homes. A few days after she was pulled from her home, the family finally had a Family Team Decision Making (FTDM) meeting. This

⁵ Details altered for confidentiality.

is a meeting that “brings people together who are involved with the family to make critical decisions regarding the removal of child(ren) from their home, changes in [foster care] placement, and reunification or placement into a permanent home” (Washington State’s Department of Social and Health Services (WA DSHS), n. d. , para. 1). Even though an FTDM is not a court proceeding, all parties come before a judge to discuss what will happen with Susie. The following outcomes are decided—she will be placed in a foster home, with a friend or family member, or return to dad if he did not go to prison.

It is telling that mom is not in the picture. Susie was afraid and did not know where she was or what was to happen next. She was removed from her world and decisions for her life were made by strangers and, so far, she has had no voice in the decisions.

Section 3: Methodology and Fieldwork Discussion

The research conducted for this thesis was comprised of six data collection methods. The first method consisted of semi-structured interviews administered in person and over the phone, and delivered via email with parents, foster parents, and volunteer guardian ad litem (Vgals). The second data collection method consisted of informal conversation with lawyers, vetted parents and a judge. The third method involved overt observational research between the parents and their children and the parents and the social worker. The fourth method of research involved covert observational research in which my observations were made in court. The fifth research method involved researcher participation that required my interaction with children in care. My sixth research method consisted of a literature review of academic literature, government documents, and autobiographical commentaries from individuals who lived through the foster care system.

My qualitative study allowed participants to give answers that led to the discovery of the lack of parent support and care in the foster care system and court services. The participants varied in profession and background. The responses and feedback from the participants were all necessary to understand the plight of the system and, most importantly, the plight of these families.

While most individuals were willing to participate in my research, I experienced some limitation in my research. Observations in court and of family visitations had to occur during work hours: 9am – 5pm, Monday through Friday. While scheduling observations around my work hours was difficult, it gave me the experience of missing work to attend court and go to the visitations. A second limitation was the lack of information on the parents of the children in foster care. The most impactful limitation was the confidentiality that the foster care system has in place for the protection of the children, the parents, the DSHS employees and the court staff and volunteers. Because of the sensitive personal and medical information DSHS has access to, legal measures are taken to ensure the privacy and safety of staff, volunteers, and families in the system.

Section 4: Restoration, Love, and Support

Restorative Justice

Part of the healing process for the families and the community is restoring what has been damaged. When the damage encompasses such a large demographic and sub-culture, the change needed is slow. The healing process needs to involve restorative justice. Restorative justice was defined by Van Ness (as cited in Fritz 2005) as “a systemic response to wrongdoing that emphasizes healing the wounds of victims, offenders, and communities caused or revealed by crime” (p. 4). While not all of the parents have committed a crime, all of the wounds of parents

and children need healing. This restorative healing process must include participation by the court, DSHS, vetted and in-it-parents, (at times) the children, and sometimes the involved foster families, making the healing is holistic for the family and the community.

In the context of the foster care system, restorative justice could look like former children in care attaining an education that will benefit the community they come from or benefit the foster system itself. For the purposes of the parents in court, restorative justice will look like working with their children to develop loving relationships that facilitate forgiveness and lead to their children thriving. Parents, who do not already have an understanding of the consequences of their actions, need to work with their children to develop that understanding. Once parents have had their children returned to them, they will have the tools and skills to, restoratively, walk with another parent who is facing the same challenges they faced. Restorative justice offers the parents the opportunity to humbly walk with other parents who are on the verge of losing their children to foster care, preventing the needs for those services in that family.

Restorative justice focuses on the resolution of a conflict verses the obligation to punish the offender, in this case: the parents. To focus on a resolution gives the parents an opportunity to develop a complete understanding of the consequences of their actions. Including the children in this process gives them the opportunity to find the answers they need to move towards healing and forgiveness. For instance, the children could assist the parents in preparing the house for the children's return. Parents would invite the children to join them in establishing house rules and consequences. In both examples the parents and the children are working together to restore the relationships. Restorative justice offers the opportunity for both the parents and the children to find forgiveness.

Love Your Neighbor: A Plea to the Church

As a child who was raised in the church, one lesson taught regularly was that of “love thy neighbor. ” The most important commandment is to love the Lord with all your heart, mind, strength, and soul as Jesus commanded in Mark 12. The second most important commandment is “Love your neighbor as yourself. There is no greater commandment than these” (Mark 12: 29-31, NIV). The question is who is our neighbor? The answer is every one you directly or indirectly interact with. This is when the church needed to consider the ripple effects of actions, or the ripple effects of a lack of action. For parents in court a lack of action on their behalf meant their children would not be returned to them or worse their children reentered foster care after they had been returned to their parents once.

The argument that our actions, or lack of, cause a ripple effect is supported by globalization. Globalization is the international relations of all countries in the world (Friedman, 2000). Globalization is what connects the markets, technology, and information on a global scale. Thomas Friedman (2000) stated that a person “cannot be a completed person alone” (p. 31), so we have to be a part of those around us. We are but one piece of the community puzzle. To ignore the other pieces is to hinder the construction of a beautiful picture. When people are able to connect to their neighbors on a personal level, they create a safe place for themselves, their families, their neighbors and their greater community. Connecting to our neighbors creates a place of unity and emotional connectedness, a place of support.

When contributing to the work of a group a person’s true self shines through. It is when we are no longer alone that we can become a “complete person” (Friedman, 2000, p. 31). The Bible supports the concept of not being alone. When we work with others, the work done will be of a higher quality and the workload will be distributed amongst a group. In Ecclesiastes 4:9-10

the Lord says that “two are better than one because they have a good return for their labor: if either of them falls down one can help the other up. But pity anyone who falls and has no one to help them up” (NIV). A community is better when the inhabitants are working together.

The church should be the model of a community working together, internally and externally in the community. Myers (2000) reminded his audience that “the church is to love the community, not be its judge” (p. 65). The church is to love unconditionally, because our Lord loves unconditionally. Christians are to love without judgment on the heart of a person. Love without judgement is how the church needs to interact with the community they are serving. If you are not able to love all people regardless of where they come from, what they have done, and the words they say, then there will not be a desire to help. Loving our neighbors, many times means putting ourselves aside and letting our neighbors take the lead. Loving our neighbors, means doing what they need, and not what we think they need. They already know; let them have their voice.

The church has an opportunity to serve their community. Filled with modern day orphans, the foster care system needs to be cared for by the church because religion that is accepted by God is to “look after orphans and widows in their distress” (James 1:27, NIV). Families in the community are hurting. They need support. If the church reached out to touch the emotionally, spiritually, and sometime physically damaged families, as Jesus with the sinners and tax collectors, the community and the church will grow.

The church has to step in without judgment and without fear. Humbly walk with the hurting families and support them. The church has the opportunity to not only affect the children, but the families that had wandered down the dangerous path that led them to court. When helping the children, the church needs to remember the systems that affecting their lives.

The church needs to edify the families and support those who hurt the most. It is not my recommendation for the church to fill this task alone. On the contrary, as stated earlier in this thesis, people are better together, it would be wise of any organization or community group to partner with other private and government agencies, the court and the families. The church could come to the plate and meet other organizations and the families where they are at. This will facilitate love, and create trust, peace, and cooperation within a community.

Community Support

Foster care is a societal program that is made up of and contributed to by other organizations, governmental programs, and community systems. Contributing to the societal program that is foster care is also contributing to the reformation of the other systems that are a part of the larger system. There is no one solution to the many and varying components of the system. Each system contributes its strengths and weaknesses to the larger system. Having worked at a non-profit that partnered with DSHS for three years, I observed how the different systems worked together—many times not well. Instead of making reforms when necessary, usually another law is added to the list of laws. The court is responsible for the parents or legal guardians who do not uphold the laws in a manner that keeps their children safe.

Where does the healing begin? Healing needs to begin with the community. The most effective community change starts within the community itself. In 1993, Kretzman and McKnight shared that “all the historic evidence indicates that significant community development takes place only when local community people are committed to investing themselves and their resources” in their community (p. 4). Community develop has to come from the heart of a community. People in communities know what the problems are and have the assets needed to develop the solutions to those problems. Aid coming from outside of a

community can have long-term unintended consequences that harm the community. My argument is not necessarily that outside aid is not useful, but that the community must be motivated for a solution to effectively use exterior aid to develop the solution to the problem. Kretzman and McKnight (1993) supported my argument when they stated that “outside resources will be used more effectively if the local community is itself fully mobilized and invested” in the community development (p. 7). Unfortunately, the community has forgotten they have the power to make a difference in the lives of the families in need.

The community needs reminding that they have the assets to influence change. Families in the foster system need support and care from the community around them. The support that the community can offer can manifest itself in different ways. Such as:

- Grass roots non-profits offering the court appointed classes, such as parenting classes, at little to no cost,
- Churches donating spaces in their buildings,
- Church members welcoming broken families into their homes,
- The women in the community providing clothing or food to the parents who may have trouble making ends meet,
- Youth or young adults offering child care, or
- The court altering its interaction with the families in court.

The above assets are all valuable. And while each task may seem small to the individual giving of themselves for the families, to the families it may be the support they need to take advantage of the opportunity to earn back their right to be their children’s primary care giver. Utilizing community assets, such as those above, will regenerate the community by community members

making connections. Kretzman and McKnight (1993) described the solution to community development when they stated that:

the key to neighborhood regeneration ... is to locate all of the available local assets, to begin connecting them with one another in ways that multiply their power and effectiveness, and to begin harnessing those local institutions that are not yet available for local development purposes. (p. 5)

Community development is about neighbors connecting; it is about relationships developed for the benefit of others.

Community development is about establishing and developing relationships. Myers (2000) said poverty is more than economics; he defined poverty as “relationships that do not work for human well-being” (p. 64). Myers (2000) later stated that people were designed to live in “just and peaceful relationships” (p. 64) with others and God. Myers was supported by Pogge (2005) when he stated that “poverty is an ongoing harm we inflict” (p. 1). Depending on the relationship imbalance in a person’s life, poverty can manifest itself different forms. The children passing through court are impoverished. Many of them are economically impoverished. All of them, however, are emotionally impoverished.

To compare, not all parents in care are economically impoverished. All of them, however, are also emotionally impoverished. The pain and frustration expressed by a parent in the court process was evident in how she communicated. This parent’s (Mom) story is heart breaking. The oldest child is now in foster care for the second time and the baby for the first time. Mom had uprooted her life and her children to find a safe place for them to live, she left her live-in boyfriend and found a new job. In this interview she voiced betrayal from those who reported her ex-boyfriend, while she looked for a safe place for her children. While he was the

adult reported, because she and her children were living with him the children were removed from the unsafe environment. She was afraid that she would lose her job for having to attend court as often as she had. She was concerned that her social worker was letting her personal feelings of disapproval get in the way. Mom stated that her social worker “couldn’t understand that I am in a place of doing [well] for myself, [I’m] clean and sober. Why would she attack me now?” (R. W. Parent, personal communication, July 31, 2014).

As stated previously, healing, like a broken bone, will take time and will be uncomfortable. It can and probably will hurt. Nevertheless, no matter which avenue for healing is explored the common denominator is support. While the court is attempting to facilitate the healing process, it is not enough. Sellick (2011) stated that the services provided for foster care are now being provided by private organizations and non-profits, not government agencies such as DSHS. The community is stepping up to support the foster care community, yet parents seem to be forgotten in the equation. A community is a living organism, thus, the healing should occur holistically. All parts of the community affected need to be treated. A holistic approach to community health includes parent development.

The Recommendation for the Community

Farmer (2009) stated that when children were placed with family they remained “connected to their roots” which helped them “maintain a sense of belonging and identity” (p. 340). A family is more than blood relations. A person’s family brings a sense of identity and belonging to their life. In one study, Clive Sellick (2011) said that children who stayed in care long-term or aged out of the system required “additional specialist services provided by agencies” (p. 796). My research discovered that parents who did not received the assistance and

support that they needed had their children removed from their care and placed in the system, usually more than once.

The lack of support to parents is a huge need in our foster care system, court system, and community at large. The research showed that children thrived and developed better when with their parents and that parents and kinship placements did not receive the same services and care that non-kinship placements did (Hussain, 2007; McLaughlin et al, 2012; Mulheir, 2012).

Personal experience and community-run groups demonstrated that when the community supported those in need, people did what they had not been able to do by themselves before.

In a conversation with a pro-parent lawyer, we discussed her work. She had worked with parents to reunify them to children for almost two decades. She shared with me a story of a dad she had worked with over a decade ago, and noted that “it took him six years before he had his children returned to him” (U. Lawyer in court, personal communication, July 2014). In the best case scenario his children spent all six years with the same foster parents. Worst case scenario the children change foster homes every three to six months. It is good that there are lawyers like her who will fight for parents, nevertheless, six years in the foster care system profoundly affected their lives.

The parents felt as if the system was working against them. They felt that the court was not parent friendly. The vetted parents credit their ability to obtain their children to those who supported and gave them love and care. The Vgals concurred that parents received one year of check-ins and informal assistance from their social worker. Parents received “an on-site visit from the social worker every three to four months, if their work loads are not too heavy” (N. Vgal, interviewee3, personal communication, August 20, 2014). Parents felt overwhelmed with

the process, especially with three to four visits a year for a year, from a social work they may not trust.

Listening to the population with whom you are working is critically important to the development of that community (Commission on Legal Empowerment of the Poor, 2008, p. 276). This community said:

- children develop at more medically acceptable rates when living with family,
- children are at less risk for needed services as adults if living in unstable environments,
- Kinship placement care is lacking, and
- Parents did not receive community or substantial department (DSHS) support during the process.

My recommendation is **parent support groups**. Currently, there are not parent support groups in Washington State. There are reader's handouts throughout the United States, one example being the *By Parents For Parents* published in Massachusetts. While *By Parents For Parents* offers helpful tips, suggestions, and defines the law, parent support groups will be a direct, active method of support.

Two types of parent support groups should be established. The first type of support group would include participation from foster parents. Foster parents would come alongside to co-power the parents providing an example and offering support until the parents were thriving in the eyes of the court. This type of support group would require the foster parents have the determination to make the situation work with the children in their care. Because the children in their care would be the children of the parents they would co-power with. Maintaining the relationships between the parents, the children, and the foster parents will provide the continuity, stability, and support the parents and the children need. The second type of group would have

vetted parents facilitate support groups in conjunction with a buddy system. A buddy system is similar to a sponsorship without the risk of paternalism between the vetted parents and the parents in to. Vetted parents have the unique perspective of foster care and court that provides them an understanding of the pain and frustration that parents in court go through. With support, vetted parents made their way through the system and now have more to contribute to their community. The support group will offer a community that will, co-power and support the parents who are struggling to do it by themselves.

Parents will know their buddy understands their experiences and be confident that they are on their sides, instead of feeling judged and rejected by the system they are currently in. Once the children are home, the parents will be encouraged to continue attending the support groups. There will be some adjustments when the children return home and the continuity of the support group will help soften the transition phase. The support groups will support the parents through the adjustments until the reunified family is secure. Children will be less likely to return to foster care once the family is safe and secure, which will relieve some of the strain on the foster care system and the social and human services in general. The now vetted parents can contribute by sponsoring a new parent going the same process they conquered. Also, after the support groups and buddies are established, guest speakers will be invited to the conversation to offer parenting techniques, guidance through the foster and court systems, changes in the law, court room etiquette, job and education support and resources.

Other examples of successful support groups include Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) and foster parent support groups. AA support groups offer sobriety assistance to recovering substance users. Participants maintain their sobriety for years, some for the rest of their lives, with the support group and a sponsor partnership for accountability, validity, and support.

Foster parent support groups were developed because they are taking similar roads and understand the pains and struggles that occur when caring for traumatized children. The foster parent support groups invite guest speakers who offer skill training or inform them about changes in the law and what that means for their foster families. But support groups offer opportunity to share and support. A combination of these two types of support groups will facilitate a healing environment.

The court is the facilitator of services for parents. Parent support group, will be a service suggested, recommended, and mandated for parents to attend. The organization, program, church, or other institute hosting the support groups will partner with the court system and develop relationships with the Vgals, lawyers, social workers and judges.

A Story of a Vetted Parent: An Example of Community Support⁶

One story exemplifies the impact of foster parents co-power a dad who had his children removed then returned to his care. Dad's story is like many other parents stories: three children with two women, substance abuse and struggling socioeconomically. He recalled that his "two oldest children had been in and out of care until they were placed with a foster family that never gave up on them" (Dad, personal communication, April 13, 2012). Every time he got his children back, he struggled with substance abuse that hindered his ability to parent. For years he was back and forth between work and drugs.

His youngest was put in foster care while she was still a little baby and he did not want to lose her to the system like his older two children. "I barely knew, my oldest two children" (Dad, personal communication, April 13, 2014). The threat of not knowing his baby and not helping her grow up scared him to his core. By God's grace her first placement was a loving family,

⁶ Some details changed for confidentiality. (Dad, personal communication, April 13, 2012)

who understood that abuse, neglect, and poverty can be generational. This family knew the love of God and that God loved him. Dad had an opportunity to meet this foster family and asked if he could spend time with them and his baby. Once the request to spend time with the foster family was approved by the court, he observed the foster parents raise and coach their children—genetic, adopted and foster children alike. They inspired him to follow through with his parenting classes. With the encouragement and support of the foster parents, his parenting class led him to seek out sobriety assistance. He relapsed once on his journey to sobriety. The foster parents did not give up on him. They helped him through the mistake and walked with him as he found his way back to sobriety.

He has been sober more than four years, has maintained employment for almost as long and his baby is now in grade school. The foster parents who took in his baby are now extended family. With love the foster family offered Dad the support that facilitated his ability to accomplish what he was not able to do by himself: earn permanent custody of his daughter. Without the support from the foster parents he would have used more social and health services. Dad is a shining example of the importance of community supporting broken families.

Section 5: Conclusion

For the benefit of the children, families should be together. While it is true that children in foster care have been abused and neglected, it is also true that they have made attachments to their parents. Therefore when care is abruptly disrupted the children experience more traumas in addition to the abuse and neglect. Characteristically, placements in foster care are unstable with children bouncing around from foster home to foster home. With each subsequent disruption in care the children experience more traumas. Farmer (2009) reminded us that children who have experienced trauma thrive mentally and behaviorally at a medically acceptable rate when they

are placed in kinship care. Unfortunately, one of the gaps in services is that kinship placements do not receive the same amount of resources and support from DSHS or the community that foster homes receive (Hussain, 2007). Because of the lack of resources and support offered to kinship placements, they have higher rate of burnout. When kinship placements burnout, the children are placed with foster families, creating more traumas because of another attachment disruption.

Parents of the children in the system feel a lack of support from DSHS, the court and the community. During my research, parents who experienced foster care felt the weight of the court as they navigated the system. One parent expressed her disgust with the lack of parent friendly resources and services (J. Parent, personal communication, July 31, 2014). While another parent did not have a clear understanding of the reasons her children were removed. Still other parents behaved in a manner that would suggest a lack of awareness of the court proceedings and codes of conduct.

The children reenter foster care because their parents are not prepared mentally, emotionally or economically. DSHS provides one year of follow-up care post reunification, however, this care includes only three to four visits in that year if the social work is available. Parents complete the court ordered tasks that are needed to regain custody of their children, but they are not offered the support or education to continue with the behaviors necessary to maintain the custody of their children. One fifth of the children in foster will return home and reenter foster care within one year (Children's Bureau, 2014; Wulczyn, 2004). Having a lack of community support, coupled with the lack of parenting skills, parents repeat the foster cycle of children removed from their care, reunified, and removed again.

The best situations for the children are to be returned home. Unfortunately, if the living environment becomes unsafe and unhealthy again the children will reenter care. The community has the assets to develop a solution for this gap in DSHS services. Parent support groups offer the emotional and structural support of AA and the practical and educational components of Foster Parent Support Groups. All of these components in the support groups are necessary for the parents' development. The support groups offer an opportunity for relationship develop and community connection. The relationships that will develop will nurture the parents, the children, and the co-powering community members by enriching each other's lives. The dialogue that will come from the support groups will restore balance in the participant's lives by developing an ongoing harmony to end emotional poverty (Pogge, 2005). Community development is relationship building; the support groups will build relationships, thus developing communities.

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Glossary

Age/aged/aging out – The natural emancipation of a minor in foster care who was not adopted or reunited with his or her genetic or legal parents.

The Department of Social and Human Services: DSHS – The public, government agency, that provides resources and assistance to individuals and families in need.

Emancipated – When minors are no longer legally under the care of parents or legal guardians. For most of the United State population this occurs legally at the age of eighteen.

Family Visitation – The family requested or court mandated scheduled times for parents to spend time with their children who are in care. Visitations can be observed or not observed.

Foster Care – The government program that is operated by county, per state, that provides safe care in homes of families, for children who have been removed from unsafe and unhealthy living environments in their own homes.

“In/into care” – Referring to the actual care children receive while in foster care.

Kinship Care – When a child is placed with a documented genetic relative.

Placed – Refers to when the department (see above) has found a suitable location for the children to live while in foster care. The suitable location can be a family member, close family friend, foster family, or any other stable adult in the child’s or youth’s life.

“The system” – Referring to the foster care system

Vetted Parents – Genetic or legal parents who have had their children successfully returned to them permanently, without having their children return to foster care.

Volunteer Guardian ad Litem: Vgals – A group of volunteers; coordinated and directed by paid staff, who are assigned to children’s cases. They investigate the life of the children by interviewing everyone involved in the children’s lives and make observations while

interacting with the children. They are to be an “objective voice for children in the court room” as stated by a Vgal (J. Vgal Interviewee 2, personal communication, August 22, 2014).

Warrant – A legal document authorizing the police to make an arrest, search a premise, or carry out another action relating to community and social justice problems.

Washington Administrative Codes: WACs – A legal document that spans many topics and licenses, including but not limited to foster care. The WACs provide the rules and regulations that differing programs, organizations, and institutions are legally obligated to abide by.