





# Drawing a Larger Circle Around Families

There are volunteers eager to nurture children and parents, reducing the trauma of foster care

By Naomi Schaefer Riley

One night about two years ago, Kiley Cobb got into a fight with her husband. The police were called when it got physical, and Cobb's infant son went to stay with a friend of hers. But the friend had to leave town and Cobb, as she tells me, "was running out of options." The Department of Child Services in Southwest Florida wanted to place her son in foster care. But before that happened, they offered to put her in touch with Safe Families—a program in which families volunteer to host children in difficult situations while their parents get matters at home under control.

No mother wants to be told that she is going to be separated from her child, and "at first, I was livid," says Cobb. But then she looked at her choices. She could send her son to live with a family close by, see him as often as she wanted, and bring him home after she and her husband had gone through counseling. Or he could go "into the system." The foster-care system often allows almost no contact between biological parents and foster parents, and only supervised visits with your child. And once a kid is in the system, it can be a bureaucratic nightmare to get him or her out. The average length of stay in foster care is about two years. The separation period for a child placed in a Safe Families home averages six weeks.

Cobb describes being in "constant contact" with the Safe Families couple who hosted her son. She received pictures all the time, talked to him every day, and saw him regularly during the month and a half he was not living with her. Cobb and her husband completed a mandatory counseling program during that

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time, and their relationship has been much better since.

She reflects, “It’s hard to let your kid go and live with another family. As a parent you don’t want to do that. But sometimes you have to give yourself a break and figure your life out and accept the help.” Indeed, she is sure that “If I didn’t, I wouldn’t have my son right now.”

### **A national nonprofit with strong results**

Launched in 2002, Safe Families for Children has served almost 20,000 children in 27 different states. Over 90 percent of the children hosted through the program have been successfully reunited with their biological families; for kids who enter foster care, that number is only slightly more than half. And Safe Families costs around \$10 a day per child served (private money that is evenly drawn from individual donors and foundations like the Schulze and Morgridge family foundations). Foster care costs five times that much, almost all of which comes from tax dollars.

The program’s volunteer host families—who undergo an extensive training program, home inspections, and background checks—are typically recruited through churches or other religious institutions. Unlike foster parents, they are not given a stipend. Safe Families does help provide for material needs of children while they are being hosted, and pays for state-required fingerprinting and law-enforcement checks. Additional resources are also provided by donors to support the children. Churches, for instance, frequently provide clothing closets, diapers, and other necessities that host families can use. Church and community donors defray the costs of summer camps or extracurricular activities, and provide volunteer help with carpooling or babysitting.

How does the charity convince families to take these kids in without any compensation? Donor Doug Campbell, a retired business executive, tells audiences of churches and other religious organizations that Safe Families “is about families helping families. If that’s part

of your mission, this is something you should be interested in.” The group has had little trouble finding people who are willing to open their homes to children.

In this sense the organization mirrors other foster-care and adoption programs that have launched around the country in recent years. From Project 1.27, which has almost emptied the list of children in Colorado waiting to be adopted, to FaithBridge, which has recruited hundreds of families to foster kids in Georgia, more and more charities are tapping into religious communities as a prime source of volunteers willing to help endangered young people. (For more on these efforts, see our Fall 2013 issue.) A secret of these groups’ success has been their recognition that whole congregations should and can be mobilized to support the couples who take on this tremendous responsibility. This prevents foster and adoptive families from burning out, and brings an entire network of community members to bear in assisting stressed children, along with their biological parents.

### **Caring for a whole family**

The families who volunteer to be part of the Safe Families program are not just offering to help the children; they also aim to boost and strengthen the child’s family. If the biological parents need help finding a job, or with their housing, or just want a friend to lean on when under pressure, volunteer families are there. Even after children are returned to their biological parents, the relationship between parents and volunteers often continues. If the parents need last-minute child care, or advice on schooling, sometimes they turn to volunteers for help.

Whereas many foster children travel considerable distances to reach their placements, Safe Families tries to find volunteers in the immediate vicinity, in order to reduce the chances that a child will have to lose contact for any period of time with his or her biological parents, a frequent problem in the foster-care system. Proximity also allows children to remain in the same school and keep



neighborhood friends even while their home life is disrupted. Chances for biological families to have continuing relationships with host families for years to come are also improved when the families are not far apart.

Safe Families is not a replacement for foster care—as any number of people involved with the program emphasize. “We will never get rid of foster care,” says Campbell, who is also chairman of a group called Friends of Foster Children. Abusive situations, for example, are not appropriate for volunteers to handle without state participation. But the majority of kids in the foster-care system are coming from situations of neglect or stress.

Many children are in foster care simply because their family situation is in crisis. Sometimes parents are sick and need to be in the hospital for an extended period. If a mother of three shows up at the hospital with appendicitis and no one to care for her children, those children may be placed in temporary foster care. In one case where Safe Families got involved, a mother had an aggressive form of cancer and the father couldn’t work and care for the kids at the same time. They had no relatives or friends to help out, and so they turned to the charity.

### **Filling gaps as families fracture**

Dave Anderson, a child psychologist who helped to found the first Safe Families program in Chicago, will never forget one five-year-old girl he met while doing professional assessments of abused kids. She had a broken arm and a face that was “black and blue.” And then he met her mother: “She was an incredibly lovely woman. But she had to work, and her babysitter fell through.” So she asked her ex-boyfriend to watch the child. He had substance-abuse problems, and ended up beating the child while she was at her job.

“The problem wasn’t that she was a harmful parent. The problem was that she didn’t have options.” That was when he started to think about ways to prevent these tragedies from happening in the first place. How do we give mothers like that more options?

The “fragmentation of families” is behind many of the problems we’re witnessing in the foster-care system today, notes Anderson. There are “no relatives or caring neighbors to turn to. People are not stepping up to be the backup caregiver.”

Shortly after meeting that girl, Anderson and his wife decided to become foster parents, but they concluded that didn’t get at the problem early enough. “There are critical moments when people need an out. How do we build those?” Anderson wondered.

He started to recruit in local churches for volunteers who could step in more quickly and flexibly than the foster-care bureaucracy. He now has 1,100 host families in Chicago, and an additional 3,000 volunteers who are willing to help in other ways.

### Drugs fan foster-care problems

Unfortunately, it’s often drug or alcohol problems that lead parents to become poor caregivers. The opioid epidemic spreading across the country has created a significant rise in the number of children being placed in foster care. Over the past few years, opioids have been the main cause of the increasing removal of kids from parental custody, with the fraction of the foster-care clientele originating in that way rising as high as 40 percent in some states, according to the *Wall Street Journal*.

Campbell, who has served as a *guardian ad litem* for children in Florida for 19 years, says the effects of heroin on the foster-care system are obvious. “The problem is flowing from north to south. We have to head off that tidal wave.”

Some of the affected children are taken in by grandparents. The *Journal* noted that “a Facebook support group for grandparents raising grandchildren due to addiction now has 2,000 members



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nationwide.” In *Hillbilly Elegy*, author J. D. Vance (who is interviewed on page 15 of this issue) describes how his grandparents took him in repeatedly when his mother kept returning to drugs. But he also notes that the foster-care system in some states is so inflexible that rather than give his grandmother custody (she wasn’t licensed by the state) they would have sent him to live with strangers. And of course some children don’t have grandparents available to them.

Safe Families sometimes provides interim caregiving when one parent is found to be using drugs and the other parent needs a bit of time to rearrange his life before taking over care of the child. “Anything you can do to avoid traumatizing the kids” by disconnecting them from people they know, Campbell points out, is helpful.

### The personal advantage

The child-welfare system, Anderson notes, was built for abuse cases. It was not

built for parents who are just overwhelmed and temporarily unable to care for their children. Parents in that situation are never going to call some kind of government agency. In fact, most will take desperate measures to avoid that.

Andrew Brown, who runs FlourishNow, a program in Naples, Florida, that used and built upon the model of Safe Families (see sidebar on page 45), recalls asking one mother who came to the program why she hadn’t sought assistance from a social worker affiliated with the child-welfare system. “Those are the people who will take my kids away from me,” she replied. As a result, parents “suffer in isolation. Eventually things get so bad that the child-welfare system has to intervene.”

At least 80 percent of Safe Families cases are precipitated by some kind of economic crisis, Brown estimates. An eviction or job loss creates a downward spiral. Safe Families provides a way for parents to ask for help in these circumstances, before things get too bad.



Safe Families employs social workers to ensure that there is clear understanding of what's going on in the family, that the transitions are as seamless as possible, that biological parents and children can reunite as soon as the time is right. But Safe Families has no power to take children away from parents against their will. Parents voluntarily place their children with another family, and at no point give up legal custody. Generally, biological parents, host families, and social workers agree about when it's time for kids to return, or when parents need more time to figure things out.

Kristen Gaff and her husband have hosted 26 kids in the past year and a half through Safe Families. Because they have five children of their own, they are not eligible to take in foster kids according to the state of Florida. But Gaff is one of those women who seems to have infinite patience. During the course of our conversation, she is interrupted several times by her own little ones and her tone of voice never changes.

The Gaffs completed a training class, a home inspection, a background check, and fingerprinting before any children were placed with them. They have hosted everyone from a two-week-old baby to a pregnant 18-year-old. They cared for a

group of four siblings so the kids wouldn't have to be separated from each other. The Gaffs have taken hosted children on vacation with them, and celebrated holidays together. And they remain in contact with most of the kids even after they leave. This is something Anderson sees as a vital part of the program. Host families can check in and "provide another set of eyes on a child" to make sure the situation doesn't repeat itself.

The Gaffs had a boy in their home for six months while his mother was in an inpatient drug-rehab program. Today "we still babysit if his daycare is closed, or even if they need a night off." She says that when a child stays with them, "a relationship is built." The transparency of the program seems to put the parents at ease. They know where their children are. They can be in touch with them at any point. As Gaff says, "it's a group plan and no one is left out of the loop." The fact that host families do not receive any payments also seems to make the relationship less adversarial than it can be in foster care.

### Overcoming official resistance

Despite the fact that Safe Families has a high rate of success and a very low cost, some child-welfare workers and legislators resist the program. "Bureaucrats hate volunteers because they can't control them," says Campbell. More fundamentally, "the government is driven by money. And

money begets systems and bureaucracies." What matters under these conditions is that an official procedure is followed, a public employee deployed, a box checked. Whether a family is actually being well-served sometimes gets lost in the shuffle.

Some states, though, have begun to welcome Safe Families. Denise Gonzales, who has been a social worker and administrator in Iowa and Illinois, says that she has worked hard to explain the benefits of Safe Families. With her public-employee colleagues, she says, she has to "talk government-speak." When describing the charity to legislators, she says it gives families "an opportunity to help themselves."

The reaction of some is that "it sounds too good to be true." Others say "it sounds like we don't care... sending these kids to live with unlicensed families who are volunteers." Gonzales assures them that if a situation escalates there is nothing to stop the government from re-engaging, but in the meantime the Safe Families alternative is much gentler on children and parents alike.

Social workers should be focused on the difficult cases that involve serious abuse, suggest Gonzales. The time and resources they spend on non-abusive cases today spreads them too thin and distracts them from the cases where they are most vital. "The government needs to focus on doing a quality assessment up front to see what is really needed." And then it can let

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nonprofits like Safe Families handle less severe situations. This would rechannel resources and bring improved results both for the children who are better kept out of state custody, and children who are in real danger and need intense intervention.

Safe Families can help thousands of children and parents every year, but it needs the cooperation of state governments in order to succeed. Leaders of the program would like to see more states pass legislation that will help integrate the charity into family-reinforcement and child-assistance work. For instance, provisions that would ensure that if parents use the Safe Families program, that won't be used against them in custody fights, or by child-protective services. Such legislation has already been passed in 12 states, but backers of the charity are anxious to see it enacted elsewhere.

With minor accommodations like that, Safe Families for Children could be expanded a lot in the many states where it already operates, and in new states. Safe Families is committed to operating without public funds—because if it becomes too entangled with the state child-welfare systems, parents will no longer trust it, and regulations could endanger the volunteer model that has made it successful. So Safe Families will need more philanthropic support. That would pay for the modest number of social workers who assess and oversee cases, for the physical needs of the children while they are with host families, and for advocacy to explain and protect the charity and push the legislation that enables it to operate.

More volunteers will of course also be needed. But there seem to be many more individuals willing to help children in distress than anyone realized before groups like Safe Families began organizing them. And once parents start helping parents, good things happen not only among children in distress but across entire communities. One of our biggest problems today, suggests Dave Anderson, “is that we draw the circle of our families too small.” **P**

## Creative Job Assistance as an Aid to Family Stability

Public-policy reformer Tarren Bragdon has been focused on child-welfare issues for a long time, so when the Safe Families model came to his home region of southwest Florida, his interest was piqued. As his church and others got involved, the success and potential of this new charitable model became apparent. Yet Bragdon couldn't shake one observation: many of the families that ended up needing help were unstable because of long-term unemployment and joblessness. At the same time Safe Families was protecting children, something needed to be done to fix the economic problems so families could reunify and avoid future tumbles.

Bragdon wondered: Could churches help in this area, just as they had become the linchpins for providing emergency caretaking for children?

Under the name FlourishNow, a team began to research the question. They surveyed the country to find successful instances where churches connect struggling households to jobs. The results weren't promising—only 2 percent of congregations nationwide had any semblance of a jobs ministry.

It's not that churches don't have economic resources: sociological research shows that typical congregations are packed with disciplined, cooperative, successful individuals from their neighborhoods (what economists call “social capital”). These individuals, with their constructive habits and networks to other community leaders, are the best possible resource for helping strugglers learn the secrets to economic advancement. But most churches currently have no idea how to connect volunteer mentors with individuals who need help succeeding at work.

So FlourishNow came up with a plan that would allow church leaders to easily execute a jobs ministry. The church would let FlourishNow use its building for a community-wide job fair. The nonprofit would recruit and train volunteers from among the congregation. It would bring in partner employers willing to hire on the spot. And it would take care of all aspects of marketing and executing the job fair. The cost to the church would be nothing; FlourishNow would raise donations to cover all costs of the event.

Churches were interested. In its first eight months, FlourishNow set up 11 church-based job fairs. Over 3,800 job-seekers attended, and one out of eight participants walked away with a job that very day. Fully 55 percent of participants reported having an employment offer within the next six weeks. Over half of those attending the job fairs had no connection to any church before walking through the host's doors.

The efforts of FlourishNow are currently focused in Florida, Phoenix, and southern California, but, given its quick success, the charity is eyeing expansion opportunities. Staging a fair requires a willing church host and 20 volunteers. Generally around 40 employers show up, along with 600 job seekers over a four-hour period. The organization's costs to stage a fair are estimated at around \$10 per job seeker.

Bragdon and his colleagues aim to connect parents who use Safe Families with FlourishNow job fairs as often as possible. Two south Florida women who used Safe Families to keep their children out of the foster-care system, then found steady work at a FlourishNow job fair, are now not only stable parents but also helping others by serving as volunteers at additional job fairs. —Ashley May