

PRESS RELEASE

For Immediate Release

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Historic Gathering of Birth and Foster Parents Held in Seattle Parents Convene to Improve Policies and Practices for Families and Children

SEATTLE, WA - With a shared goal of working together to improve the lives of children and their families, 32 birth and foster parents representing 30 diverse communities in 13 states met together for two days at the Birth and Foster Parents Partnership 2017 Convening in Seattle, June 27-29. This groundbreaking event was the largest convening to unite foster parents and birth parents to develop a shared agenda to improve foster care policies and practices and to promote strategies to prevent the need for foster care. The [National Alliance for Children's Trust and Prevention Funds](#) supported the initiative with our partners Casey Family Programs and the [Youth Law Center/ Quality Parenting Initiative \(QPI\)](#). At a planning meeting that took place in Sacramento, California in December 2016, a parent partner articulated this initiative best, "This is about building a new community and a new way to work together."

The convening engaged parents who have navigated through the child welfare system and are members of the Alliance's Birth Parent National Network (BPNN), many of whom have been reunified with their children, with QPI and other foster parents and relatives who have opened their homes to be a resource to children while they are apart from their birth families.

Parents are mobilizing as a unified voice to ignite change that promotes and supports new partnerships among birth and foster parents and other stakeholders. Organizers for the Birth and Foster Parent Partnership convened the meeting to learn from the shared experiences of both birth and foster parents to identify promising practices and hear their recommended agency and policy changes to help children thrive. Collectively the parents identified over a dozen practices and policies that can be implemented to transform our current child welfare system to better serve children and their families in need of various supports - from prevention, intervention, reunification and post reunification. Corey, a birth parent, stated, "We need to work together to make the child welfare system work as well as possible for children and families and also do all we can to prevent the need for children to go into the system in the first place."

Jennifer Rodriguez, Executive Director, Youth Law Center/ Quality Parenting Initiative, challenged the participants stating, "Don't think only of what we have now - think of what a child welfare system that actually meets the needs of children would look like." QPI foster families and relatives shared ideas they are piloting in their jurisdictions including improving relationships between birth parents and foster parents who are caring for their children through "comfort calls" and implementing "co-parenting" approaches. Families recommended recruiting and training foster parents to be committed to ensuring children maintain a relationship with their birth parents whenever possible. Birth parents and foster parents also discussed ways that they help mentor other families who are navigating through the child welfare system. According to Natalie, a foster parent, "It's not just about helping the kids, we've got to help the families." Participants highlighted multiple approaches that help families build protective factors, including mutual peer support groups; strategies where foster families can support birth families

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in innovative ways; and other prevention strategies that can help safely reduce the number of children entering or re-entering foster care.

In the upcoming months, the Birth and Foster Parent Partnership will continue working together to develop short and long-term priorities, develop joint statements and propose recommendations for consideration by decision makers at local, state and federal levels. The Partnership is focused on developing resources and tools that will have maximum impact on agency practices around engaging birth and foster parents. Teresa Rafael, Executive Director, National Alliance of Children's Trust and Prevention Funds, stated "Our goal is to keep families together, whenever possible, and to support birth and foster families and kinship care providers by helping them build connections and use their voices to transform systems, policies and practices to support this new way of working together."

Everyone agrees that these reforms will take time, because they involve fundamental changes in the way that child welfare currently operates and how foster parents are trained about what role they play in supporting children who enter foster care. Parents identified the need for a culture shift in child welfare, especially given that over half of the children who enter foster care return home to their families of origin. And yet, while there is an agreement that full-fledged reforms take time, everyone involved believes that there is no time to waste.

"It doesn't matter whether we are birth parents, foster parents, what YOU call us. We are family and we want to speak together for our children." Jeremiah, birth parent.

For additional information about the Birth Parent Foster Parent Partnership, please contact Meryl Levine, Senior Associate, National Alliance of Children's Trust and Prevention Funds, by phone at 818-523-9410 or email meryl.levine@gmail.com.

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