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The Opioid Plague's Youngest Victims: Children in Foster Care

By SHERRY LACHMAN DEC. 28, 2017

Our stunning failure to care for our most vulnerable children is a cause and devastating consequence of the opioid crisis that is ravaging towns around the country. We can't end the crisis — or a host of other problems — until we fix our beleaguered child welfare system.

As more Americans struggle with opioid addiction and find themselves unable to perform their duties as parents, children are pouring into state and county foster care systems. In Montana, the number of children in foster care has doubled since 2010. In Georgia, it has increased by 80 percent, and in West Virginia, by 45 percent. Altogether, nearly 440,000 kids are spending this holiday season in foster care, compared with 400,000 in 2011.

The data points to drug abuse as a primary reason, and experts have identified opioids in particular. Neglect remains the main reason children enter foster care. But from 2015 to 2016, the increase in the number of children who came into foster care as a result of parental drug abuse was far greater than the increases in the 14 other categories, like housing instability, according to data from the federal Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System.

Child welfare agencies across the country are doing heroic work, but they simply cannot find enough foster families to meet the growing demand. In some places, kids in foster care are sleeping in social workers' offices. Many children are shipped off to prisonlike institutions where they languish for months, even years, without loving

families. And many more bounce among multiple foster homes, deepening their feelings of abandonment, disrupting their education and severing their relationships with relatives, teachers and friends just when they need them most.

The consequences for these kids, and our country, are alarming. Children who have been in foster care are five times more likely to abuse drugs. As many as 70 percent of youths in the juvenile justice system have spent time in the child welfare system. One-third of homeless young adults were previously in foster care. Black children are twice as likely as white children to wind up in foster care and face its devastating effects, a symptom of our country's disparate treatment of black and white families who experience similar challenges.

It turns out that our child welfare system is a kind of patient zero for the crises overwhelming our other social service organizations.

Of course there are unsung heroes trying to improve things: social workers collaborating with housing officials in states like Connecticut to prevent children from entering foster care simply because their families cannot afford safe apartments; nonprofit groups like Foster Adopt Connect, which hires detectives to track down relatives to care for children in foster care; and programs like Guardian Scholars, which prepares youths in foster care for college and careers.

But efforts like these are rare and lack the resources to meet demand because we as a society simply have not made these kids our priority.

There is no national foster care movement, no viral social media campaigns or crowds of protesters taking to the streets to battle for these children. No household name like Teach for America or AARP devoted to fighting for kids in foster care. Foster youths are, by definition, wards of the state, but when was the last time you heard any elected official talking about them?

It is a heartbreaking paradox that few people in the nonprofit, philanthropic or government sectors seem to think the foster care crisis is their problem, even though it is at the root of so many problems, such as mass incarceration and economic inequality, that they are so diligently trying to resolve.

Children in foster care desperately need their help. We cannot put the entire burden of fixing the system on the backs of overworked, underpaid social workers. Our government must treat the child welfare crisis like the emergency it is and respond with more funding and better policies. We need more philanthropists, advocates and celebrities to champion this cause and more families to open their homes and hearts.

We particularly need companies and professionals with private-sector expertise to partner with child welfare agencies and bring the system into the 21st century. Marketing experts can help recruit foster parents and spread the word about the 100,000 foster children who are available for adoption. Customer service specialists and user-centered designers can help children and families better navigate the system. Data scientists can use analytics to predict and prevent child abuse and reduce the number of kids who enter the system in the first place.

Issues like drug addiction and homelessness can seem overwhelming. The truth is, by the time they make the headlines, they have been building for years, and they *are* overwhelming, exhausting our communities' resources and spiraling beyond our control.

But they didn't start out that way. Often, they started with a child in need of a safe and loving home. And if we rally around each of those children, we can write a very different set of headlines years from now.

Sherry Lachman, the founder and executive director of Foster America, was a domestic policy adviser to Vice President Joe Biden.

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