Keeping Immigrant Families in the Child Protection System Together

by Ann Park

You are an attorney appointed to represent a mother in a child welfare case. The caseworker tells you he has heard your client is held at a federal immigration detention center pending deportation proceedings. He also mentions there may be relatives willing to care for your client’s child, but they are undocumented immigrants or they live outside the U.S.

Your client’s child is placed in foster care and the case plan calls for continued placement, services for your client, including parenting classes, and a concurrent plan of adoption.

- How can you effectively represent your client’s interests?
- How do you find your client?
- What services can or should she be expected to participate in? Can she come to court hearings or otherwise participate in them?
- What about options for relative placement if she can’t care for her child?
- If your client is deported, how can you help her reunify with her child?

Recent developments have highlighted issues immigrant families face in the child welfare system. A 2011 report by the Applied Research Center, “Shattered Families: The Perilous Intersection of Immigration Enforcement and the Child Welfare System” revealed shortcomings of the child welfare and immigration systems. These shortcomings increase the chances that children will be removed from their parents’ custody and be unable to reunify when immigrant parents are detained or deported.¹ The report urges advocacy and legislation that prioritize keeping immigrant families intact and out of the child welfare system.

This article discusses legislation enacted in California that addresses some of these questions, as well as recent federal policy that helps safeguard the parental rights of undocumented immigrants involved in federal immigration enforcement proceedings. Additionally, this article reviews federal child welfare law and policy that support best practices for working with immigrant families.

Problem

When a child in foster care has a detained or deported parent, the child welfare system and immigration enforcement must work together to meet the child’s needs. Yet, studies find that child welfare departments and courts often move to terminate the parental rights of a deported parent even though the child could be safely reunified.² Even when undocumented parents are not detained, some child welfare agencies and attorneys object to placing children with them because of the possibility of the parent’s deportation.³

Federal immigration and child welfare policy prioritize reunifying families when possible. In Fiallo v. Bell, the U.S. Supreme Court affirmed the federal Immigration and Naturalization Act “establishes that congressional concern was directed at the problem of keeping families of United States citizens and immigrants united.”⁴ Further, the federal Bureau of Immigration Appeals also held that a parent, upon deportation, can decide whether to take their minor child along or leave the child in the U.S.⁵

Although research shows reunification with parents or placement with relatives results in better outcomes for children⁶ of children of deported

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Internet: http://www.childlawpractice.org
parents are at risk of extended and even permanent separation. Detained or deported parents may not have access to reunification services and may have difficulty taking part in child welfare proceedings like family court dependency hearings or child welfare agency case planning. Studies find the top challenges to reunification are:

- **Locating detained and deported parents.** Child welfare workers, lawyers, judges, and family members face difficulty locating parents when they have been transferred without notice to an ICE detention center. ICE created an Online Detainee Locator System in 2010 to track an individual detainee, but it is reported that few child welfare personnel are familiar with it. The parties involved in the case often have trouble communicating with parents. It is often incorrectly assumed that parents are uninterested in reunifying with the child.

- **Complying with case plans.** Detained or deported parents face difficulty abiding by child welfare case plans, including making regular phone calls and visits. A report by the Women’s Refugee Commission noted that “immigration detention significantly impairs parents’ ability to comply with reunification plans.” ICE detention facilities do not provide parents access to classes required for reunification plans or adequate access to phone calls.

- **Strict reunification timelines.** The Adoption and Safe Families Act (ASFA) requires that child welfare agencies file for termination of parental rights (TPR) when a child has been in care for 15 of the previous 22 months. Although this can be extended when there is a compelling reason, a parent’s detention or deportation is not explicitly listed.

- **Lack of access to services and family court proceedings.** According to “Shattered Families,” before the Parental Interests Directive (discussed below) detained parents were almost universally denied access to services required for reunification plans because ICE did not provide access to any services. Further, ICE lacked a formal policy to help a parent attend state court hearings, either by phone or in person. When a parent is not present at these hearings, the court often concludes the parent is unwilling or unable to reunify with her children.

- **Systemic bias in the child welfare system against undocumented immigrant parents and relatives.** “Shattered Families” noted that systemic bias against undocumented immigrant parents and family members prevents reunification. Child welfare agency administrators, caseworkers, judges, and attorneys may believe children are better off in the U.S. with American adoptive (or even long-term foster) parents. The report further explains that this bias often supersedes the law that prioritizes family reunification.

- **Lack of policy on reunification with deported parents.** Unlike California and New York, most child welfare agencies lack clear policies on reunifying children with deported parents, making decisions case by case. In some jurisdictions, the concern has not risen to a level that generates the need for policies. In other jurisdictions, the child welfare agency prefers not to have explicit policies to avoid controversy with anti-immigrant politicians and groups.

- **Lack of consulate involvement.** Some foreign consulates have the capacity to complement your state agency’s efforts to help families outside the U.S.; they can locate deported parents, provide parents with case plan services, facilitate

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Special Immigrant Juvenile Status Findings Available Despite One Protective Parent  

Family court erred in denying petition by children for findings to support SIJS application. The court may make SIJS prerequisite findings of dependency when one parent abused or neglected a child. The court may also appoint a protective parent guardian when returning the children to their home country would subject them to abuse or neglect.

Three siblings, age 19, 18, and 16, were born in El Salvador. The father abused alcohol and physically abused the mother leading her to leave with the children when the oldest child was four. The father had little contact after that.

Lacking support from the father, the mother was forced to live in a neighborhood controlled by gangs. The oldest sibling was pressured into joining a gang. Threats were made on his life if he did not join and he knew of nine other young people who had been killed for refusing to join the gang. A gang member threatened to kill the mother if she would not have sex with him.

Given this situation, the mother fled to the U.S. She first brought the oldest son, who had been the subject of the most immediate threats. The younger children stayed with their grandmother, who was then killed by a gang on her way home from work. Although three individuals were arrested for her murder, other gang members continued to threaten the family. The mother was able to bring the children, and their now orphaned uncle, to the U.S. The mother moved to New York and was able to find employment to support the four children.

The children petitioned for Special Immigrant Juvenile Status (SIJS) and to have their mother appointed their guardian.

The family court concluded that a hearing was not warranted... in determining best interests, the legislative goal of SIJS suggests courts should consider the harm a child might face if returning home.

because the children were not dependent on the mother to protect them. The children appealed.

The New York Supreme Court, Appellate Division reversed. The court first provided an overview of Special Immigrant Juvenile Status (SIJS). SIJS is a type of immigration relief that offers a path to lawful residency and citizenship for children who are abused or neglected. The ‘child’ must be under age 21 and be unmarried. The child or his or her representative must petition a court with child welfare jurisdiction. To be eligible the court must find the child is dependent. Next the court must find that reunification with one or both parents is not viable and it is not in the child’s best interests to return to their home country.

If the court makes these findings of fact, the child may petition the United States Citizenship and Immigration Services (CIS) for SIJS. That agency must ultimately consent and the consent should be granted where the facts show the child is primarily seeking the relief to avoid further abuse or neglect, rather than legal residency.

First, the court considered whether the state court had authority to appoint a parent as a guardian. Citing the state Surrogate’s Court Procedure Act, which allowed guardianships for “any person” the court found the trial court did have that statutory authority. Case law does not suggest a different result. In contests between, usually parents and relatives, parents may be awarded custody, which is functionally similar to guardianship under state law. Further, there is no reason to treat contested and uncontested guardianship or custody proceedings differently.

Next, the court discussed the family court’s determination that no hearing was necessary on the children’s best interests because the mother was available and able to protect them. Citing prior state case law, the court held that SIJS findings could be made in cases where a child was abused or neglected by one parent. Further, in determining best interests, the legislative goal of SIJS suggests courts should consider the harm a child might face if returning home.

The court held the uncontested facts clearly supported finding the children would be dependent but for the appointment of their mother as guardian and pursuing SIJS. Their father had abandoned them and, if returned to El Salvador, they faced being forced into gangs or worse.
STATE CASES

Alabama


While the court correctly found that mother was unable to meet child’s needs due to his autism and other mental health needs, termination was inappropriate under best interests prong where mother had never abused or neglected child, had maintained constant visitation, and witnesses testified their bond was important to maintain.

Arizona


Where mother brought termination proceedings in Arizona against father, California had original jurisdiction under the Uniform Child Custody Jurisdiction and Enforcement Act (UCCJEA). California was the “home state” because child had lived there for over six months and Arizona was not shown to be a more proper venue.


Defendant could not be convicted of both aggravated driving under the influence of intoxicating liquor while a minor is present and a misdemeanor driving under the influence of intoxicating liquor. This violated double jeopardy.

Connecticut


Trial court properly excluded evidence of phone conversation between child and mother at hearing on mother’s motion for reunification. Mother claimed phone conversation contained a discussion she and her daughter with professional about running away from home and mother signing papers with her attorney that she had not read. Information was irrelevant to whether the issues that led to removal had been resolved.

Florida

In re J.B., 2014 WL 258743 (Fla. Dist. Ct. App.). DEPENDENCY, NOTICE

Due to the child welfare agency’s failure to file proper notice that it was seeking permanent guardianship and termina-
makes possessing a handgun a danger to the public, handguns are most available to juveniles, and most often used in committing crimes.

Maryland
In re Joy D., 84 A.3d 223 (Md. Ct. Spec. App.). DEPENDENCY, AGGRAVATED CIRCUMSTANCES
Trial court properly found reasonable efforts were not required in case because mother had rights to prior children involuntarily terminated without considering whether it was in the child’s best interests. Statute indicated that upon finding aggravated circumstances, courts ‘shall’ make the finding and the state legislative history confirmed it was intended to be mandatory.

Montana
In re L.V.-B., 317 P.3d 191 (Mont.). DEPENDENCY, NONCUSTODIAL PARENTS
Where state filed to terminate mother’s rights, but then placed child with father after he completed a case plan, trial court properly terminated mother’s parental rights. Mother’s claim that state statute prohibited termination where a child was reunified failed because father’s success in safely parenting did not protect her given the state’s other reasons for seeking termination, such as later aggravated circumstances findings for siblings.

New York
In re Christina L.N., 979 N.Y.S.2d 350 (App. Div.). TERMINATION OF PARENTAL RIGHTS, MENTAL ILLNESS
While court properly found a ground for terminating mother’s parental rights where she had persistent mental health issues, including psychosis and depression, court erred in not holding a dispositional hearing. While a dispositional hearing may not be required in every termination case after fact finding as to grounds, here the court should have explored the alternatives given mother’s regular visitation and fact that 13 year old opposed adoption.

North Carolina
Trial court correctly found mother lacked standing in dependency proceeding. A biological parent whose parental rights have been terminated lacks standing in future disposition orders involving her children.

Further, mother did not qualify in any other category of persons who would have a statutory right to appeal dependency matters involving the children, such as a guardian ad litem, the state agency, or an appointed guardian, or custodian.

Oregon
In re S.N.R., 2014 WL 324564 (Or. Ct. App.). DELINQUENCY, GROUNDS
Youth who fell asleep while driving and killed another motorist could not be found delinquent as her actions did not constitute a gross deviation from what a reasonable person would do under the circumstances. Youth drove after having only five hours of sleep, realized she was too sleepy to drive, looked for somewhere to pull off, but was unable to find a safe pull off within a few miles of becoming aware of her fatigue, when the accident occurred.

Texas
In re D.D.G., 2014 WL 252090 (Tex. App.). TERMINATION OF PARENTAL RIGHTS, SUBSTANCE ABUSE
Evidence showing child was born addicted to methamphetamine based on mother’s substance abuse supported court’s endangerment finding. Trial court properly terminated mother’s parental rights based on this evidence and evidence that mother placed child with persons who could endanger his well-being, and her parental rights had been terminated with a previous child.

In re K.S., 2014 WL 252105 (Tex. App.). TERMINATION OF PARENTAL RIGHTS, LEGAL REPRESENTATION
In a termination of parental rights case, parent attorney’s failure to file formal discovery was not ineffective, as it would likely not have produced material relevant to father’s case. It also would not have affected appellate counsel’s motion for new trial based on insufficient evidence to support parental termination. Parent attorney provided effective representation by working on the case nearly a year before the final hearing and the record hearings showed his strong familiarity with the case.

Because jury found child victim’s mother’s testimony credible, her testifying to child’s outcry describing sexual abuse supported defendant’s conviction. Child described the sexual abuse during the drive home from the babysitter’s through tears and after reassurances from her mother that she would not get in trouble and the drive home was routinely when child eagerly shared all of her day’s activities with her mother. The appellate court must defer to the jury’s credibility determinations, thus lower court’s finding that the statement was enough to convict the appellant was affirmed.

Virginia
In case where father had never been found to have maltreated child, trial court erred in terminating his parental rights based on speculation he was unable to provide a stable home due to his undocumented status where he had been caring for a sibling adequately, had complied with services, and had been working with an immigration attorney to remain legally in the U.S.

Wyoming
Where a defendant was serving probation for promoting prostitution, sexual assault, and battery on a pregnant woman, court properly imposed a “no contact” provision of probation that denied the defendant contact with his minor children. The “no contact” provision did not unconstitutionally hinder defendant’s fundamental rights as a parent, as it prioritized the rights of the appellant’s children in preventing further potential abuse against them.

FEDERAL CASES

7th Circuit
U.S. v. Foley, 740 F.3d 1079 (7th Cir. 2014). ABUSE, JURISDICTION
The government met its burden to prove defendant produced child pornography and that it was part of interstate or foreign commerce. Evidence showed the hard drives defendant used to store the images and videos were internationally-manufactured, thus being part of interstate or foreign commerce.
Especially if you represent a parent, be aware of ASFA’s emphasis on timely permanence. The agency is required to consider termination after the child has been in care for 15 of 22 months, but there are categorical exceptions including when the family did not receive services that were part of their case plan, when the child is placed with relatives, and when there are “other” compelling reasons that termination is not in the child’s best interests.

Thus, the primary way to protect your parent client’s rights is to ensure the parent is provided services to ensure a “safe” return home. These services should be tailored to the individual needs of the family, and as such, should be directed at overcoming the unique issues out-of-country or undocumented families face. It is important to emphasize that, in a custodial dispute between parents and the state, the requirement is that they provide a “safe” home, not the best home, and considerations such as the quality of schools or services in another country do not generally have much weight versus a parents’ constitutional rights.

As one court noted the “fact that a child may enjoy a higher standard of living in the United States than in the country where the child’s parent resides is not a reason to terminate [their] parental rights....”

Ideally, the case plan and services are effective and the case can be resolved before 15 months. If not, a failure to provide services is an exception to a termination filing.

Second, especially if a parent’s detention will last for an extended period, relative placements should be considered. Aside from the benefits of keeping the family together, a relative placement is a listed exception that could protect against termination if the case remains open.

Fostering Connections
The Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act (Public Law 110-351) requires that child welfare agencies notify adult relatives of children removed from their parents’ care within 30 days of removal. There is no mention of this requirement being limited to relatives within the United States. Thus, notice should be provided to relatives outside the U.S.

MEPA
Additionally, the Multiethnic Placement Act (Public Law 103-382) provides that states cannot delay or deny placement of a child for adoption or into foster care based on the national origin of the adoptive or foster parent, or the child.

Foster Care Payments under IV-E
Finally, federal guidance related to Title IV-E foster care payments makes clear that federal law does not prohibit undocumented adults providing foster care from receiving federal foster care payments.

California’s “The Reuniting Immigrant Families Act”

SB 1064
California has the most foreign-born residents in the nation. Also, nearly a quarter of the estimated 5,100 children in foster care whose parents have been detained or deported are California residents. California’s Reuniting Immigrant Families Act, signed into law on September 30, 2012, aims to address some challenges to reunification that immigrant families in the child welfare system face. The law:

- permits the court to make placement and custody decisions regardless of the immigration status of the parent, legal guardian, or relative, and affirms that immigration status alone is not a disqualifying factor in making placement and custody decisions;
- grants the court discretion to provide an extension in the family reunification period for parents who may be detained or deported;
- requires the court to consider barriers detained or deported parents may experience in accessing court-ordered services and keeping contact with the child;

Affected Population
A growing number of U.S. deportees are parents. More than 5,100 U.S. citizen children of undocumented immigrants were living in foster care as a result of their parents’ detention or deportation in 2011. In 2010, approximately 5.5 million children, 4.5 million of whom were U.S. citizens, lived with at least one undocumented parent.

Legislation
Below is a discussion of the major federal child welfare laws and proposed legislation that impact immigrant children and families involved in the child welfare system. California is the first state to enact legislation explicitly promoting family reunification for detained or deported parents. Debates are occurring about the need for similar legislation at the federal and state levels. For example, last year, the U.S. Senate passed the Border Security, Economic Opportunity, and Immigration Modernization Act of 2013. Further, an ongoing movement is underway to establish the “New York State Reuniting Families Act,” which replicates the California bill (now pending).

Existing Federal Legislation

ASFA
The Adoption and Safe Families Act (ASFA) requires funded jurisdictions to make reasonable efforts to prevent removal and work toward permanency. The initial goal is generally reunification. Because ASFA does not provide an exception for immigrant parents, they are entitled to reunification efforts.

Especially if you represent a parent, be aware of ASFA’s emphasis on timely permanence. The agency is required to consider termination after the child has been in care for 15 of 22 months, but there are categorical exceptions including when the family did not receive services that were part of their case plan, when the child is placed with relatives, and when there are “other” compelling reasons that termination is not in the child’s best interests.

Thus, the primary way to protect your parent client’s rights is to ensure the parent is provided services to ensure a “safe” return home. These services should be tailored to the individual needs of the family, and as such, should be directed at overcoming the unique issues out-of-country or undocumented families face. It is important to emphasize that, in a custodial dispute between parents and the state, the requirement is that they provide a “safe” home, not the best home, and considerations such as the quality of schools or services in another country do not generally have much weight versus a parents’ constitutional rights.

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- grants the court discretion to provide an extension in the family reunification period for parents who may be detained or deported;
- requires the court to consider barriers detained or deported parents may experience in accessing court-ordered services and keeping contact with the child;
requires the California Department of Social Services (CDSS) to provide guidance to social workers on referring children eligible for Special Immigrant Juvenile Status (SIJS) and other immigration relief options to receive assistance acquiring protective status;

- requires CDSS to provide guidance to counties and municipalities to establish Memoranda of Understanding (MOUs) with appropriate foreign consulates in child custody cases;

- requires the court to grant preferential consideration to a placement request by a child’s relative regardless of the immigration status of the relative.


On June 27, 2013, the U.S. Senate passed “The Border Security, Economic Opportunity, and Immigration Modernization Act of 2013” (S744). It is still not known whether this bill will pass in the House. Note that several provisions reflect improvements in California’s SB 1064.

The bill grants states discretion to consider a parent’s detention or deportation in delaying filing a TPR petition. Further, the bill mandates state child welfare agencies to make reasonable efforts to meet certain conditions before filing for TPR in those cases. The bill also includes provisions that ensure states identify, locate, and contact detained or deported parents and relatives, and notify them of the state’s intent to file for TPR. It ensures that state child welfare agencies reunify children with relatives whenever appropriate, regardless of their immigration status, and provide and document services to the parent or relative.

U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) Parental Interests Directive

On August 23, 2013, U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) issued a directive that supplements existing ICE directives and other detention standards and policies dealing with immigrant parents. The directive establishes ICE policy and procedure to address “the placement, monitoring, accommodation, and removal of certain alien parents or legal guardians.” The directive emphasizes that “ICE personnel should ensure that the agency’s immigration enforcement activities do not unnecessarily disrupt the parental rights of both alien parents or legal guardians of minor children.”

The ICE Directive encourages ICE offices to:

- Appoint personnel to implement the directive.
  - Designate specially trained coordinators as Field Points of Contact to communicate with the central ICE Parental Rights Coordinator and to receive and address public inquiries from all parties involved in the process related to the parental rights or family ties of detained parents or legal guardians.

- Place or transfer detained parents.
  - Whenever possible, place or transfer the detained parent as close as practicable to the location of the child and/or family court or dependency court.

- Arrange parent’s court participation.
  - When possible, arrange for the detained parent or legal guardian’s in-person appearance at family or dependency court, when their presence is required and:
    - the detained parent or legal guardian requests an opportunity to participate in private custody or dependency hearings with reasonable notice;
    - the court is located within a reasonable distance of the detention facility where the parent or legal guardian is housed;
    - transportation can be reasonably arranged without security and/or public safety concerns.

- When in-person appearance is impractical, work with the detained parent or legal guardian and the family court or child welfare authority to arrange other means, such as video or teleconferencing.

- Arrange parent-child visits.
  - Facilitate visitation between the detained parent or legal guardian and child to the extent practicable if visitation is ordered.
  - Permit visitation through video or teleconferencing from the detention facility or the field office, if feasible and approved by the court.

- Coordinate care or travel of minor children.
  - When a parent or legal guardian is subject to a final order of removal, to the extent possible, accommodate the parent or legal guardian’s efforts to make provisions for children. This could include arranging guardianship for the children to remain in the U.S. or obtaining travel documents for the children to accompany their parents to the country of removal.
  - Help a detained parent or legal guardian access counsel, consulates, and consular officials, courts and/or family members to help execute signed documents in the weeks preceding removal.

- Help parents appear at state court proceedings.
  - Facilitate the return of a removed parent or legal guardian if an order or documents show a TPR hearing will occur in family or dependency court and the parent or legal guardian must be physically present (although this is phrased to limit case return for TPR proceedings, a lawyer should argue that earlier dependency hearings are just as important, as they can be used to form the basis for later TPR petitions).
  - Aid the return of a removed parent or legal guardian when the parent...
or legal guardian confirms that:
- their sole purpose in traveling to the U.S. is to attend their TPR hearings (the lawyer should make the same argument as above);
- the grant of parole can be terminated any time;
- they are not traveling to the U.S. to pursue immigration benefits or relief, protection from removal, or to circumvent visa and immigration proceedings;
- they will depart the U.S. promptly at the end of the final TPR hearing;
- they understand they may be subject to removal from the U.S. if they do not leave right after their TPR hearing.

**Provide training.**
- Develop training materials to assist relevant field office personnel.

**Practice Tips**

**Child welfare agencies and dependency courts should:**
- Set the right tone in court by making clear to the involved attorneys and parents that the parent’s immigration status alone does not prohibit reasonable efforts to reunify or constitute a basis for TPR.
- Make sure that immigrant parents receive assistance from competent counsel and to translators/interpreters as needed.
- Track parents’ whereabouts by closely working with a relevant foreign consulate or using tools such as the Online Detainee Locator System.
- Ensure parents can effectively participate in case planning and hearings.
- Make policy changes.
  - Create a taskforce composed of child welfare and immigration advocates. Charge the taskforce with identifying policy changes or clarifications for immigrant families in the child welfare system.
- Adopt policies that prioritize reunification with parents and placement with relatives regardless of their immigration status.
- Support training and specialized skill development.
- Host trainings on immigration law and immigration enforcement policies, and their impact on child welfare cases, for all caseworkers, attorneys, and judges working in child protection courts (the ABA Center on Children and the Law has helped develop and participated in such trainings in several states).
- Contact foreign consulates and sign MOUs to ensure timely involvement and assistance of consulates when children of noncitizen parents are taken into protective custody of the child welfare system.30
- Designate staff within child welfare agencies who specialize in working with immigrant children and families.
- Encourage child welfare agency attorneys and children’s attorneys to explore immigration relief options, including SIJS, T-Visa, U-Visa, etc.

**Parent attorneys should:**
- Track parents’ whereabouts by closely working with a relevant foreign consulate or using tools such as the Online Detainee Locator System.
- Upon notice of court hearings, promptly notify parents of the hearing date, time, and location.
- Ensure parents receive family reunification services while in detention, or after deportation, and help parents complete required services.
- Ensure parents communicate their ideas, concerns, and issues with a caseworker and their attorney through reliable translation/interpretation services if needed. If locating the services is challenging, reach out to the relevant foreign consulate.
- Understand challenges parents have visiting with children or successfully completing court-ordered services, and address them in court.
- Work closely with the relevant foreign consulate.
- Be aware of parents’ immigration proceedings and status updates that can affect the child welfare case and provide the information to parents.

**Children’s attorneys should:**
- Ensure a child’s wishes and best interests are reflected in their case plan, including visitation with parents and services to be provided.
- Help the child maintain contact with their parent through regular visits, video conferences, phone calls, letters, etc., and maintain close contact with the parent’s attorney.
- Ensure translation/interpreter services for the child as needed.
- Ensure the child is fully aware of all options, pros and cons of applicable plans and placements in and outside the U.S.
- If the child plans to remain in the U.S., find out if the child is eligible for immigration relief options, such as SIJS, T-Visa, or U-Visa.

**Conclusion**

Efforts to improve the response to immigrants in the child welfare system are in the early stages. Notable achievements have occurred on the federal and state levels. Practitioners can play important roles:
- implementing state policies aimed at addressing challenges faced by immigrants in the child welfare

(Cont’d on p. 58)
A Different Approach: Illinois Taskforce on Immigrant Children and Families

The Illinois Taskforce on Immigrant Children and Families works to improve treatment of immigrant children and families in child welfare cases. Read on to learn about the taskforce’s approach.*

A Taskforce Forms
At the symposium, *Growing Up Undocumented in America*, on October 12, 2012, hosted by the *Children’s Legal Rights Journal* of Loyola University Chicago School of Law, participants discussed whether Illinois needed legislation like California’s SB 1064. A taskforce was created to evaluate the state system to better answer this question.

Evaluation Efforts
The taskforce focused on what was happening with immigrant children and families who enter the child welfare system. It assessed the strengths and weaknesses in dealing with immigrant families and exchanged information with stakeholders. The taskforce met with the Illinois Department of Children and Families (DCFS) and reached out to attorneys representing children and parents to learn about their experiences. It contacted the Office of the Cook County Public Guardian for statistics and information. It also worked with immigration advocacy centers to identify issues.

DCFS Policies
The Illinois DCFS has worked to address challenges immigrants face and ensure parents’ immigration status does not negatively affect permanency. DCFS policies 1) address placement with relatives; 2) instruct caseworkers on identifying an undocumented immigrant child; and 3) reinforce Memorandums of Understanding (MOUs) between DCFS and the Mexican consulate. While the policies apply statewide, their implementation has not been evaluated.

DCFS has an unwritten policy not to inquire about the immigration status of the child or parent. This ensures the status does not affect services the child receives or create more issues for the child and parent. As a result, DCFS lacks consistent data on immigrant families. However, DCFS conducts internal reviews every six months and flags parents’ immigration status when it has been raised.

Timeframe Restrictions
Detaining or deporting parents can add time to the reunification process. ASFA lacks language addressing how a parent’s detention or country of residence should affect reunification or ASFA timeframes. In Cook County, ASFA timeframes have not been raised as a concern affecting immigrant parents. There have been few reports of cases in which parents are deported or detained, and the parent’s detention or deportation status is not usually the reason children are not sent home.

Language Accommodations
In Illinois, there is a preference for placing a Spanish-speaking child in Spanish-speaking home and assigning the parent a Spanish-speaking caseworker.

Children Eligible for SIJS
Illinois has had a few cases involving children eligible for Special Immigrant Juvenile Status (SIJS). Once DCFS discovers an undocumented child, a DCFS officer fills out an application for SIJS. Because of the policy of not asking about immigration status of the child, it is assumed many children eligible for SIJS are not captured in the system. DCFS generally identifies SIJS for teenagers when they struggle applying for a driver’s license or college because they lack key documentation. More training for stakeholders on SIJS may help.

Why No Legislation?
Unlike California, the Illinois taskforce decided not to pursue separate legislation. In Illinois, it has been difficult to identify ongoing issues related problems facing immigrant families and children in the child welfare system. Also, good policies are in place and DCFS is committed to enforcing them for the interest of immigrant children and parents. Therefore, the benefit of raising this to the legislature is uncertain.

Does Your State Need a Taskforce?
In your state, how does immigration status of a child or family play a role in dependency proceedings? Creating a taskforce to closely assess the system is key to recognizing immigrant children and families and finding gaps. No matter where your state stands, it is essential to raise awareness and provide training for judges, attorneys, and caseworkers to create stable, long-term improvements.

* Information provided by Anita Weinberg, clinical professor and director of ChildLaw Policy Institute and Alexandra Fung, Salisbury clinical teaching fellow, at the Civitas ChildLaw Center, University of Chicago School of Law.

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system;

- raising awareness of issues facing immigrants in the child welfare system;
- providing training to stakeholders;
- encouraging cooperation among parties in child welfare and immigration proceedings; and
- aiding efforts to collect data and identify systemic challenges and solutions.

Even in states without legislation like California’s, federal child welfare laws and policies promote practice, advocacy, and policy actions that prioritize family reunification for immigrants in the child welfare system. Practitioners can leverage these laws and policies to help maintain immigrant families who enter the child welfare system.

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The author thanks Liz Thornton and Scott Trowbridge, staff attorneys at the ABA Center on Children and the Law, for reviewing and providing guidance on article drafts, and professors Anita Weinberg and Alex Fung for giving an insightful interview.

Endnotes

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24. Ibid., 44-45.
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49. Ibid.
50. Wessler, 2011, 17. According to ARC’s research, reunification between children and their families after parental deportation happened only when foreign consulates are involved in a case.
Foster youth are educationally at risk. Only 50% graduate from high school and only 2-9% attain a bachelor’s degree, according to Jessica Feierman, supervising attorney at the Juvenile Law Center and a member of the Legal Center for Foster Care and Education. Those rates contrast with the 84% of foster youth in high school who say they would like to graduate from college.

On January 28, 2014, the National Working Group on Foster Care and Education held two congressional briefings to highlight these disparate education outcomes and prompt legislative change. Four panelists spoke at the briefings, a former foster youth, a policy expert, and representatives from a child welfare agency and a school district. Feierman moderated the briefings.

Panelists discussed several themes, including the need for stronger adult relationships and networks for foster youth, increased stability in school placements, and standard data on education outcomes for foster youth. Each of these barriers to education success can be improved by systemic changes.

**Common Challenges**

“I come from two legacies, one of my birth family, and one of foster care, and both are statistically telling me I probably won’t succeed.” said Kayla Van Dyke. Kayla, a student at Hamline University, entered foster care at age four. She remained in care until age 18, with her final foster home placement coming at age 15. During placements with seven foster families while in the child welfare system, she moved through more than 10 schools. She was also homeless for a year in fourth grade.

These disruptions challenged Kayla’s education success and relationships with others. Her many school moves made it difficult to keep track of her school records and maintain the required courses for each new school. Math and science became tough subjects, as courses tend to build on one another, meaning school transfers quickly break that continuity. One of eight children, Kayla had to cope with separation from her siblings while in high school. She found friends to be a great place to turn for support, though those relationships would often fall apart with the next school placement and when resources to stay in touch ran out.

“Every time that I had to transition away, all this progress I had made, and the progress with my education, I felt like it was all just crumbling beneath me,” said Kayla. “Every time you move to a different home, it often comes along with the reality that you’re going to have to change schools, yet another time.”

Kayla began to associate a lack of trust not just with the school system, but with her social worker and other child welfare workers. Many issues Kayla faced personally were not ones social workers understood well or were ready to address. Despite her passion for learning, Kayla still had to deal with challenges related to mental health, trauma, and difficulty trusting people.

“There are a lot of different factors going into foster youth success that aren’t just ‘Are they safe? Do they have food? Do they have the money to succeed?’ The human element is a huge factor in success,” said Kayla.

**The Human Element**

Streams of social workers told Kayla they supported her, but would then move on. “No one really latched on to me to make me feel safe, to make me feel supported. A lot of people were trying to relate to me in only the most generic sense before quickly moving on.”

Kayla explained the back-lying trauma, mental health issues, emotional instability, and trust issues that come along with being in foster care for a long time.

The real difference in Kayla’s life came when she found genuinely supportive adults. At age 15, Kayla met her final foster mother, Constance. Constance was different—loving and supportive and willing to let Kayla make mistakes, “as a normal parent would,” and stay in her home.

Finding one person Kayla was able to trust enabled her to start trusting others and building her support network, the network that would help her succeed.

**Finding a Voice**

As her trust in others and the foster care system grew, Kayla began talking to social workers and going to court. She began communicating her needs and standing up for herself.

“For the first time in the foster care system, I didn’t feel belittled or marginalized, I felt like I was powerful and like I could achieve so much more. And I did.” With a supportive foster parent and the newfound confidence to communicate her best interests, Kayla excelled in school. She won a scholarship, became a straight-A student and student council president.

Despite her successes, Kayla still dealt with the effects of having attended four high schools. Because of all of the transfers and different school curricula, her class credits did not add up to meet the graduation requirements of her final school. It was only with the support of a social worker and a teacher—part of the support network she built with the stability of her last placement—that Kayla was able to negotiate extra tutoring hours to graduate.
Kayla credits her success to her support network and her ability to stand up for herself, both of which were only possible with the stability she found in her last two years of high school.

"Until you have that moment where you can advocate for yourself, when youth can advocate for themselves, you just see a lot of defeat in people. I think one of the most powerful things we can instill in anybody is the power to advocate for themselves, to ask for what they want, because so few youth in foster care feel entitled to ask for anything."

Barriers to Education Success
The obstacles faced by Kayla are not just specific to her. Every child in foster care has a unique story and needs, but also faces many common systemic challenges that emerge when the education and child welfare systems cross paths. The panelists highlighted the following barriers to educational success:

- Unstable school placements
  - Due to distance and transportation constraints, changing homes often means changing schools.
- Transportation
  - Transportation challenges prevent students from staying at a school and participating in afterschool tutoring or extracurricular activities.
- Delayed enrollment and credit transfer
  - Each time a student changes schools, the student falls further behind—each school move can result in six months of lost learning.
  - Class credits don’t transfer or graduation requirements may differ district-to-district.
- No clearly defined education decision maker or advocate
  - With no one to make important education decisions on the student’s behalf or to advocate for education services, the youth misses learning opportunities.
- Disruption of relationships with supportive teachers, afterschool activities, and friends
  - Social supports and activities are key to youths’ well-being. Frequent disruptions to relationships and meaningful activities create a loss for youth and force them to start over.
- Periods of homelessness
  - Foster youth experience high rates of homelessness. Without a home they are unlikely to attend school.
- Unmet special education and remedial education needs, despite their high incidence among foster youth.
- Lack of support for pursuing higher education and older youth transitioning from the child welfare system.
**Cross-System Collaboration: Model Programs**

The education and child welfare systems can work together to better address the challenges students in foster care face. Some states and cities are well on their way to this type of system integration.

**Cincinnati: Kids in School Rule!**

Kids in School Rule! is a model program for school-agency collaboration created by four partners: Cincinnati Public Schools, Hamilton County Jobs and Family Services, Hamilton County Juvenile Court, and Legal Aid. The program was developed after panelist William Myles, assistant superintendent of Cincinnati Public Schools, pulled data on students in foster care from the county’s robust data system. The data uncovered wide differences in education outcomes for foster youth in the district:

- Attendance rate 30-40% lower than the district average
- Graduation rate less than 50%
- Higher number of school suspensions than the district average
- Lack of involvement in extracurricular activities

With these disparate outcomes identified, said Myles, the first step was to meet with students in foster care and school principals to identify the barriers to success. “We asked them, ‘What is needed? What can we do to help you?’,” said Myles. The group identified common barriers to educational success and ways to break them down. Kids in School Rule! was created to implement these key steps:

- Automatically enroll foster youth if they change schools.
  - No questions-asked policy; any issues are sent to the superintendent’s office and addressed while the student is enrolled immediately.
- Allow youth to stay in their original schools no matter where they move.
- Connect each student with a school liaison, who must check in with the student weekly. The liaison:
  - uses data system to look at attendance and other metrics and address issues with the student as they arise;
  - works as the student’s parent-advocate within the school system;
  - monitors transcript and course data to ensure credit requirements are met and the student has needed courses and enrichment activities;
  - makes sure the student is aware of and signs up for school activities.
- Work with the district’s transportation department and, for older youth, metro transportation to address transportation to schools and extracurricular activities.
- Talk with teachers and provide professional development on trauma.
- Meet with principals upfront to stress the importance of the program and the role of the education liaisons.
- Waive fees for extracurricular activities.
- Take students on college visits and promote college planning.

Cincinnati Public Schools implemented these steps even with a tight budget. The district used a grant for professional development to build capacity and provide training for individuals upfront. The liaisons were people already in the schools, whether a school social worker, school psychologist, or a teacher who wanted to get involved.

So far, Kids in School Rule! is proving effective. It helped 23 students graduate in 2013 by involving them in a summer learning program. Foster youth in the school district now have the same attendance rate as the district average and are more involved in activities. More time is needed to get data on graduation rates.

**Philadelphia’s Education Support Center**

In Philadelphia, panelist Anne Marie Ambrose, commissioner of the

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**Legal Resources**

**Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative, Success Beyond 18: Re-Examining The Foster Care Review Process: Issue Brief, August 2013**


This report covers the role courts can play in promoting a successful transition from foster care to adulthood.

**Connecticut House Bill No. 6705 (June 19, 2013)**


This recently passed legislation puts in place coordinators to help support education stability and success for foster youth and youth in the juvenile justice system. The bill sets up a two-year pilot program in three cities.

**Maryland House Bill 1012 (2013)**

http://mgaleg.maryland.gov/2013RS/Chapters_nolin/CH_260_hb1012t.pdf

A bill passed to expand Maryland’s tuition waiver program for foster youth. The bill expands the tuition waiver to cover the entire cost of tuition at public colleges and state-run vocational programs. The bill also expands the waiver to cover youth placed in guardianship.
Philadelphia Department of Human Services (DHS), has been working with education partners to bridge communication gaps between the two systems and address the education issues experienced by children and youth in foster care.

The main vehicle for DHS's inter-agency communication is the Education Support Center (ESC), created in 2009. The ESC serves as the agency’s single point of contact in the education system and facilitates communication with the School District of Philadelphia. The ESC has helped speed up school enrollment, improve school stability by implementing the Fostering Connections Act (see Effective Legislation below), create safety plans to prevent bullying, ensure access to early education programs, and coordinate services.

Philadelphia DHS is also beginning to collaborate with early intervention and behavioral health partners to streamline data-sharing and referral procedures to ensure follow-through. The collaboration will also identify tutoring and mentoring resources.

Ambrose reinforced the challenges presented by the lack of data at the local and state levels. The Uninterrupted Scholars Act will help remove some barriers to information sharing, said Ambrose, but there are still structural barriers. DHS has a memorandum of understanding with the school district for information sharing, but their data systems cannot interact directly with each other. Interactive systems are costly and complicated to create, said Ambrose.

Models of Success
Programs like these that harness the power of cross-system collaboration can be found across the country. Successful models incorporate some of the following elements:

- Supportive adults—education liaisons and advocates
- Added supports to caregivers
- Trauma-informed programming
- Positive youth development, for older youth in particular
- Stability and continuity in both place and relationships

To craft well-informed programs and legislation, panelist Dianna Walters, policy associate at Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative, discussed the need for more hard data on foster youth and education outcomes, noting that much of what is shared is anecdotal. A systemic way to collect national data in every school district and every child welfare system is needed.

Effective Legislation
In the last five years, federal legislation that supports education for youth in care has been adopted. Feierman highlighted the Fostering Connections Act and the Uninterrupted Scholars Act as great steps forward, but added there is still work to do.

- **The Fostering Connections Act (2008)**—Requires child welfare agencies to promote education stability for children and youth in care.
- **Uninterrupted Scholars Act (2013)**—Improves information sharing between education and child welfare agencies.

Both acts promote quick enrollment and access to education records.

### Conclusion
Improving education achievement for children in foster care must be addressed through concerted efforts by advocates, policymakers, and child-serving systems. The panelists stressed the need for legislation to remove barriers to education success and enhance data collection systems nationwide.

Programs that bridge child welfare and education systems are proving they can positively affect education outcomes for foster youth. Programs that support stronger adult relationships for foster youth and stability in school placements are getting results.

More data is needed, however, to continue identifying and solving education challenges for foster youth.

Empowering youth by helping them develop strong support networks and teaching them how to advocate for themselves is also key to promoting school success.


*Alanna Pawlowski,* program assistant and subscriptions coordinator at the ABA Center on Children and the Law, is a staff contributor to *CLP.*

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**Confronting Family Violence and Community Violence: The Intersection of Law and Psychology**

May 1-3, 2014  Washington, DC

The American Psychological Association and the American Bar Association are co-sponsoring this continuing education national conference, addressing issues related to the exposure of children, youth, and families to violence in and around the home, community and society.

**Highlights:**

- 40 plenary and invited sessions addressing prevention and intervention
- Focus on violence across individual, family, community and social contexts
- Sessions targeted to professionals in legal, mental health, social service and education fields
- Continuing education credits offered to psychologists and attorneys
- Networking session to let participants exchange information and views about critical issues and promote strategies for addressing violence

**Register online:** [www.apa.org/about/offices/ogc/apa-ab/a/conference.aspx](http://www.apa.org/about/offices/ogc/apa-ab/a/conference.aspx)
Military Dads Have to Re-Learn Parenting after Deployment

Fathers who returned after military service report having difficulty connecting with young children who sometimes don’t remember them, according to a recent study.

While the fathers in the study had eagerly anticipated reuniting with their families, they reported significant stress, especially around issues of reconnecting with children, adapting expectations from military to family life, and co-parenting.

“A service member who deploys when his child is an infant and returns home when the child is a toddler may find an entirely different child,” says lead author Dr. Tova Walsh. “Under these circumstances, fathers find that it takes substantial effort to rebuild their relationship with their child.”

The study was published in a special issue of the journal Health & Social Work devoted to the needs of military families. About 37 percent of the two million U.S. children of service members are under age six, suggesting that such issues are widespread.

Walsh, a Robert Wood Johnson Foundation Health & Society Scholar, is spending three years doing research at the University of Wisconsin School of Medicine and Public Health. For the study, she and colleagues interviewed 14 fathers of children ages six and under who were returning from combat deployment. Most fathers were part of a larger study evaluating a group parenting class for military families.

For some, the reunion with their children didn’t go as anticipated. One father told the researchers of coming home to a toddler gripping onto his mother’s leg: “He (was) looking at me like, ‘Who’s that?’ She had to tell him, ‘That’s Daddy.’ I have no idea what our relationship would be like if there was no Iraq war.”

The fathers wanted to improve their parenting skills, learn to better express emotion and manage their tempers. Half of the fathers met the clinical definition of having Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and most of the rest had subclinical symptoms of trauma. Several reported having difficulty staying calm when their young children acted up, or said they were stressed by their children’s behavior.

“The results show that we need to support military families during reintegration,” says Walsh. “Military fathers are receptive to information and support that will help them understand and respond to their children’s age-typical responses to separation and reunion. They all hope to renew their relationships with their young children.”

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Many Uninsured Children Live in Immigrant Families

More than two-thirds of uninsured children with immigrant parents are U.S. citizens, according to an analysis by Eric I. Seiber, PhD, of The Ohio State University College of Public Health, Columbus. He writes, “Initiatives to expand coverage or increase Medicaid and CHIP uptake will require decision makers to develop new policy and outreach approaches to enroll these children so they do not fall behind.”

Dr. Seiber analyzed data from a U.S. Census Bureau survey for the years 2008 to 2010, including more than 2.8 million households annually. Each year’s data included over 40,000 children living in immigrant families: those who had immigrated themselves or had at least one immigrant parent.

By this definition, nearly one fourth of all U.S. children in 2010 were living in immigrant families. Eighty-six percent of these children were native-born citizens, and another two percent were naturalized citizens. Thus, only 12% of children in immigrant families were noncitizens. Overall, 42% of uninsured children in the survey lived in an immigrant family. The percentage of uninsured children with immigrant parents ranged from four percent in Maine to 69% in California. “Having an immigrant parent is a defining characteristic of uninsured children,” Dr. Seiber wrote.

After adjusting for other factors, children who were not citizens and those born in Latin America were most likely to be uninsured—by about 11 and seven percentage points, respectively. Language barriers also played a role. For children living in a home where Spanish was the primary language, the chance of being uninsured was two percentage points higher.

While previous studies have shown children living in immigrant families are more likely to be uninsured, less is known about what percentage of uninsured children who are immigrants or have immigrant parents. In 2000, a study reported that 36% of uninsured children live in immigrant families. The results show that “approaching half” of uninsured children in the United States have immigrant parents, said Dr. Seiber. He added, “Children living in immigrant families are the group most likely to miss key investments in their health and human capital.”

The Affordable Care Act includes efforts to expand health care coverage to uninsured populations. But as the new study points out, many children living in immigrant families are uninsured despite being eligible for Medicaid. “With the future of immigration reform undecided, enrollment groups must provide a safe harbor for citizen children who may have undocumented parents,” according to Dr. Seiber.

He urged new policies and outreach to expand health insurance coverage among children living in immigrant families. “Maine, Hawaii, Massachusetts, New York, and Illinois have been particularly successful in enrolling eligible children with immigrant parents in insurance programs, and are models for the rest of the country,” Dr. Seiber noted.

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Take an inside look at children and families living in transitional situations—homeless shelters, temporary housing with family or friends, foster care or group homes—and their daily struggles. This new book offers suggestions for maintaining these families based largely on the experiences of staff at the Center for the Vulnerable Child, a community-based service provider of mental health and case management services for families in Oakland, CA.

The book explores the factors that cause families to find themselves in transitional situations, mainly intergenerational poverty combined with a lack of affordable housing, and parents struggling with mental illness, trauma, and substance abuse. It also reviews cultural and historic characteristics of these families with an eye toward how helping professionals and organizations can keep these characteristics in mind when intervening to help them. The importance of culturally sensitive, respectful responses is emphasized.

Promising, evidence-based programs that have proven effective in helping families in transition are shared. The programs each have a unique focus:

- SEED—A multiagency collaboration that integrates services while balancing the developmental/mental health needs of the child with child welfare mandates.
- Center for the Vulnerable Child—A child and family therapy provider for families under dependency court supervision
- CATS Project—A clinic specifically for foster children offering a multidisciplinary approach combining medical, case management, assessment and referrals.
- SPARK—A program targeting homeless preschoolers with behavioral issues

Stories of clients who have been served and benefitted from these programs show how they work and make a difference.

A final chapter looks at how systems that work with families living in transition (housing, child protection, mental health, criminal justice, substance abuse) can work together to be more effective and focused. A collaborative, early-intervention approach, combined with strong case management and efforts to foster social and peer support for families in transition are key elements of future interventions.