

CWLA THE NETWORKER

June 2023

Connecting child-serving professionals
with resources, events, and each other.



In this Issue

- Rural Summit
- Members-Only Website
- Aging Out of Foster Care
- Partner Highlight
- Office of Child Support Services
- National Fatherhood Advisory Committee
- Good News

CWLA Virtual Rural Summit

CWLA invites urban and rural providers to join us for a special virtual summit that will share strategies for community collaboration. Many rural child- and family-serving agencies have innovative approaches to partnering with community-based organizations to bring holistic services to families. This summit will provide an opportunity for urban providers to hear directly from national rural leaders about methods for working with local organizations, outside of child welfare, and how these lessons can be applied to their own communities. Each day will end with a dialogue session for shared learning with peers.

[Register for the Summit](#)

[See Who's Presenting](#)

Members-Only Resource Center

CWLA's Members-Only website offers a myriad of resources for member agencies and their staff. Make sure to check out tools for implementing and improvement DEI programs on the Member Equity Committee's page, digital editions of the Child Welfare journal, and slides/handouts from CWLA's 2023 National Conference!

Contact MemberServices@cwla.org if you need assistance accessing your member account.

CWLA THE NETWORKER

Connecting child-serving professionals
with resources, events, and each other.



Aging Out of Foster Care: Defying the Odds to Be the Change

By Ashley Foster

Recently, I sat before my program director during supervision, awkwardly struggling to answer the question “Where do you see yourself in five years?” Looking back, I suspect her response to my discomfort was because she thought my answer did not include a future with my current employer, whereas, in actuality, it was due to my embarrassment at not having a response at all. Future-forward thinking is a concept I’ve become conditioned to perceive as a luxury I am not afforded. Although I consider this thought process a downside of my upbringing in the foster care system, at times I need to remind myself of the role that upbringing also played in laying the foundation that I built my career path and life’s work upon.

Thinking five years ahead is almost as difficult for me as it is to reflect back on the last five years. Looking back at 2018, I was not only adjusting to my new career as a Child Protective Services Social Worker, I was also juggling the role of being a single mom all while also trying to navigate one of my greatest challenges in life: aging out of the foster care system. This transition was highly anxiety provoking, not just because of the normal “unknowns” associated with adulthood, but due to almost daily reminders that the “odds” were never going to be in my favor. My undergraduate graduation cap had been decorated with the phrase “Defying the Odds to Be the Change” to represent the 2 youth (out of 276) who had aged out of the foster care system with a four-year degree the prior year. As great of an accomplishment as this was, it was still not enough to escape the data that predicts that I will be more likely to experience homelessness, unemployment, incarceration, and even death than youth who did not grow up in foster care. I would be lying if I denied the contribution my stubborn personality has made in some of my successes, but I primarily attribute it to the passion that arose from wanting better futures for youth in foster care in the years to come. This passion is derived from not only the trauma that led to my entering care but also the trauma I further endured while in foster care. Due to my involvement in improving outcomes for children and youth, in 2018 I was graciously nominated for and

awarded the first Child Welfare League of America Cassaundra Rainey Youth Champion Award. At times, this work entailed exposing some of the most vulnerable moments of my life as I spoke to audiences both locally and nationally on various platforms, attesting to why system changes were necessary. Winning this award was not only one of my greatest accomplishments professionally, but it also a very personal one as well.

Since winning the award, my life has changed drastically both personally and professionally. As time progressed, my involvement with the Youth Advisory Board decreased due to work demands. In 2019, I started my journey as a foster parent in an attempt to still have a connection to improving the lives of youth in foster care, even if that meant just giving them a safe space to breathe for a night. This later resulted in a partnership between myself and the Connecticut Alliance of Foster and Adoptive Families, the same agency whose Executive Director had nominated me for the CWLA award. With their support, I began developing and facilitating workshops that provided knowledge and skills geared towards how caregivers, community providers, and stakeholders can better meet the needs of youth in foster and adoptive care.

Between 2019 and 2021, my son's declining health became a priority, resulting in me having to take a step back from a lot of the work I was doing. During this time, I was also struggling with my role as a CPS worker due to a variety of reasons, both personally and professionally. In December of 2021, I realized a major reason I had been struggling was due to losing my passion for the work I was doing. Day after day, I no longer felt I could have a positive impact on even the families I worked with directly, because I did not have the support of the system to be able to do so. In February of 2022, I transitioned into a new role as the Forensic Services Program Manager at United Services, a non-profit mental health authority in my state. Leaving my role at DCF was a major life change as well as a big career change because this agency had also been one of my longest personal connections during my journey in foster care. However, knowing the potential good I could accomplish in this new role brought back the passion I'd once had.

In my new position, I have been able to create an entire Forensic Services Unit, the first of its kind in my state. I was responsible for supervising a state-contracted Jail Diversion program as well as developing and implementing the Connecticut CRISIS Police Pilot Program. Creating this program entailed developing a partnership between law enforcement and mental health professionals to work toward officer and community safety while successfully diverting individuals in crisis and in need of support from incarceration by facilitating the utilization of services. Our program model has integrated an innovative approach to essential service delivery by engaging in cross-system collaboration to help bridge gaps in services, resulting in better outcomes for children, youth, and families. In the initial ten-month span of the program, 583 referrals were processed, surpassing data of program models predating this one.

When changing careers, I made the decision to stop focusing on fixing what was broken and instead allowed my passion to help me take part in the journey to start over and build something better. As scary a journey as it is, I often remind myself there is nothing to fear in starting over because I am not starting from nothing, I am starting from real-life

experiences; experiences that were often a result of the failing systems that were tasked with meeting the needs of individuals such as myself.

Someone who has known me since my first week in foster care recently reiterated to me, “You’re a fighter; never stop fighting.” Although very accurate, this is unfortunately also my reality. I fight battles both big and small every day. I always have, and always will, question what battles could have been avoided due to circumstances out of my control as a result of failures in “the system”. These questions are the reason I continue to fight for myself, for my son, and for youth in foster care who feel as if they do not have a voice; a voice I once did not have myself. Future-forward thinking may be a significant struggle for me, but that is a result of being conditioned to survive. Surviving is about living one day at a time, not about hoping for the future. Everyone deserves the right to live and not just to survive. This is why system changes are not only necessary; they need to be mandatory.



Ashley Foster began her journey into the field of social work over a decade ago when she entered the Connecticut Foster Care System as an adolescent. In 2012, after navigating several different placements and new schools, Ashley graduated with her high school diploma from Danbury High School. She attended Becker College in Worcester, MA for one before transferring to Southern Connecticut State University in New Haven, CT. After becoming pregnant her sophomore year, Ashley quickly realized the social work field was her true calling and opted to change her major from nursing as she entered into her junior year.

Ashley maintained both full-time and part-time employment while navigating a full-time student workload and internships as a single mother, all while remaining under the auspices of her state’s child welfare system. During this time, Ashley was also actively involved with the Connecticut Department of Children and Families (DCF) Youth Advisory Board, dedicating her free time to advocacy work resulting in several policy reforms including the Connecticut’s Adolescent Bill of Rights and Expectations and the Adolescent Needs Prior to Transitioning from Care. Ashley passed her LMSW exam in January 2020 and is nearing licensing eligibility to become a Licensed Clinical Social Worker.

CWLA THE NETWORKER

Connecting child-serving professionals
with resources, events, and each other.



CWLA Partner Highlight

CWLA is a diverse community of professionals entrusted with the well-being of children. Each member uses their unique practice to partner with CWLA to fulfill our mission of advancing policies, strategies, and best practices that result in better outcomes for children, youth, and families. This month, we're highlighting one of our closest partners, the Association of Administrators of the Interstate Compact on Adoption and Medical Assistance (AAICAMA). Read an excerpt from our conversation with **Director Sharon McCartney**:

What is the Association of Administrators of the Interstate Compact on Adoption and Medical Assistance (AAICAMA)?

AAICAMA is a non-profit, state association that implements the Interstate Compact on Adoption and Medical Assistance that connects all U.S. states, the District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico in their efforts to eliminate barriers to adoption and secure and ensure permanency for children and youth adopted with special needs.

Begun in 1986, AAICAMA provides the construct for interstate collaboration to achieve the transfer of permanency support benefits between states. It built and maintains the ICAMA System, an electronic system of case transfer that enables states to open and close Medicaid without delay in the receipt of health benefits for children or the need for family involvement. The Association educates and trains states on Federal, child welfare, and Medicaid law and emerging legislation through conferences, forums, and webinars. The Association is the platform that unites and convenes states to share concerns and discuss current and emerging needs in the field of child welfare and Medicaid. AAICAMA mediates between states and promotes model practices to promote children's permanency and reduce state administrative efforts.

How are AAICAMA and CWLA partners?

AAICAMA and CWLA are partners in collaboration to improve the lives of children and families. CWLA is Secretariat to the Association, providing administrative construct and opportunities to work together on current and on-going issues in child welfare including

permanency, health care, and equity. CWLA's broad and AAICAMA's specific knowledge bases combine to serve the needs of children touched by child welfare and to work to reduce the number of children involved in the system.

AAICAMA is excited by its partnership with CWLA. Begun in the fall of 2019, the events of 2020 and the needs of the pandemic became our initial focus. Beginning in 2022 when we held our first, joint conference with CWLA, we refocused our efforts to pursue joint projects, field initiatives, and legislative goals that serve the children in and from the child welfare system, and to work across systems to prioritize reducing the number of children in state systems.

What is AAICAMA working on now?

AAICAMA just held its annual conference, Bridging States and Strengthening Children: Focus on the Child Welfare Professional, in St. Louis, Missouri, with one of the largest representations of states in its history. This was AAICAMA's first solo conference since 2019 and we decided to celebrate the work of the child welfare professional in the face of the unprecedented circumstances and needs generated by the pandemic and the emotional impact that work has left. Sessions were given in support of child welfare staff from the agency down and the worker up, along with education and training in the operation of the Compact, the work of the Association, and Title IV-E and Medicaid programs.

What are AAICAMA's top priorities for the next five years?

Membership, partnership, and service are the priorities in AAICAMA's Strategic Plan for the next five years.

Membership: Puerto Rico has just joined the Compact as an Associate Member! It will now participate in the operation of the ICAMA - benefiting children by getting healthcare to children faster and more securely and benefiting the Territory by reducing state administrative time.

Partnership: Expanding partnerships and strengthening existing partnerships is key to AAICAMA's success in aiding states to serve the children in and from their care. CWLA is key to this initiative as we increase collaboration in the areas of foster care, adoption, guardianship, and healthcare.

Service: AAICAMA is redesigning and rebuilding its electronic, interstate case transfer system for Medicaid: the ICAMA System. We have finished the discovery phase and are in the building phase of the system's update. The new system will be more intuitive, comprehensive, and responsive to child welfare staff's needs and enable them to more quickly and accurately meet the needs of the children and youth served under the Compact.

How did you become involved with AAICAMA?

I was a Social Service Specialist in state government before deciding to go to law school. I wanted to combine my commitment to children's welfare with an expansion of their rights to safe and healthy care; this is what led me to choose law as the avenue to meet both goals. In AAICAMA, I found a position that combined those goals and allowed me to apply my law degree to state, child welfare, and Medicaid policies for the good of children and youth in and adopted from state care. I began as an Analyst, progressed to a Program

Manager, and became Director of the Association five years ago. I have been with AAICAMA for 21 years. Working with all 51 jurisdictions, and now Puerto Rico, is ever-changing and interesting. There is never a lull in the need for advocacy and betterment in systems and services to children. AAICAMA challenges and supports its members and partners to work together in that betterment.



Sharon McCartney has worked with the Interstate Compact on Adoption and Medical Assistance (ICAMA, the Compact) and its Association of Administrators (AAICAMA, the Association) since 2002. Ms. McCartney works to increase state understanding of federal, child welfare, and Medicaid law to aid states in developing model practice that strengthens permanency and improves life outcomes for children and youth in and from state care. She has been an attorney and child advocate for over 20 years, working to improve state and federal systems that serve children in foster care, adoption, and guardianship.

She specializes in interstate and interagency coordination to improve service delivery and meet the needs of children and youth with special needs. A graduate of the University of Texas at Austin and the George Washington University Law School, she has a peer-reviewed publication on the Medicaid rights of children adopted and state obligations to provide it interstate. Ms. McCartney presents webinars and training to states and NGOs to educate on children's permanency, the services needed to support it, and the role of the Compact, child welfare professionals, and parents as advocates for children, youth, and families.

Prior to law school and working for the AAICAMA, Ms. McCartney was a Social Service Specialist for the Georgia Division of Family and Children Services. She lives in Washington, DC and can be reached through the AAICAMA national office shared with its Secretariat and Partner, the Child Welfare League of America, in Washington, DC via email at SMcCartney@aaicama.org or phone (202) 913-3226.

[Visit AAICAMA's Website](#)

Office of Child Support Services

CWLA is excited to share that the Federal Office of Child Support Enforcement is now the Office of Child Support Services (OCSS). This name change reflects the program's commitment to serve the whole family and provide services that promote family self-sufficiency so children receive reliable support from both parents.

[Read the Information Memorandum](#)

CWLA THE NETWORKER

Connecting child-serving professionals
with resources, events, and each other.



National Fatherhood Advisory Committee

CWLA is excited to announce the formation of the CWLA National Fatherhood Advisory Committee. The committee will serve in an advisory capacity to the Senior Fellow Project *Exploring the Importance of Father Involvement in the Well-Being of Children* led by Dr. Rufus Sylvester Lynch. Working within the context of CWLA's *National Blueprint* and *Standards of Excellence*, Dr. Lynch will work to identify current best practices in father inclusion among CWLA's member agencies and partners, facilitate a process for peer-to-peer learning and identify resources and tools that member agencies and partners may take advantage of to support their work in serving fathers. The committee will also recommend how CWLA's practice, policy, education, and training could be enhanced by incorporating an intentional focus on greater father involvement in the lives of children.

[Read the Full Announcement](#)

[View the Committee's Members](#)



CWLA would like to congratulate Dr. Rufus Sylvester Lynch for being named a recipient of The Judge David Gray Ross Government Award for Outstanding Government Leadership in Fatherhood, Presented by the National Partnership for Community Leadership (NPCL) at its 25th Annual International Fatherhood Conference.

CWLA THE NETWORKER

Connecting child-serving professionals
with resources, events, and each other.



Good News in Child Welfare

At times, the news media's bad news bias towards child welfare can lead us to feel disheartened, dispirited, and discouraged. But we know the truth – that all over the country dedicated child-serving professionals are having an immense positive impact on the lives of children and families.

In partnership with the Field Center for Children's Policy, Practice, & Research, each month we highlight one inspiring, joyful news story from the child welfare system. We hope this segment brings joy and delight into your day.

Lawmakers Fund Parent Representation Program

A new law in Oklahoma will create a statewide program providing better legal representation to parents who are involved with the child welfare system. The first year of the Family Representation and Advocacy Program, housed under the Administrative Office of the Courts, will be funded with \$4.6 million. A nonprofit is being sought to manage the program that will pay and train attorneys to work with parents and kids, manage caseloads and provide support during court cases. Preliminary data from a parent representation program in Tulsa County, OK, shows that parents who receive high-quality legal representation are more likely to be reunited with their kids, who spend less time in state custody. Additional funding to expand the program may be added in future legislative sessions.