

NEWS

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The impact of trauma on children who have experienced abuse and/or neglect is focus of RI Family Court conference

“The Family Court, DCYF and the Schools: Putting Children First”

CRANSTON, R.I. – The impact of trauma on children who have experienced abuse and/or neglect is the topic of a conference hosted by Rhode Island Family Court Chief Judge Haiganush R. Bedrosian that began today and continues through tomorrow at Rhodes on the Pawtuxet in Cranston.

Chief Judge Bedrosian welcomed more than 550 attendees including school personnel, social workers, providers, attorneys, law enforcement and court staff. She stated, “The effects of childhood trauma often bring children to the attention of the Family Court, DCYF and/or the schools. As we examine these problems that face some children, we will explore how collaboration among the system providers can deliver effective appropriate interventions at all levels.”

“This conference is Rhode Island’s beginning of a call to action that was initiated in Washington, D.C., two months ago. We must work together to provide school stability and other interventions, when necessary, for children in foster care. We need to address the social and emotional needs that impede the learning process,” said Chief Judge Bedrosian.

“As a former Family Court judge, I greatly appreciate the effort that went into putting together this week’s conference,” said Rhode Island Supreme Court Chief Justice Paul A. Suttell. “Getting the various providers together in one room to explore together the advances in this field is of vital important to many of our most troubled children.”

On November 3 and 4, 2011, the Administration on Children, Youth and Families and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services gathered representatives from all 50 states in Washington for an important summit – “The Child Welfare, Education, and the Courts: A Collaboration to Strengthen Educational Successes of Children and Youth in Foster Care.” This summit was convened to bring state leaders together to work to improve the well-being of children and youth in every state.

On November 3, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Secretary Kathleen Sebelus addressed the gathered state leaders and made the following remarks:

“In 2008, Congress passed the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act, which gave us a new mandate to take down the barriers that stand in the way of a foster child’s educational success.

The law is clear that child welfare agencies must make the child's education a top priority. That means making sure that children are enrolled in an appropriate education program and when possible, that children stay in their original school so they can maintain continuity in their learning. And to help make that happen, it also gives states the option to keep children in their original school even if they move out of district, and allows them to use foster care funds for transportation between their home and that school."

"Today, Rhode Island is in the forefront in making a meaningful difference for children in state care," Chief Judge Bedrosian said. "The Family Court, DCYF and the schools are coming together to make a difference in children's lives and we must remain vigilant in that effort."

The keynote address, entitled, "Development, Trauma and the Brain: the Neurological and Psychological Impact of Childhood Abuse and Neglect," was given by Robert Hagberg, LICSW, deputy director/clinical coordinator, Casey Family Services, and James Greer, M.D., clinical assistant professor of psychiatry at Brown University Medical School, medical director of the Child and Family Unit at The Providence Center, and psychiatric consultant, Casey Family Services.

"From a neurodevelopmental perspective, our brains are organized by our experiences. The younger the brain, the more malleable or more organize-able it is, such that experience in adulthood can alter a brain that has already been organized. But more important, experience in childhood actually organizes or hardwires the developing brain. As a result, early childhood trauma experiences can have a lifelong neurodevelopmental impact," said Dr. Greer and Mr. Hagberg.

Maura McInerney, Esq., from the Education Law Center in Philadelphia, has an education law practice that focuses on the legal rights of students who are homeless or in foster care, including issues relating to prompt enrollment, school stability, special education and transfer/graduation requirements. Ms. McInerney is also involved in policy work at the federal, state and local levels. She said, "Children in foster care are in educational crisis – they are one of the most 'at-risk' of all student populations due in part to high rates of mobility, frequent school changes and unmet remedial needs. The good news is that we know what works: school stability, judicial focus on education, mentoring, access to remedial support and graduation planning. I applaud Rhode Island's Family Court Conference for bringing child welfare, the courts and education together to focus on these critical issues. Cross-systems collaboration is the key to unlocking school success for children in foster care. We know success is possible for all our children."

Attorney Mary Ann Carroll said, "As funding in school districts and state agencies continues to decline, providing a free and appropriate education for all students will require the courts, school districts and DCYF to work cooperatively. Attorney (Andrew) Henneous and I view this conference as the first of several that will bring us together as we attempt to meet the needs of all Rhode Island students. We appreciate the efforts of Chief Judge Bedrosian and her staff in organizing this conference." Carroll and Henneous are attorneys with Brennan, Recupero, Cascione, Scungio & McAllister, LLP in Providence.

"We need to work collaboratively to help build our children and youths' social capital, which consists of their social relationships and networks. This social capital supports healthy development and enhances the opportunity to overcome negative experiences of loss, separation, and disruption of relationships. It is critical that our children in care have support to develop and sustain these diverse social networks of quality relationships with their families, schools, peers and communities. These essential connections enhance the youth's productive capabilities and chances for success throughout their lifetime," stated Dr. Janice De Frances, executive director of the Department of Children, Youth and Families.

A panel entitled, "Hear Our Story: Former Foster Youths' Perspectives," was moderated by Victoria Ferrara, of the Rhode Island Foster Parent Association. Panel members included: Shania Connor, Jordan Cook, Kenneth Gagnon, Michael S. Peno, Jr., and Dee Saint Franc. This was an exceptional session where the panel spoke poignantly about their educational experiences while in state care. "It is critical to hear the voices of foster youth when developing policies and practices that will directly affect them. These young

people are the experts of their own lives and should be a part of the decision-making team,” said Ms. Ferrara.

“Children who are victims of child abuse and neglect and who are in the care of DCYF must have the support they need to continue learning and furthering their education. Our state’s future economic prosperity depends on their success,” said Elizabeth Burke Bryant, executive director of Rhode Island KIDS COUNT. “Today’s Family Count Conference is an unprecedented step forward because it brings together educators, state agencies, the court and community partners to ensure that these children receive the consistent educational opportunities, support and services they need to thrive.”

“On behalf of the Family Court, I am extending our thanks and appreciation to everyone involved with this two-day event,” Chief Judge Bedrosian said. “This conference has brought awareness to the barriers that may block the educational success of youth in foster care. These children can achieve wonderful things. We – the adults in their lives (families, foster parents, judges, teachers, social workers) – need to continue to work together to give them every positive opportunity.”

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