

## The Impact of Substance Abuse on Children and Youth in Foster Care

By Judge Katherine Lucero



Child Welfare Courts are called different names in different states. In California it is called the Juvenile Dependency Court. In California 68% to 78% of our

children are in the foster care system due to drug and alcohol abuse.<sup>1</sup> Across the country 40% to 80% of the children in foster care are due to substance abuse.<sup>2</sup>

The consequences of this epidemic cannot be understated.

To add salt to the wound, the populations of families that enter the child welfare court systems actually do not have the where withal to treat the problem of addiction even if they wanted to because of the lack of education and resources to enter treatment facilities or outpatient services. Addiction itself is an enigma to the best educated, and the stigma of addiction keeps people sick and protects their secret long after it should have been addressed. For the addict from the lower socioeconomic levels of our society it becomes an incurable death sentence, which along the way means the loss of their children to foster care and possibly adoption along with the standard consequences of jails and institutions.

What I see in court each day is that substance abuse robs children of their parents and it robs them of a sense of themselves as belonging to a family unit “like everyone else.” They quickly become even more of an outsider than they already were by just having parents who are drug addicts or alcoholics. Now they have also lost their family. Foster children do not want anyone to know that they are in foster care. They often

go to great lengths to hide it. They become invisible and left behind. They feel hopeless. Foster children are often overmedicated and under championed through life. They are at the highest risk for becoming addicts and alcoholics themselves, and they have the least amount of support to face that reality or to become educated about that inevitability. It is well documented that children raised in the foster care system have poor outcomes.<sup>3</sup>

Foster children need us all to step up. They need judges, lawyers, foster parents and CASAs to step up. Foster children and youth need us to bring clarity to the very confusing and disorienting life of chaos that substance abuse in their families has wrought upon them. There are ways to do that.

Some of us have begun to champion the need to educate our youth about addiction and its impact on the family. Educating our youth about the disease of addiction and its impact on the family is a critical gap in the current child welfare systems family intervention paradigms. These children do not know that parental addiction is not their fault, that they did not cause it and can't make it better. They do not know that the bad things that have happened to them may be the result of addiction's hold on their parents, that this doesn't mean their parents are bad people, but are rather people in need of help to recover.

There are many excellent programs and activities which can help them, in age appropriate ways, to understand this family disease, its impact on them, and which can help them find their strengths. With accurate information and effective support, they can strengthen their resilience.

One study shows that if we can prevent first use of cigarettes, drugs and alcohol until the youth is 21 that they are likely never to become addicts themselves. This is a remarkable statistic that should be the hallmark and starting point for all of our work in child welfare systems with regard to child well being. The research goes on to say that no one has greater power to influence a teen's decision whether to smoke, drink or use drugs than that teen's parent or guardian. *That would be us for a foster child.*

As those who have stepped into the shoes of the parent to raise these children, we have the greatest power to influence their choices and to foster their resilience. How are we doing?

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<sup>1</sup>California has between a 68% to 78% removal rate for substance abuse (Foster care:Parental Drug Abuse Has Alarming impact on Young Children – Letter Report 4/4/94 GOA/HEH 94-98, & T-HEH-98-40 Parent Substance Abuse Implications on Children)

<sup>2</sup>Across the country 40-80% of foster care children are removed for substance abuse. (Voices for Americas Children, Issues Brief, Nov. 2004)

<sup>3</sup>Chapin Hall's Midwest Study provides a comprehensive picture of how foster youth are faring during this transition since the Foster Care Independence Act of 1999 became law. Foster youth in Iowa, Wisconsin, and Illinois were eligible to participate in the study if they had entered care before their 16th birthday, were still in care at age 17, and had been removed from home for reasons other than delinquency. The study showed that those who emancipate at age 18 were more likely to become homeless, experience early and unwanted pregnancy, incarceration and joblessness. [http://www.chapinhall.org/sites/default/files/Midwest\\_Study\\_ES\\_Age\\_23\\_24.pdf](http://www.chapinhall.org/sites/default/files/Midwest_Study_ES_Age_23_24.pdf)

<sup>4</sup>Study can be found at [www.casacolumbia.org](http://www.casacolumbia.org). Click on prevention.