

Meet the 2021 Children's Bureau Champions



For Advancing Equity



Corey Best (Palm Coast, FL)

Corey Best is an independent child welfare consultant and founder of Mining for Gold, Inc. He has been a parent leader with the Children's Trust Fund Alliance and its Birth Parent National Network and has become an in-demand national consultant who is advancing racial equity with diverse populations. Mr. Best has been working as a partner with the FRIENDS National Center for Community- Based Child Abuse Prevention (CBCAP) for almost two years on a systems change initiative called the Prevention Mindset Institute (PMI). Mining for Gold, along with three additional national partners,

works with FRIENDS to support prevention and child protection leaders in six states in their state systems change efforts. His contributions are centered on racial justice and equity.

As a bold, persistent, and engaging advocate, Mr. Best has a personal understanding of how the system works. He advocates for those who may not be able to speak for themselves, he speaks truth to those in power, and he gains their trust and respect. By bringing critical messages related to advancing equity to groups all over the country, he is changing thinking and challenging norms.

For Building Community Capacity



The Honorable Amy L. Nechtem (Boston, MA)

The Honorable Amy L. Nechtem is Chief Justice of the Massachusetts Juvenile Court, where she oversees the administration of policy and practice affecting juvenile justice and child welfare matters in courts throughout the Commonwealth. She is committed to judicial leadership and engagement in building community capacity and ensuring multidisciplinary and cross-sector collaboration to develop a child and family well-being system that is dynamic, responsive, and differentiated based on community and individual needs. As a foundational strategy, Chief justice

Nechtem led the Juvenile Court's implementation of Pathways, an innovative, differentiated case management system designed to improve outcomes for children through individualized assessment of each case, each child, and each family.

Building on and informed by her leadership of Pathways, Chief Justice Nechtem saw the opportunity and need to deepen the engagement and partnerships with stakeholders. Under her leadership, the Court convened the Massachusetts Child Welfare Mapping, utilizing public health concepts and mapping expertise to develop a framework for assessing the health and well-being of children and families within individual communities.

In carrying out her role as a leader and convenor, Chief Justice Nechtem has looked far beyond the traditional purview of stakeholders of the judicial system and engaged a broad and diverse group of partners in working toward a vision of a child and family well-being system that meets needs within the community at the earliest opportunity.



Think Of Us (Washington, D.C.)

Think of Us is focused on transforming child welfare by leveraging lived experience and system proximity to drive systems change through the lens of technology. The Think of Us team works directly with government, tech, media, and philanthropy to effectively integrate folks with lived experience into significant projects in the field.

Founded and led by Sixto Cancel, a former foster youth, Think of Us evolved from a technology nonprofit to a research and development lab. Their work is expanding rapidly at the intersection of technology, data, and partnerships. Key achievements by Think Of Us include the #hackfostercare program, a national initiative to infuse the tech field into the care system, and the Think of Us App, a prototype web app designed to empower youth to build their personal advisory board of supportive adults that will coach them through their transition out of foster care.

Think Of Us also partnered with the Obama Administration to co-design, resource, and execute the first-ever White House Foster Care and Technology Hackathon, which resulted in the first update to federal tech and foster care regulations in 25 years; 8 million dollars in commitment of action; and follow-up hackathons in New York, California, and three other states that have led to new tech solutions and new types of tools for youth, front line workers, and the foster care system.

For Preventing Child Maltreatment



Dr. Melissa Merrick (Chicago, IL)

Melissa Merrick is President and CEO of Prevent Child Abuse America (PCA America), the nation's oldest and largest nonprofit organization dedicated to the primary prevention of child abuse and neglect. Dr. Merrick's leadership and vision has wide-ranging impacts. She has created new opportunities for national partnerships in the child maltreatment prevention space, recognizing that such partnerships are essential. As a steadfast public health scholar, researcher, and leader, Dr. Merrick reminds stakeholders of their duty and responsibility to partner to

ensure conditions in which all children and families can thrive.

Dr. Merrick is recognized as one of the country's foremost experts on adverse childhood experiences (ACEs). In partnership with the Children's Bureau's Office on Child Abuse and Neglect, she served for eight years as the lead scientist for the ACEs study at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and is the lead author of CDC's Vital Signs: ACEs, the most nationally representative report on this topic.

Dr. Merrick was instrumental in helping to chart a course for integrating public health and primary prevention approaches into multiple frameworks. Through collaborations with public, private, and philanthropic entities, Dr. Merrick helped successfully launch the Thriving Families, Safer Children movement, uniting PCA America, the Children's Bureau, Annie E. Casey Foundation, and Casey Family Programs—as well as numerous local partners—to proactively create conditions and contexts for strong families and communities across the country.



FIRST Legal Clinic (Everett, WA)

FIRST Legal Clinic is an innovative advocacy program aimed at providing legal advice and case management for pregnant persons and parents of newborns. The agency advanced the concept that providing legal advocacy after a child has been removed from a parent is far too late. Instead, through FIRST Legal Clinic, an attorney engages as soon as possible to assess a case and prepare for advocating for an infant to remain with a parent. Early legal advocacy is one of the best, most underutilized tools for prevention. With that in mind, FIRST Legal Clinic aims to level the playing field for families from oppressed or non-privileged backgrounds.

Since its beginning in July 2019, FIRST Legal Clinic has served more than 70 families. The majority of families working with the clinic do not have a CPS filing or removal of their infant

at all. Even for cases that do involve an out-of-home placement, preliminary data suggest that return-home outcomes for families are more frequent and quicker than families who do not have the benefit of the clinic's advocacy.

FIRST Legal Clinic also utilizes a parent ally to assist in support for parents and case management services. The parent ally provides knowledge and an empathetic approach to clients, running a weekly support group for pregnant parents and families who have successfully navigated the system. The parent ally uses a networking system with local services, non-profits, and other support services to access expedited services for clients. This includes access to housing resources, in-patient treatment, DV services, and other community parenting resources. Because of her networking influences, the parent ally is able to get clients to these services within a matter of days and, sometimes, within hours.

For Promoting Child & Family Well-Being



Cosette Mills (Salt Lake City, UT)

Cosette Mills has served as Federal Operations Administrator for the State of Utah Division of Child and Family Services (DCFS) for more than 25 years. During her tenure with DCFS, she has held a key position on the DCFS administrative leadership team and has been integral to the agency's strategic planning processes. As Utah's Federal Operations Administrator, she oversees the creation and implementation of the DCFS Child and Family Services Plan, Annual Progress and Services Report, Federal Performance Improvement Plan, Title IV-E Prevention Program Five-Year

Plan, and all other federal grants that the agency receives. Her vision and leadership influence child and family well-being across the continuum of services, from primary prevention through adoption and after-care.

During the waiver demonstration period, Ms. Mills spent months on the road, travelling throughout the State of Utah to participate in various aspects of implementation. She met directly with workers and families to obtain feedback and identify strengths and challenges. She then adapted the project to ensure successful outcomes. This work relied heavily on implementation science, a concept that was new to Utah at the time. She pushed DCFS to utilize this scientific methodology to help move best practices into regular practice through dedicated, focused efforts.

Ms. Mills is a key player at the national level as states work together to expand and improve services available on the IV-E Prevention Services Clearinghouse. Ms. Mills has been on the Casey Family Programs Fiscal Leaders Work Group since its inception, and she is known across the country as a sound resource on federal laws that concern child welfare.



Truancy Prevention Outreach Program (Las Vegas, NV)

Truancy Prevention Outreach Program (TPOP) was developed to eliminate chronic absenteeism by developing outreach programs and services for youth and families. The program operates in partnership with the community and Clark County School District in Nevada. During 2020-2021, the program received 3,880 referrals and collaborated with 221 schools in the Clark County community.

Community Navigators collaborate with youth, families, schools, and community partners to develop a comprehensive plan to

identify, address, and eliminate the root causes of chronic absenteeism in communities where there is a large population of at-risk youth. Community Navigators also complete family assessments, helping to identify challenges that require academic and educational intervention. In addition, families who are experiencing food instability are provided with food resources, and youth are provided with services to address educational, emotional, and mental health needs. TPOP developed a parent/peer-to-peer mentoring program to provide ongoing peer support to the youth's parent/guardian.

TPOP includes an early warning system to identify at-risk students and provide individualized support for such students and families. Interventions are offered within a case management model, where families, program staff, and school personnel can work with students on a range of issues to address the root causes of their absences. Weekly data are collected and analyzed, and statistical results determine program practice, policy, and procedure to ensure that adjustments are immediately made to address any negative outcomes. To date, the program has shown a 66 percent success rate regarding improved attendance and grades.

For Reshaping Foster Care as a Support for Families



Carole Shauffer and Jennifer Rodriguez
(San Francisco, CA)



Carole Shauffer (JD, MA) and Jennifer Rodriguez (JD) are leaders of the Youth Law Center. Ms. Shauffer served as Executive Director for many years, and Ms. Rodriguez has served as Executive Director for the last decade. Ms. Rodriguez is a former foster youth who brings her lifelong, lived experience to the Youth Law Center, as well as to the National Commission to End Child Abuse and Neglect Fatalities. Working together with Ms. Shauffer—who has a Master’s degree in developmental psychology—Ms. Rodriguez helped to develop the Quality Parenting Initiative (QPI), which works to ensure that children, foster parents, and birth parents experience more support (and less trauma) when children go into foster care.

The QPI builds on past efforts, like Family to Family, in emphasizing partnerships between the foster parent and birth parent, while also ensuring that child welfare workers, supervisors, attorneys, and judges are fully engaged. This includes such activities as comfort calls (i.e.- the foster parent calls the birth parent within 24 hours of a child’s arrival) and other forms of outreach and face-to-face

meetings between foster parent(s), birth parent(s), and child(ren).

QPI is now in 20 states, with new states and counties joining each year. QPI holds a national conference that includes youth, birth parents, foster parents, child welfare staff, and attorneys. Evidence from the field suggests that QPI is highly valued, it is critical to efforts to ensure that foster care feels like help (rather than punishment), and that partnering is essential. By engaging entire state and county child welfare agencies and their partners, QPI is providing foster parents with more ideas and freedom to support birth parents and children. Building on other initiatives focused primarily on foster parent screening, orientation, and training programs that encourage partnerships with birth parents, QPI works with foster parents and their agencies to help produce more supportive parenting.

For Supporting the Workforce



Mark Harris (New Orleans, LA)

Mark Harris is Executive Director of the Pelican Center for Children & Families, a nonprofit that serves as coordinator of Louisiana's court improvement program (CIP). Under the leadership of Mr. Harris, the Pelican Center has grown into a major force in child welfare operations in the state, providing resources and coordination across multiple agencies. He has provided extraordinary support to all aspects of the child welfare workforce, ensuring that stakeholders receive the resources that they need to serve their respective communities.

Mr. Harris has a particular interest in making sure that underprivileged children are served by professionals and community leaders who are well-trained and well-qualified. The satisfaction and health of the workforce are of great importance to him, and he has worked diligently to increase support, training, and standards for case workers, attorneys, judges, CASAs, and foster parents so that people who are working for the children and families of Louisiana benefit from a solid foundation and a supportive environment.

Under the leadership of Mr. Harris, the Pelican Center has become a catalyst for multidisciplinary learning, positive collaboration among entities, and community involvement. He has worked hard to use training and publications to bring parties together to build a better child welfare system, reaching out to community partners to ensure that there is a clear understanding of DCFS policy and its impacts on the decision-making process. Building on these understandings, the Pelican Center has worked successfully to improve practices that help to improve outcomes for families served.

Maine Behavioral Healthcare's Department of Clinical Innovation (Portland, ME)

Department of Clinical Innovation (DCI), Maine Behavioral Healthcare is comprised of a multi-disciplinary team charged with the development and implementation of innovative strategies to mitigate the impact of trauma by promoting the resilience of the child and family-serving workforce. DCI specializes in identifying and mitigating secondary traumatic stress (STS) as a result of serving children and families impacted by trauma. For over a decade, DCI has conducted local and national training on STS and developed organizational protocols and policies to mitigate the impact of STS. DCI's commitment to this work stems from an understanding that a healthy, resilient workforce improves outcomes for children and families.

Since 2010, DCI has invested heavily in supporting the workforce that serves children and families in Maine. Through education, training, consultation, and resource provision on the effects of trauma-exposed work, DCI has supported individuals, leadership teams, and entire organizations. Moreover, DCI collects data on the support services that it renders in order to

study, hone, and improve its work over time. DCI collaborates closely with the child-serving systems in Maine—including the state’s largest legal aid provider, Child Protective Services, local domestic violence and sexual assault resource centers, Child Advocacy Centers, and the District Attorney’s office, among many others.

The Children’s Bureau Champion Awards honor those who have demonstrated an extraordinary commitment to improving the overall health and well-being of our nation’s children and families. To learn more, visit the National Conference on Child Abuse and Neglect website at <https://nccan.acf.hhs.gov>.