

# Policy Forum

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## Finding “Hope” for children and seniors

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and David Hopping

*Editor's Note: This issue of Policy Forum departs from the usual focus of the series. Instead of providing independent commentary on an issue of public policy, it describes and explains the rationale for an innovative, widely-praised foster-care and adoption program that is administered by Generations of Hope, a unit of the Institute of Government and Public Affairs. Professor Brenda Krause Eheart is Director of Generations of Hope. David Hopping is a sociologist who has been evaluating the impact of the Generations of Hope program and translating the results of that evaluation into policy options.*

In May of 1994 an innovative foster/adoption program was launched in a small town in central Illinois. Utilizing housing on a former Air Force base, Generations of Hope (then called Hope for the Children) established a neighborhood composed of senior citizens, foster-adoptive families, and a small staff. Hope's purpose is to assist in the adoption of children seemingly trapped in the foster-care system, to support them throughout their childhood, and to provide seniors with a new, useful chapter in their lives.

Hope, as a partner with the University of Illinois' Institute of Government and Public Affairs, offers policymakers a new model for strategies dealing with retirement and foster care.

### Hope Meadows

Generations of Hope is a not-for-profit corporation and child welfare agency, and Hope Meadows is its first program site. Hope Meadows is a contained, “inter-generational,” planned community where foster and adoptive families, children, and senior citizens live

together and care for one another. It was designed to provide a model of foster care and adoption that protects children, offers permanency, and cultivates personal and social development and as a response to the challenge of applying what we already know—that nurturing families and caring communities are necessary for healthy child development.

With a \$1 million grant from the state of Illinois, Hope purchased a 22-acre housing subdivision that once had been part of the base housing complex at the now-closed Chanute Air Force Base. Twelve duplexes were converted into single-family homes, and three were renovated for administrative and community use. Ten four-plexes were renovated and made into 40 apartments for seniors. With its tree-lined streets that meander in typical suburban fashion, the neighborhood is virtually indistinguishable from the surrounding housing. Overall the appearance is that of a semi-rural, working-class environment where kids walk to public schools, ride bicycles and run freely between and around the houses, moving from one large open green space to the next.

At the core of Hope's intergenerational neighborhood are the comprehensive assessment and evaluation of children, the provision of necessary services to those children, the adoption of those children by parents within the neighborhood, and the ongoing support for the neighborhood's families. That support includes weekly parent training, on-site therapy and counseling for children and families, and the volunteer help of Hope's seniors.

Perhaps the most striking component of Hope's neighborhood is this cadre of senior volunteers. Seniors live in the neighborhood and receive below-market-rate rent in return for six hours a week of volunteer work which may include tutoring, playing games, child care, guarding school crossings, playground supervision, or numerous other jobs. A principle contribution, however,

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lies in simply becoming a part of the lives of the children — just being there, lending an ear, and sharing their wisdom and insight as neighbors and honorary grandparents.

A final component of the program at Hope is monetary support for parents in exchange for a life-long commitment to the children who share their lives. Hope families receive a large six-to-seven bedroom home rent-free and approximately \$19,000 a year so that one parent can stay at home and be a full-time mom or dad, adopting and raising up to four children from the foster care system.

### The young and the old

It is not news that changes need to be made in the way we support both the children caught in the quagmire of child welfare and seniors living lonely lives on limited incomes. The kind of children who come to Hope have been described as “discarded” or “disposable.” These are the children who are scarred by abuse and neglect (both by parents and by the foster-care system) and who are thus not easily adopted through traditional avenues. They tend to be older, to be minorities, to be part of a sibling group, to have severe behavior and emotional problems, and to have been born to parents unable or unwilling to perform the task of parenting. As of September 30, 1999, a record 581,000 children in the United States were reported to be in foster care. At least 127,000 of these children were waiting to be adopted.

The problems facing the child-welfare system show little sign of abating. As one researcher enumerated them recently in an argument for privatizing the whole system, they include “children staying in foster care too long, children being shuffled through several foster homes, abuse in foster homes, children available for adoption who remain in foster care too long, caseworker burnout, large caseloads, high turnover, poor investigations, incomplete paperwork, and lost files and data.” Whatever the merits of privatization, it is clear that the child-welfare system is not meeting the needs of these

vulnerable children. Agencies alone cannot keep children safe and happy; they must reach out to families and communities to solve the child-welfare crisis.

The Hope program focuses on foster children, ages 11 and younger, who are unlikely ever to return home from state care. Approximately two-thirds of the children who come to Hope are more than 15 months old and have spent *more than half of their lives* in foster care. These children are representative of the thousands whose time in care exceeds the guidelines set by the federal 1997 Adoption and Safe Families Act, which mandates that a child should not spend more than 15 of 22 consecutive months in state care without finding permanency.

Seventy-five children referred by the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services have moved to Hope since September 1994. Counting current pre-adoptive placements, 90 percent of these children have achieved permanency. This is significantly higher than what the state has been able to accomplish. Between 1995 and 1999, the rate of adoption at Hope was more than three times higher than the annual average for the state as a whole.

Currently, 31 foster children are living at Hope Meadows, joining 21 birth and adopted children who were already a part of Hope families. Upon arrival these 31 foster children ranged from just days old to 13 years of age; two-thirds were older than five. Eighteen of these children have siblings living at Hope. Seventy-two percent are African Americans. Well over a quarter had been sexually abused, came with serious medical problems or were drug exposed at birth. Thirty-five percent had severe behavior and emotional problems.

These children came from dysfunctional families. One-third of the mothers were seriously developmentally delayed and nearly two-thirds were mentally ill. Seventy-eight percent of the mothers were teens when they had their first child, and 83 percent were drug or alcohol abusers. About half of the birth mothers were allegedly abused as children. Two-thirds of the birth fathers had never been involved in their child’s life and one-half of the fathers are not even mentioned in their child’s case records.

Hope recognizes that adoption for most of these children will involve risks and difficulties and require continuing support. However, the manner in which

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these needs and supports are perceived and provided for at Hope is, in many ways, new. The program's success suggests that a radical departure from business as usual is needed in the foster-care and child-welfare systems.

### The need for change

The need for radical change is no less evident when considering how to meet the needs of the rapidly increasing number of senior citizens. The 2000 census counted 41.3 million persons age 62 and older in the United States, and 1.8 million age 62 and older in Illinois. Since 1900 the proportion of individuals in later life has tripled, producing an end result that, as researcher Marc Freedman notes, is truly staggering: "Half of all the people who have ever lived to age 65 are currently alive." This dramatic trend creates challenges and opportunities that cannot be ignored.

Most older people face major life transitions such as the death of a spouse, the onset of physical disabilities, leaving one's job, and caring for younger and older family members. These transitions represent key emotional turning points, may pose major economic challenges, and can create social dislocations leading to depression, isolation and illness.

"Social connectedness," writes Robert Putnam, "is one of the most powerful determinants of our well-being."

Many older Americans have two very special gifts: a surplus of unstructured time and vast experience. But in order to begin a new, active and involved chapter in life, and to avoid what can be a jarring transition into retirement, new institutions and opportunities for service will have to be created. Seniors need to be able to make a genuine contribution to society while benefiting in the process. We need to look past the dominant attitude of seeing seniors as a potentially unupportable burden. They should be viewed as an untapped national resource.

In contemplating new models of retirement, however, it is easy to overlook the approximately one-third of seniors who may be the most vulnerable. These are the seniors who are not poor by federal standards. Like many of the seniors living at Hope, they have worked hard all of their lives but come to their later years without the security of savings, an adequate pension, or a home that is paid for. Too often this segment of the population (retired Catholic school teachers, bus drivers, self-employed owners of small businesses, etc.) is sidelined from mainstream America.

The mean age of Hope seniors is 65. Currently the 59 seniors living at Hope Meadows are renting 39 apartments. The average annual income per household is \$12,389, with a slight majority of the households having at least one senior employed (mostly part-time). Together they average a total of 1,400 volunteer hours

per month, about one-third more hours than are required by Hope.

### Connecting young and old

At Hope Meadows, there is a close connection between the quality of life for the young and the old. This connection can make important contributions to the well being of both children and seniors. Research has shown how care for the young and for the old is intimately connected, and how communities that are safe, supportive, and manageable for the old are also good for children. And as one researcher points out, fostering the well-being of children offers the most urgent and promising opportunities for revolutionizing retirement.

The problem is that children and the elderly are generally regarded as being in competition for scarce public resources. Tough decisions seem to be demanded regarding provision for their prospective needs. What once might have constituted a solution (the mutual care of young and old) is now divided neatly into two problems. And these become the province of a rapidly-growing service economy that still never quite manages to cover the ever-expanding needs.

At Hope, children previously caught in the foster-care system, and seniors previously sidelined from mainstream America, live side by side as friends and neighbors. This model offers policymakers new ideas for dealing with the problems faced by children and seniors.

### Recommendations

Our view of children who enter state care must change. Rather than viewing them as wards-to-be-managed, where the focus is on finding and repairing deficits, these children should be seen as ordinary kids with the same need for family and community that our own biological children have. When a decision is made about a foster child, we should ask ourselves, "Is this what I would want for my own child?" Likewise, our ageist view of seniors as being weak, passive, and useless needs to change.

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Second, neighborhood-based child-welfare initiatives need to be encouraged. Agency-based services alone cannot protect children, nor help them form meaningful relationships. New partnerships need to be formed with families and neighborhoods where much of the work of caring and decisionmaking is left to the residents, not the “professionals.” It may even be necessary, as with Hope, to develop new neighborhoods where the common purpose is caring for the children.

Third, it is imperative that we recognize that adoption, by itself, is not a magic bullet for foster children. The older the children are, usually, the greater their problems. To best promote positive outcomes, ongoing post-adoption programs that focus on support for the entire family are necessary.

Fourth, we must begin to inject an intergenerational vision into public policy. Instead of having the old and the young compete for scarce dollars, we need to look at funding holistically. We need to ask how we can fund programs that help children help seniors, help seniors meet the needs of families, and help families meet the needs of children and seniors. The result will be that all benefit, and communities will become stronger.



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