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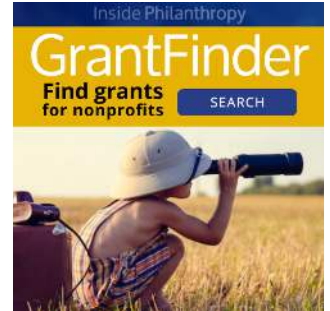
Seven Funders Working to Improve Child Welfare and Foster Care

Connie Matthiessen | May 22, 2024



EVGENY ATAMANENKO/SHUTTERSTOCK

The U.S. child welfare system isn't working — that is the consensus of those closest to the issue. [Human Rights Watch](#) concluded that it harms families, particularly those in Black, Indigenous and low-income communities, and [two recent books](#) underscore the scars it leaves on children and adults alike.



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— is critical, but it is too often pursued in a way that leaves families [broken](#) and [traumatized](#). While foster care represents a positive alternative in some cases, many young people endure a dizzying array of foster placements of varying quality, then age out of the system with little preparation or support. According to one [study](#), close to 30% of foster youth experience homelessness after they age out of care.

A wide array of philanthropies prioritize children and their wellbeing, and many of them are endeavoring to transform the child welfare system and make it more responsive to children and families. As nonprofits confront the system’s shortcomings, Inside Philanthropy has been following some of their key backers. Here’s a lineup of some important funders to watch in that space, with the caveat that this is not an exhaustive list.

Annie E. Casey Foundation and Casey Family Programs

These two organizations are both part of the Casey Philanthropies, built on the fortune of Jim Casey, who founded United Parcel Service (UPS). Both organizations have been stalwart in their commitment to child welfare. The [Annie E. Casey Foundation](#), which was created in 1948 and named after Jim Casey’s mother, has created a raft of [child welfare](#) initiatives over the years. It’s perhaps best known for its [KIDS COUNT](#) program, which provides exhaustive data and reports on children and their wellbeing, including statistics on [child welfare and foster care](#). [Foster care](#) and how to improve it is a foundation priority, along with support for young people as they age out of the system. The [Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative](#), for example, works with state programs that help foster youth achieve stable housing, employment and education as they transition from foster care to adulthood.

[Casey Family Programs](#), which Jim Casey created in 1966, has the following mission: “To provide and improve — and ultimately prevent the need for — foster care.” To that end, Casey Family

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and Native American tribes, direct services, resources for policymakers, and research and analysis to improve the child welfare system.

Doris Duke Foundation

The [Doris Duke Foundation](#) was built on the funds that James Buchanan Duke, the founder of the American Tobacco and Duke Energy Companies, passed down to his only child, Doris Duke. Child wellbeing is one of the foundation's priorities, with an emphasis on transforming the child welfare system to make prevention more of a priority.

The foundation seeks to strengthen and support families before they get caught up in the child welfare system, and its recent initiative, Opportunities for Prevention & Transformation Initiatives ([OPT-In for Families](#)), aims to do just that. The three-year, \$33 million initiative supports prevention-oriented child welfare programs already underway at four sites around the country. These approaches include, for example, providing direct cash payments to families when a lack of resources puts children at risk. Another established a call line that families can access when they face a problem so they can get help before a minor issue escalates to a crisis. [The Duke Endowment](#) and the [Aviv Foundation](#) are also providing support for OPT-In for families.

Conrad N. Hilton Foundation

This global foundation, now one of the largest family foundations in the world, was created by the founder of Hilton Hotels. The [Conrad N. Hilton Foundation](#) includes [foster youth](#) among its many funding areas, dedicating more than \$25 million in 2023. Aiming to support both foster youth and those aging out of the system, Hilton maintains a specific focus on Atlanta, Los Angeles and New York City. The foundation's [foster youth initiative](#) invests in "direct services for foster youth and their caregivers; systems change efforts; building

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and research and evaluation.

The Hilton Foundation was also among the funders that backed a \$47.5 million [Audacious Project](#) award to child welfare reform organization [Think of Us](#) in 2023. Think of Us seeks to incorporate the experiences and voices of young people involved in the system, while also strengthening policies that prioritize placing children with trusted relatives whenever possible. The Annie E. Casey, Doris Duke and Aviv foundations also contributed to the award.

Blue Meridian Partners

Among the ever-expanding list of pooled funding vehicles popping up throughout the philanthrosphere, [Blue Meridian Partners](#) is among the most prominent, and pursues a mission to “transform the life trajectories of young people and families in poverty.” Its method: Identify successful antipoverty strategies, and then provide significant funding to scale them by pooling partners’ resources. Those partners include a long list of major philanthropies and megadonors, including the [Ballmer Group](#), the Gates Foundation, MacKenzie Scott and the [William and Flora Hewlett Foundation](#).

Among the 12 initiatives Blue Meridian Partners is seeking to scale as part of its [Nationwide Solutions](#) portfolio are two that address flaws in the current child welfare system: [Youth Villages](#) and [Wendy’s Wonderful Kids](#). Youth Villages’ LifeSet program supports young people as they make the transition out of foster care. Its Intercept program works to keep kids out of foster care or to reunite them with their families as quickly as possible. Families in Intercept have shown a 53% decrease in the likelihood of placement in foster care compared with children not involved with the program. Meanwhile, Wendy’s Wonderful Kids, a program of the [Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption](#), works to find permanent homes for children in foster care, particularly those who can be hard to place — teens, siblings and young people with special needs.

The [foundation](#) started by Jeff and Tricia Raikes, who met when they worked for Microsoft, prioritizes [housing stability for youth](#) in its funding. The foundation recognizes that young people who have had involvement with the child welfare or youth criminal justice systems are at particularly high risk of housing instability and homelessness. Mental health plays a role, too, as Tricia Raikes pointed out in an [IP guest post](#) discussing the interconnected systems that too often land young people on the streets.

The nonprofits working in these diverse but overlapping areas typically find themselves competing for scarce dollars. As Casey Trupin, the director of housing stability for youth at the Raikes Foundation, told IP last year for an article on [students experiencing homelessness](#), “I think we’ve unwittingly been pushed into a situation where we’re fighting over breadcrumbs, and if we can do some aligned work and help the advocates do more aligned work, we think that there’s going to be far better outcomes.”

To cultivate that aligned work, Raikes helped launch the [Fund for the Education Success of Students Experiencing Homelessness, Child Welfare, and Juvenile Justice \(FES\)](#). FES is part of the [Youth Transition Funders Group](#), a network of funders that supports “the wellbeing and economic success of young people ages 14 to 25,” particularly foster youth, young people who have experienced homelessness, and those with youth justice system involvement. Many of the other funders on this list are also network members, including both Annie E. Casey and Casey Family Programs, Doris Duke Charitable Foundation, Conrad N. Hilton Foundation, the Raikes Foundation and the Walter S. Johnson Foundation.

Walter S. Johnson Foundation

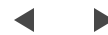
This [foundation](#) has a somewhat lower profile than most of those featured here, but it stands out because support for “transition-aged foster and other vulnerable youth” is its primary focus. It works

Foundation funded more than \$2.1 million in grants to organizations serving transition-age youth. The foundation is part of the Youth Transition Funder Group and FES (see above).

Anthony and Jeanne Pritzker Family Foundation

One of the many philanthropic vehicles of the sprawling Pritzker clan, the [Anthony and Jeanne Pritzker Family Foundation](#) includes foster children among its program areas, along with education, environment and other causes. The goal of its Pritzker Foster Care Initiative is to reduce the number of children in foster care; it works primarily in Southern California. It backs a number of organizations that support foster youth, including [Foster Nation](#), which offers transitional youth mentorship and employment opportunities. Its Meal Nation program provides free meals to foster youth facing food insecurity in college. The foundation also supports the [RightWay Foundation](#), which offers transition-age foster youth a variety of services, including housing assistance and a program called “Operation Emancipation” that builds basic life and stress-management skills, as [IP reported](#) recently.

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