

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In his 2001 landmark book, *The Broken Hearth*, author William J. Bennett noted that, “widespread family breakdown is bound to have a pervasive and debilitating impact not only on the quality of life, but on the vitality of the body politic; the breakdown of the family has already dragged innumerable children and adults into the very opposite of personal happiness.” Simply stated, the breakdown of the American family has caused more problems—physical, mental, emotional, social, economical, and psychological—than any other affliction in our history.

This social epidemic has grown at an alarming rate since 1900. In 2007, it grew 11% from the previous year. Factors such as a difficult economy, increased poverty, rising education costs, drugs and alcohol, and severe peer pressure are only several issues that are potential roadblocks to the success of a contemporary American family. Now, more than ever, socioeconomic conditions play a primary role in the breakdown of nuclear families. Bennett notes, “no doubt because of the presumption we place on personal happiness, many of us invest hopes in our spouses and families that can never be realized, expecting them to meet all our needs. As a result, we become frustrated and disillusioned and give up on family life entirely, never allowing it to become what it can be: a sanctuary, a setting of intimacy, companionship, deep friendship, and a place to learn patience, grace, and the joy of giving oneself fully.”

In 2007, more than one million American children were in alternative care as a result of the frightening breakdown of families. Nearly seven times that many children remained with their biological family, but lived below the poverty standard. Over three million reports of child abuse or neglect were filed in 2007, and nearly 35% of these reports were found as indicated child abuse¹. A fact becoming blatantly obvious, the breakdown of American families continues to grow at an ever-increasing rate each year. As a result, an increasing number of children are placed in alternative care such as kinship homes, foster care, and other restrictive environments each year.

As the need for quality alternative care continues to increase, state agencies are limited in their options to provider agencies that lack efficient and well-maintained programs and facilities. Ultimately these deficiencies decrease the quality of care given to children. While the purpose they serve is admirable and the work they accomplish is useful, there are many opportunities for the improvement and refinement of these programs and enterprises to achieve the goal of increasing the overall quality of life for American children and families.

¹Courtesy of the US Department of Justice in partnership with ChildHelp, a national child abuse prevention agency

The Thomas Organization is proud to offer Pennsylvania Children and Youth Agencies a new foster care option, the Thomas Foster Care Agency (TFCA). TFCA was developed in response to the overwhelming evidence provided from many personnel in the social service field that demonstrated a disturbing lack of high-quality and efficient foster care provider options. For the first time in years, or perhaps ever, a private company has accepted the challenge of redesigning a foster care program that meets current DPW standards, but goes to great lengths through careful attention to detail in order to meet the needs of today's continually declining social welfare system.

The TFCA program is based on Vance Packard's theory of child rearing, which is marked by many elements of positive interaction, self-esteem building, and the creation of an unshakable sense of safety. Our program offers maximum opportunities for foster children to be included in stable and exemplary families. While children are placed with these families, our program also includes the most positive reinforcement and self-esteem building elements in the social service industry. The TFCA program is the most accessible and beneficial for foster children in Pennsylvania.

In addition to maintaining these excellent standards for foster children, TFCA is also committed to discovering, developing, and managing the state's finest foster homes. We will maintain an aggressive recruitment effort to meet the growing need for more quality foster homes. TFCA also is committed to paying the industry's highest family per diem, mileage reimbursement, clothing allowance, and recreational funds. We do not consider our foster care program to be a vehicle to earn maximum profit. As we studied other providers, it was very clear that so many children and foster families were *nickel-and-dimed* that the resulting effect was a dramatic decrease in service quality, which was typically manifested in decreased happiness among the children and foster families, which ultimately threatened the success of the placement. While these foster care agencies have provided a great service to Pennsylvania children, they are inefficient and outdated. Their lack of a well-performing program is ultimately underwritten by a decline in service, as their families and staff are left underpaid, facilities are outdated, and file systems are erroneous and difficult to manage.

TFCA is proud to maintain the industry's most accessible, reliable, and efficient program that minimizes agency interference to children, families, and county workers. The result is a significant increase in service quality, which ultimately benefits foster children. This program improvement is, in large part, attributed to our digital reporting and case management system. TFCA is proud to be the first foster care provider to offer county agencies the industry's most efficient, well-managed, and reliable file system.

This DPW and HIPPA compliant system makes it possible for county workers to have unlimited access to every detail about a placement. The system also reduces the amount of case management *busywork* by nearly 500%, making it possible for TFCA Case Managers to spend more time working directly for the foster child and family. The resulting effect is that TFCA Case Managers become more closely integrated with county workers, as their primary responsibility is shifted from an internally-focused struggle of private agency compliance and regulation to accepting a larger role in facilitating the necessary casework that is directed by the county worker.

In addition to its excellent and efficient program, TFCA is also benefited by a close corporate partnership with the Thomas Institute of Well-Being, including the area's leading in-home family rehabilitative service provider, Family Development Consultants. This partnership makes it possible for a county agency to purchase services for biological families in order to facilitate reunification with placed foster children. The Thomas Organization stands firmly behind the principle that the ultimate goal of the social system is to improve families, and when it is appropriate, the focus should be entirely on improving existing family conditions in order for children to return and remain at home with an improved quality of life. These combined resources are a powerful method to facilitate and inspire reunification while a child is placed in an excellent foster home.

The Thomas Foster Care Agency provides the most complete, efficient, and child-focused standards of care. We humbly accept the awesome responsibility of assuming temporary care for children in order to develop esteem, satisfaction, and personal happiness. As Bennett mentions in his book, *"the state has a manifest interest in promoting the kind of stability that results in sound marriages and strong families. I am skeptical that we must stick to inherently flawed policies because we lack confidence in people's capacity to change. The burden of proof ought to rest not on those who would try something new, but on those who support policies that have helped to destroy large parts of an entire generation."*

Submitted respectfully and earnestly,



Michael G. Thomas
President & CEO