

Fixing Massachusetts' troubled foster care system

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Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

Last week, the death of a 2-year-old foster child in Auburn, Massachusetts, drew widespread attention to the state's troubled child welfare system. As criticism of its Department of Children and Families continues to mount, we spoke with Northeastern professors Elise Dallimore and Christie Rizzo. Dallimore, an associate professor of

communication studies and a foster parent herself, studies the role of communication in the process of organizational learning, including methods for enhancing organizational development activities. Rizzo, an associate professor of applied psychology who served as the assistant director of the Juvenile Mental Health Clinic at the Rhode Island Family Court, studies the prevention of high-risk behaviors among adolescents in the juvenile justice and child welfare systems.

Do you believe the recent criticism leveled at the Massachusetts Department of Children and Families is warranted?

Dallimore: As an educator who requires students to be skilled in utilizing data to improve organizational decision-making, I am deeply troubled by the lack of assessment done in this country, and particularly in the state of Massachusetts, to document and then share best practices for enhancing the quality of foster care. The public hears stories in the press of foster [children](#) who suffer abuse, neglect, and even death while in foster care in Massachusetts. What they do not hear are the frustrations of many committed social workers, lawyers, and child advocates who are constrained by policies, procedures, and state-mandated requirements that, based on their professional training and experience, they know to be counter productive if not downright dangerous. My experience would suggest that many [social workers](#) are chronically overworked and under-resourced only to find their efforts scrutinized by an otherwise disinterested and fault-finding public, including stakeholders with competing and mutually-exclusive self interests.

Rizzo: The situation is incredibly complex. When a child is harmed under DCF's watch, it is natural to assume that failures in the system are solely to blame for what has taken place. However, that assumption is based on the notion that it is possible to accurately predict the safety of a

home environment every time. I would argue that, even when the conditions of the system are perfect, when foster homes are continually reevaluated and data are leveraged to make the placement decision, it is still not possible to be right every time. This is the first hurdle and it is a big one. A second hurdle relates to pragmatics. We are plagued by a dearth of available foster families with whom to place children. A third hurdle relates to the flow of children into the [child welfare](#) system—such as the rapid increase caused by the opioid epidemic in Massachusetts and nationwide. When the flow of children into the system increases, the system must care for them despite having the same resources, staffing, training, and foster placements that it had when fewer children were in care.

In light of recent events, what changes should be made to improve the foster care system?

Dallimore: I see a broken DCF system without a data-based plan or infrastructure for more effectively achieving its fundamental mandate. There is a need for our state to more effectively track and measure current foster practices and to direct attention to benchmarking data, which will help identify best practices elsewhere in the country. There are a number of states that have recently made significant gains in the quality of foster care, such as Virginia, Colorado, Utah, and even Florida, which has historically performed poorly alongside Massachusetts. We need political leaders and a general population who are not only genuinely committed to better understanding the challenges faced by our foster system, but equally committed to addressing those challenges.

Rizzo: It is vitally important that DCF has adequate resources to hire the proper number of staff needed to manage the number of children entering and exiting the system at any one time. Staff should be properly

credentialed and receive appropriate training for the work that they are being asked to do. They should not be asked to carry more cases than is feasible given the expectations of their job. Staff also need to have timely access to all relevant data regarding [foster parents](#) and the children they care for. All of this requires a streamlined system of communication and oversight. Lastly, the quality, adequacy, and availability of resources and training for foster parents should be regularly improved and evaluated.

What is the role and the importance of a foster parent?

Dallimore: The most fundamental role of a foster parent is as a social advocate. As a foster parent myself, I believe my responsibility is to be a committed advocate for any child placed in my home and entrusted to my care. In attempting to successfully fulfill this role, I have found myself defending a child's interest against opposition posed by medical and educational professionals, other well-meaning but often uninformed community stakeholders, and even an occasional DCF social worker who has not acted in a child's best interest. My personal goal as a foster parent is to both empower and enable one of the most disregarded and disenfranchised segments of our population.

Rizzo: Foster parents are invaluable. They volunteer to care for children in their own home until those children are reunited with their biological family, are adopted, or can live independently. Frequently, the amount of time that a child will remain in foster care is unknown, so foster parents are expected to tolerate that uncertainty. What's more, many children and adolescents in [foster care](#) present with multiple psychosocial and mental health problems. They have a higher and more complicated burden of disease than other youth including physical, mental, developmental, behavioral, and social-emotional concerns. For

this reason, it is the hope that foster parents can provide a home environment that is predictable, caring, and stable so that youth who have experienced trauma, loss, and stress have a chance to feel safe and cared for.

Provided by Northeastern University

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