

SMALL VICTORIES

How the Bridge Builders keep one
neighborhood's children safe.

The Bridge Builders
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Bridge Builders Funders:

- The Child Welfare Fund
- Open Society Institute
- New York Community Trust
- Sills Family Foundation
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- Oak Foundation
- Ira W. Decamp Foundation/JPMorgan
- FAR Fund
- Clark Estates Foundation
- Administration for Children's Services

Bridge Builders Partners:

- Alianza Dominicana
- The Bronx Defenders
- CES 11
- Child Welfare Organizing Project
- Citizens Advice Bureau
- Highbridge Community Life Center
- Legal Services New York/Bronx
- Woodycrest Center for Human Development, Inc.
- Agenda for Children Tomorrow
- Fund for Social Change

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For Jane Wilson* life was, literally, an uphill climb.

Eight-months into a high-risk pregnancy, Wilson lived in a homeless shelter at the bottom of the hill. Her six-year-old son, Billy, went to school at the top of the hill. There was no public transportation. And she had another child, age 15 months, to care for.

So every morning, Jane Wilson had to climb the hill with her children, in order to get Billy to school. When Ms. Wilson no longer could climb to the top of the hill, her son started missing school.

And another problem loomed: Who would take care of Ms. Wilson's children when she went into labor?

In most neighborhoods, the school would have called the Administration for Children's Services.

Anne Williams-Isom, ACS Associate Commissioner for Community Affairs, says she has no doubt what would have happened in what she calls "the olden days" – the late 1990s: "I'm sure ACS would have come in and said: 'educational neglect.'"

At a minimum, Ms. Wilson and her children would have been subject to a traumatic investigation. At worst, the children might have wound up in foster care. And after Ms. Wilson got her children back -- or, rather, after her children got their mother back -- she might still be living at the bottom of the hill. Or maybe she'd be homeless because, without her children, she might not qualify to live in the shelter.

ACS has changed a lot since it was created early in 1996. Williams-Isom says

* All names of families helped by the Bridge Builders have been changed.

she thinks the agency often responds better to such cases everywhere. But in one neighborhood, a better response is especially likely.

Ms. Wilson's story takes place in the Highbridge section of the Bronx – specifically, it takes place in one of three census tracts where schools have another option.

Instead of calling ACS, they can contact the Bridge Builders. That's what Billy's school did. With Ms. Wilson's permission the school got in touch with Meredith Levine, a social worker with the Citizens Advice Bureau, one of eight community agencies that are part of the Bridge Builders program.*

Levine works intensively with two elementary schools in the neighborhood, CES 11 and CES 126. She spends one day a week at each, conferring with faculty and staff, meeting with parents and children.

After Levine met with Ms. Wilson and discussed her service needs, she arranged for Ms. Wilson and her children to move to another shelter – at the top of the hill, near the school. This shelter also allowed the children's father to move back in with the family. (He had been living at a separate men-only shelter) – solving the problem of who would watch the children when Mom went into labor.

Levine helped the family. With the involvement of Ms. Wilson the children were saved from all the risks of foster care.

* Participating agencies are the Administration for Children's Services, Alianza Dominicana, The Bronx Defenders, CES 11, Child Welfare Organizing Project, Citizens Advice Bureau, Highbridge Community Life Center, Legal Services New York/Bronx, and Woodycrest Center for Human Development, Inc.

and she saved New York City taxpayers some money. At a minimum, they saved the cost of an ACS investigation. And they may have saved \$32,850 – the minimum cost for placing two children in foster care for a year.¹

It was one more small victory for the Bridge Builders, an ambitious multi-year project designed to answer one simple question: What would happen if child welfare were done right? What if many, if not all of the services everyone says families need actually were available? What if the waiting lists disappeared? What if families caught up in the system had lawyers with the time and resources to mount a real defense? And what if you brought all this to bear in the neighborhood that, proportionately, loses more of its children to foster care than any other in the City?

The Bridge Builders initiative is answering those questions. The project is a collaboration between ten foundations* and ACS, with an annual budget of about \$1 million. The funders play an active and ongoing role in shaping and overseeing the project, which is administered by the Fund for Social Change.

The project's mission is "to decrease the likelihood of child maltreatment and placement outside the family through supportive services that respect and support family functioning and increase the well-being of resident families."

Specific goals are to reduce the overall occurrence of abuse and neglect as well as the number of children who enter foster care for the first time, the number who must re-enter foster care and the length of time children stay in foster care.

* The Child Welfare Fund, the Open Society Institute, the New York Community Trust, the Sills Family Foundation, The Annie E. Casey Foundation, Hedge Funds Care, the Oak Foundation, the Ira W. Decamp Foundation, the FAR Fund, and Clark Family Estates.

And it's already succeeding. According to ACS statistics, the number of children taken from their parents in the three census tracts targeted by the project in 2004 declined by more than 15 percent over the previous year. At the same time, a prime measure of child safety, the proportion of children who have to return to foster care after having been sent home, was cut by 60 percent.

The problems afflicting America's child welfare systems are well known. Everyone has seen the headlines about children left in dangerous homes. Less well known is the problem of taking children from homes that are safe, or could be made safe, if families get the right kinds of help.

Everybody talks about "prevention," but the concrete help families really need often is not available. So instead, children wind up in foster care, a system which, according to one recent study in the Pacific Northwest, fails 80 percent of the children who enter it. The study found that only 20 percent of foster care alumni were "doing well." Using an elaborate mathematical model, the authors concluded that no matter how good a job a child welfare agency did, those poor outcomes could be improved by no more than 22.2 percent.²

And the more time caseworkers spend on children who don't need to be in foster care, the less time they have to find children in real danger, who really do need to be taken from dangerous homes.

So while there are some children for whom removal from parents is absolutely essential to ensure their safety, agencies like ACS, which know the limits of substitute care, are encouraging safe, proven alternatives.

Compounding the problem: the stereotypes about birth parents. Since the stories that make headlines involve parents who brutally beat, torture or kill their chil-

dren, a lot of people believe that's what most parents who lose their children to foster care are like.

In fact, they're a lot more likely to be people like Jane Wilson.

In recent years, ACS has made a lot of progress. Since 1998, the City has cut the number of children taken from their parents by 60 percent – with no compromise of safety, as evidenced by reabuse of children left in their own homes, and the rate at which children returned from foster care have to be placed again. Bridge Builders marks the next step – bringing a concentrated array of services to bear in one of the neighborhoods with the highest risk of foster care placement in the city.

“We’re all just a couple of steps away from being the other person we think we’re nothing like.”

**--Meta Bodewes,
Family Support Program Director**

“People get pushed to the brink,” says Meta Bodewes, Bridge Builders family support program director. “If you’re a 25-year-old mom and you’ve been living in poverty and have a low education level, and suddenly the welfare rules change on you and you’re expected to follow all these rules, but you can’t because of your education level, and maybe your child has a disability. You’re degraded by the system; they cut you off public assistance the instant you don’t call. You didn’t grow up understanding half the concepts they think you’re supposed to know right away...”

To Bodewes, it’s like a final exam month at college that never ends. “You don’t get any sleep for three weeks around

finals. Then you go home and sleep for two weeks – and realize what a walking zombie you were when you had no sleep. Imagine not sleeping and being stressed out for all the time your child is growing up. Even the best parents have thought: My God, I want to spank my child. How do we expect people under so much stress not to do it? ... We’re all just a couple of steps away from being the other person we think we’re nothing like.”

Until leaving to go to graduate school, Shaolee Sen was Parent Liaison Coordinator for The Bronx Defenders, one of two Bridge Builders partners providing legal services. She recalled one of their clients, who is not from Highbridge, Paula Cartwright. She has two children, aged eight and three.

In the summer of 2004, child care became a nightmare. Paula found out that her regular child care provider was abusing her children. Of course, she stopped using that provider immediately. But then what? As she searched for a new provider she patched together a network of sitters. One day one of them didn’t show. She found an older teenager in her building who regularly cares for children, and she left for work.

“By the time she got out of the subway at midtown,” Sen says, “there was a message on her cell phone from the police saying they found the children home alone and took the children into custody. Every time we talk, she says: ‘I was trying the best I can. I had a new boss, I was risking losing my income. Everything that I’m doing is for my children.’”

The children were placed in separate foster homes, and it took four months to get them returned.

The nerve center for the Bridge Builders is the Highbridge Community Life Center storefront at 164th Street and Ogden

Avenue.

From the moment the Center opens each morning, nobody slows down. When the Bridge Builders staff are not out in the community, meeting with families, consulting at schools or doing presentations to community groups, they're working the phones, lining up help for families or coordinating with all the other people who enter a family's life once ACS gets involved -- or might get involved

"I've never worked somewhere like this before," says Bodewes. "The family support workers, they work a lot more than they're paid for. They get knocks on the door at 10 p.m., or midnight."

Bodewes recalled what happened when family support worker Joanne Daughtry heard through the grapevine that ACS had removed a child from someone in the neighborhood. "Joanne spent almost 20 hours searching for that person. It was like her mission. All she did for a week; she went here, she went there. Finally she found her, and was able to engage her in services."

"We come from the community, we know what's going on," says Daughtry, who lives in a 700-family development where she is vice president of the Tenant Association. She knows her neighbors, and she knows when a young single mother is having problems.

"I see a mother cashing WIC checks, so she's my target. I'm observing her. I say 'Hi. You OK? Got stuff for the baby?' Then one day she'll run out of milk. She'll knock on the door and ask for milk. Then she is willing to ask for help.

"I can talk with them," Daughtry says. "First I come to them as a neighbor and get them to open up. Then I let them know what I'm doing and how I can help. "When you say ACS they're so petrified. I have to build up trust. I let them come to my house and chitchat; then I tell them what we can do for them."

What Bridge Builders can do is provide help geared to the specific needs of each family. And that is unusual.

"If you look at the service plans most parents get you could go: 'wow: everyone needs parenting, everyone needs anger management and everyone needs a drug test and individual counseling,'" says Kara Finck, an attorney with the Bronx Defenders.

But if a case is diverted to Bridge Builders, they can build a custom-tailored plan. If a child is in danger of being removed because of housing conditions, Bridge Builders will try to find better housing. If the children are hungry Bridge Builders will help the parents find them food. If there's a substance abuse problem, Bridge Builders will help get a parent into treatment. And if the parent really needs counseling and parent education, Bridge Builders provides it.

**"We come from the
community, we know what's
going on."**

**--Joanne Daughtry,
Family Support Worker**

Similarly, legal assistance for Bridge Builders clients is not limited to family court.

The other legal services partner in Bridge Builders, Legal Services New York/Bronx, maintains a legal advice line specifically for Highbridge residents and Bridge Builders staff.

One caller was an immigrant mother who, at first, said only that she was about to have her utilities cut off. It turned out she had just gotten her children returned by ACS, but that wasn't reflected in her public assistance grant. She also needed health insurance. LSNY/Bronx helped with all of

these things.

Jill Siegel, Director of Litigation for LSNY/Bronx calls it “preventive lawyering.”

She recalled a mother who called them, frantic, because ACS was threatening to take away children the agency had just returned. The reason: In order to help pay the rent, the mother had taken in a roommate. But she didn’t know that the roommate had a history with ACS that the agency felt made her a danger to the children.

In addition to representing the mother in Family Court, LSNY/Bronx went to Housing Court to help the mother evict the roommate.

The Bridge Builders can provide what families in the community need because the community has been an integral part of the project from the start, says Charles Woods, parent liaison for CES 11, and co-chair of the project’s executive committee. “From the outset, when we designed Bridge Builders, what was beautiful about it is that the funders ... made it a stipulation that it had to be community-driven. We didn’t want an agency run by a number of professionals who, once the sun went down, went into another community.”

And Bridge Builders will connect parents with others who’ve been through what they’re going through. Partnering with the Child Welfare Organizing Project, Bridge Builders offers support groups to parents at risk of losing their children and those whose children have been taken.

“We zero in on where the barriers are,” says Bridge Builders Project Director Francis Ayuso, who runs one of the support groups. Ayuso also is ACS’ Bronx Borough Coordinator for Neighborhood-Based Services. “The first part is the whole emotional piece, helping the parents cope with the separation from their children,” says Ayuso. “The second piece is helping parents with the concrete tasks they need to accomplish

for their kids to return home. If they don’t have housing, we make sure the application is in for housing and they start looking for housing, if it’s a parenting class, we make sure they go.”

“We didn’t want an agency run by number of professionals who, once the sun went down, went into another community.”

--Charles Woods, Co-Chair,
Bridge Builders Executive Committee

Another support group is run by parents who, themselves, once lost children to the system, and were trained in advocacy by CWOP.

At one meeting a mother talked about the trauma of having ACS back in her life.

Alice Franklin’s children had been returned after living for many years with their grandmother. The separation worsened the normal tensions and communication problems that arise in the teenage years.

“I’m scared for my daughter,” said Ms. Franklin, who said the 13-year-old is “blossoming all over. I want her to know I do love her. But she’s scared to come out and talk to me. She’d rather talk to her friends and her teachers.”

That’s not unusual for a teenager, of course. But Ms. Franklin said her 13-year-old told someone at her school that “she was scared of me.”

Probably because the children had been removed in the past, the school called ACS. The child was not removed, but Ms. Franklin and the family are under ACS supervision.

“Now, all of a sudden I have to be

humiliated again,” Ms. Franklin said. “I’m trying to stop all of that so we can be a happy family like we used to be.”

Ms. Franklin also felt guilty. She said she’d been told her child had learning problems, and she assumed it was because she was using cocaine when the child was born.

“The people here are like family. I know I’m not going into unfamiliar territory.”
--Bridge Builders Client

Other members of the support group quickly reassured Ms. Franklin, saying that some children simply don’t test well, and in other cases schools make assumptions about children who’ve been in foster care.

And one of the facilitators for the group, Tracey Carter, explained that there are any number of reasons a child may have learning problems that have nothing to do with past parental drug use.

There is a wealth of scientific evidence to back up that statement. But Carter had another reason to know. She had won her own struggle with addiction, and got some of her children back from foster care – including a child who had been born with cocaine in her system.

“She’s an honor student,” Carter said. “She plays the cello.”

“Don’t give up,” Carter told Ms. Franklin. “Don’t let what happened in the past distract you from getting to know your daughter.”

“I’ve been through it,” Carter said. “I know how it is to have ACS in your life. Now I get to help other parents.”

Word about what the Bridge Builders can offer is getting around.

“Everybody is coming to the store-

front,” says Rosa Rosado, Assistant Director of CWOP. “Some parents, even before ACS comes in, feel something’s going on in the family, they fear ACS will get involved, so to prevent that, they walk in.”

That’s what Susan White did. Under enormous stress and facing eviction, Ms. White admits she took it out one morning on her eight-year-old daughter. The child’s school reported Ms. White for excessive corporal punishment. A social worker friend urged her to get help before ACS got involved.

So Ms. White came to the storefront. She joined a support group and signed up for counseling and anger management classes. “By the time ACS said we want you to do this, I was already doing it.

“The people here are like family,” Ms. White said. “I know I’m not going into unfamiliar territory.”

“Someone really needs to broker on behalf of these families,” says Ayuso. He recalled one case in which all a parent needed was a psychological evaluation. The foster care agency handling the case said it couldn’t be done for six weeks. “We said we would pay for a private psychologist to do the evaluation so she could get it on a timely basis and move on.”

Nanette Schorr, director of the Family and Education Law Unit at LSNY/Bronx, recalled a father who was granted temporary custody of his son, a disabled child who’d been in foster care “for a good while” as a result of a neglect allegation against the mother.

But ACS was threatening to take the child again because the agency questioned whether the father could give his son the special help he needed.

“We did a lot of advocacy with ACS and we had a law student working closely with the father on education issues, helping him get his son into a special summer camp and getting the right special education ser-

vices,” Schorr said. “He won full custody of his son – and he’s now working for Bridge Builders.”

And where services don’t exist, the Bridge Builders will help create them.

One of the biggest problems is the one faced by Paula Cartwright – child care. How is a young mother supposed to get off welfare, learn skills or take advantage of a job opportunity if there is no one to watch their children? asks Joanne Daughtry.

She and other family support workers helped find a solution. They found a privately-run day care center in the neighborhood that wouldn’t take children from families on public assistance. That also meant the center was nearly empty, serving only 20 children. Daughtry and her fellow family support workers persuaded the center to start taking public assistance clients. Today, the center serves 110 children.

It’s early afternoon at School 126, and Meredith Levine is meeting with another mother who is “at the bottom of the hill.” Anne Jones was referred to Levine by another Bridge Builders partner, the Woodycrest Center for Human Development, which has an office at the school.

Ms. Jones was on welfare, and taking part in a welfare-to-work program. Then she became homeless and had to live in a shelter. She missed meetings of her work program while she searched for housing. That got her sanctioned off welfare, and she was waiting for the results of a fair hearing. The sanction meant she couldn’t get a voucher under a city program that would help her find housing.

Then the room she shared with her husband and children at the shelter was burglarized. Afraid of another robbery, she was carrying everything she owned in a large backpack. Ms. Jones wanted to move to another shelter, but that wasn’t allowed while

she was sanctioned. Since she couldn’t move, she wanted at least to have the locks changed on her room, but the shelter wouldn’t do it because she didn’t have the right kind of police report about the burglary.

And her husband was blaming her for the crime, because, he said, she socialized too much with others at the shelter.

Now, Anne had \$11 to her name and she needed food for her children, and herself. By 3:00pm, she still hadn’t eaten all day.

It took more than an hour just to find out all the problems. Then Levine, Woodycrest Program Coordinator Janet Williams and her staff, and Ms. Jones, started working on solutions.

They checked to see if a nearby food pantry was open, or if Ms. Jones would have to go to a pantry two bus rides away. They made sure Ms. Jones had the i.d. she needed to get food. And Levine worked with Ms. Jones to come up with a food budget for that last \$11 – just in case the pantries couldn’t help for another couple of days.

Levine asked Anne if she thought her husband was right to blame her for the robbery.

“Sort of,” she said. “I’m a friendly person.”

“No. It’s not your fault,” Levine said. And she got Anne to agree to talk to people at Sanctuary for Families, which counsels people in potentially abusive relationships, even where there has been no violence. Sanctuary for Families has something else: A program to change locks for free.

No one had called ACS in this case, or threatened to. But a family of crime victims living in a shelter with a stressful marriage and little food left is a family that could be called in at any time. It’s a family “at the bottom of the hill.” That afternoon, Levine, and the Woodycrest staff helped Anne begin the climb up.

They and CAB Family Advisor Arleen Berry continued to help Anne, cutting through red tape and assisting her to do something she'd never done before: search for her own apartment. The family moved in over the summer. Bridge Builders also helped Anne enroll the children in summer camp.

Maria Simmons, parent coordinator for Woodycrest, recalls how they helped a mother who was a victim of domestic violence. Mary's boyfriend often would not let Mary care for her daughter or even let her out of the house. But she got to the Sisters Healing Circle support group at Woodycrest and, after saying little for several weeks, told the staff the whole story.

In "the olden days" ACS often removed children in such situations, and accused both parents of "engaging in domestic violence." Prodded by a class-action lawsuit, and the recognition of the harm such removals do to children, ACS has significantly improved its handling of such cases. And by the time Mary came to Woodycrest, they didn't have to involve child welfare authorities at all.

"We got ... support services for her," said Simmons. When Mary decided to call the police, Woodycrest was able to help. "She was able to go to court and get a restraining order." Instead of seeing her children removed, the *abuser* was removed from the home.

Meredith Levine began the morning checking on another of the Bridge Builders' small victories: A child who had been absent 26 times in the first few months of the school year. He's 13 – and repeating fifth grade for the third time.

His mother wanted the boy to go to school, but had no idea how to get him there.

Levine met with mother and child and negotiated a contract. Goals were set and rewards established for attending school

and getting a good report card. For the past six weeks, the boy missed only two days of school.

Now, he needs to pass the standardized tests required for him to finally make it out of fifth grade. Levine and guidance counselor Bea Johnson worked on ways to help him get access to an online service that would help him practice.

"They're a godsend. [No more] waiting lists from here to Jerusalem."

--Coreen King,
Guidance Counselor, CES 11

"They're wonderful," Nancy Santiago, parent coordinator at CES 126, says of Bridge Builders "It makes a great difference. I've thrown who knows how many cases at them."

"They're a godsend," says Coreen King, guidance counselor at the other school served by Bridge Builders, CES 11. When she needs help for a child, the help is there right away, she says. No more "waiting lists from here to Jerusalem."

King says many of the parents she deals with had poor school experiences themselves. They either avoid coming to the school when their children have problems, or they are very hostile when they get there.

But Bridge Builders doesn't require the parent to venture into an environment they find hostile and intimidating. When Levine gets a referral she works with two "family advisors" to meet the parents on their own territory. They make home visits. And if no one is home the first time, they'll come back, over and over.

And then, they'll accompany the parent to the school.

Just such an intense effort by Family

Advisor Adriane James persuaded an extremely hostile mother to allow her child to be transferred to a specialized school where the child could get intensive therapy. The child was extremely disruptive and, had the mother not co-operated, the school might have had no choice but to call ACS.

As at CES 126, there is a Bridge Builders partner at CES 11: Alianza Dominicana. Marie Stroud, Beacon Director for Alianza, recalls a case involving a fourth grader who felt her seriously ill sister was monopolizing her mother's attention. When the fourth grader got hurt, she thought her mother didn't care. So she hurt herself again, this time on purpose, trying to cut her arms with a razor or pin.

The school called in the mother and said if her child were not taken to a hospital for psychological tests, they would have to call ACS.

"Our caseworker was in the building," Stroud said. "She translated for the mother and assisted her on what to do. We

set up counseling for the mother and the child and they received extensive counseling."

The mother and daughter were "two people who were very upset with each other who should be embracing each other. We got them to come to terms and stop the blaming."

And no one had to call ACS.

If the Bridge Builders can't get to a family before ACS intervenes, there still is plenty they can do to help.

To understand how much difference Bridge Builders makes, it's crucial to understand how the process works *without* such a program.

All it takes is one phone call to the state's child abuse hotline in Albany to bring ACS into a family's life. That phone call can be anonymous. It can be from a landlord out for revenge or a disgruntled boyfriend or an upset neighbor – or simply someone making

Keeping Children Safe

Before she joined the Administration for Children's Services, the agency's Associate Commissioner for Community Affairs, Anne Williams-Isom, worked for the New York City Police Department. There, she was involved in one of the most acclaimed innovations in police work all over the United States: Community Policing.

Police officers become part of their communities. They get to know the residents and help with problems, large and small, even when they aren't directly related to law enforcement. While tensions sometimes remain, a relationship of mutual hostility comes closer to one of mutual trust. All over America, Community Policing has been widely credited for a significant reduction in crime.

Now, ACS is trying to take a similar approach. The Bridge Builders initiative is showing that the same principles work in child welfare.

The Bridge Builders initiative targets one of the neighborhoods that has been losing more children to foster care than any others. But in the three census tracts where the Bridge Builders concentrates its efforts, the number of children taken from their parents dropped from 44 in 2003 to 37 in 2004. That's a decline of more than 15 percent – greater than the citywide decline of 10.7 percent during the same period.

"Many of these cases are about neglect, and the neglect is because of a parent living in poverty, and not because the parents don't love their kids and want good

things for their kids,” says Williams-Isom. “So the best thing we can do for a child is give an opportunity for the family to raise them in a safe environment.”

“Child safety is the primary concern,” says Charles Woods, who co-chairs the Bridge Builders Executive Committee. “That should not be forsaken to arrive at some numbers to make someone look good.”

And it hasn’t been in Highbridge, where a key safety number also is looking good. An important measure of safety is how often children returned home from foster care have to be placed again. In 2003, 48 percent of the children removed in those three Highbridge census tracts were being returned to foster care. In 2004, that figure dropped to 19 percent.

Marie Stroud of Alianza Dominicana says Bridge Builders partners know children are safe because “we see and monitor them daily and we get to know and build a relationship. Once you build a relationship, you get to know what’s going on.” Alianza staff, for example, see the children in an after school program the organization runs and sees parents at monthly meetings at the school. Stroud says they know the children so well that they can tell if there’s a problem just by how a child responds when asked “How’s it goin’?” Says Stroud: “We listen a lot.”

The importance of taking a “community policing” approach to child welfare can be seen in the role played by schools.

Many reports alleging child maltreatment come from schools, but three quarters of them turn out to be unfounded, Williams-Isom said. The reason: Teachers with real concerns about their students had no place else to turn. Now, the Bridge Builders have given these teachers another option. “We’re not saying don’t call ACS if you see burn marks. But if you see roaches coming out of a child’s bag and the lunch doesn’t look like it’s made correctly, in that case, there is somebody else you can call who really is going to do something.”

Similarly, says Williams Isom, “We’re not going to leave a child in a home if there aren’t things put in place as a safety net. It has to work on both ends. We have the expertise - -you may not think it’s a big deal that there is no milk in the refrigerator for an 18-month-old, but we think it’s a big deal.” But what’s needed, says Williams Isom, is not someone to take away the child, but “somebody to step in and give services.”

To further help schools draw such distinctions, and help teachers, guidance counselors and administrators learn about alternatives, LSNY/Bronx is working on arranging formal weekly meetings at Highbridge schools, beginning with CES 126, where school officials and Bridge Builders representatives would examine each case where the school is considering calling ACS.

“Sometimes a child isn’t getting to school because a parent is a victim of domestic violence and her life is in chaos,” says Nanette Schorr of LSNY/Bronx. “She may need an attorney to represent her in court” in order to get her life in order and get her child back to school.

It hasn’t been easy. In many impoverished neighborhoods, the attitude toward ACS is much like the attitude toward the police before Community Policing. “It’s even tougher than a new marriage,” says Williams-Isom. “It’s like a marriage between two people who have traditionally not gotten along, trying to take the time to get to know each other.

“In the olden days, people used to say [to ACS workers] don’t go to community meetings. ... You don’t want anyone to know what you’re doing wrong. Us giving them permission to be out there and use the community as a resource is

making them feel better about the community; they realize this can help me do my job.”

But the respect has to go both ways, Williams-Isom said. “When I put a group of caseworkers into a Community Board meeting and everybody wants to call them baby snatchers, why would they want to come back?”

And Woods emphasizes that the parents have to do their part: “I didn’t want Bridge Builders to become another resource that would perpetuate dependence,” Woods says. “I felt there should be a *quid pro quo* methodology.”

Woods recalled a case in which the Bridge Builders offered the necessary help, but a mother didn’t do her part. The children were taken and, Woods says, ACS was right. At the same time, it made no sense to make it even harder for the mother to help herself by taking away her housing assistance because the children were gone. So the Bridge Builders stepped in again to preserve that assistance.

“I want ACS to be different,” Williams-Isom says. “I know the only way to be different is to really partner more.” And, Williams-Isom says, that requires something that is difficult for any government agency: “How can we release some of our power, in order to give parents and the community more of an ability to help us figure out how children can be safe?”

an honest mistake. But no one, not even the hotline operator, can demand to know who is making the call.

“We’ve had clients suffer through false report after false report after false report because of a beef that someone else has against them,” says Kara Finck of the Bronx Defenders.

The worker sent to investigate a child abuse complaint wields enormous power. New York State law allows her to remove a child on the spot, entirely on her own authority. The law says this power is supposed to be used only in emergencies. But ACS often has used it when there is no emergency at all, despite a federal court ruling ordering the practice banned³ and a state Court of Appeals ruling taking ACS to task for the practice.⁴

ACS now is moving to change its approach through Placement Decision Meetings, (discussed below) and the Bridge Builders will be part of this initiative. But once a child is removed, it’s at least 72 hours until a parent has a day in court.

And then, it’s hardly a fair fight. On one side is an ACS lawyer who has had at

least 72 hours to prepare a case. He works in a fully-staffed office with secretaries, computers, caseworkers and any other source of expertise he needs. Attorneys serving as guardians *ad litem* for children work for the Legal Aid Society – again, an institutional provider which gives the lawyers support staff and resources.

On the other side is typically an overwhelmed, impoverished parent who, if she has a lawyer at all, just met him in the hallway five minutes before the case was called.

That lawyer’s “office” may be his briefcase. He has no institutional “provider” to back him up. He has no social worker to evaluate the city’s case and offer alternatives or even talk to the parent. He has no money for expert witnesses. He probably doesn’t even have a secretary. After all, you can’t afford all that on \$75 an hour, and that’s all such lawyers are paid.

What can this lawyer do? According to a report from the New York City Public Advocate:

“[W]ithout the benefit of any background information or investigation, the attorney must make a whole host of weighty decisions, only the first of which is whether

to request a ... hearing to challenge the removal. The attorney is faced with a Hobson's choice: proceed with the hearing without sufficient time to prepare, or seek a continuance and require the child to stay in foster care in the interim. More often than not, a good lawyer will opt for the continuance."⁵

And this is the best-case scenario.

"I've been in the elevator in family court and seen a client turn to an attorney and say 'Hi.' And the attorney says: 'Huh?' And the client says: 'You're my lawyer,'" says Kara Finck.

And sometimes, at the first hearing, parents have no lawyer standing beside them at all. In that case, the hearing must be postponed until a lawyer can be found to take the case.

Meanwhile, the child stays in foster care. The parent may not even be able to visit the child. And with postponement after postponement it may be six or seven months before the court even rules on whether ACS was justified in removing the child in the first place.⁶

So even when a lawyer is found, that lawyer can do little more than tell the parent to plead guilty to something and accept the ACS service plan, since contesting the case will only lead to more delays, and she'll probably lose anyway. One study found that parents win these cases on the merits only 1.6 percent of the time. The study found this is not because ACS is 98.4 percent perfect.⁷

For families that find Bridge Builders, there is a more level playing field.

Robert Campbell, whose story first was told by the *New York Non-Profit Press* (NYNP), entered a homeless shelter with his three children. Everyone who enters a shelter is screened for allegations of child maltreatment. And the shelter found one – against his ex-wife.

Though Campbell wasn't living with

his ex-wife, ACS took the children from him anyway. Fortunately, his girlfriend had seen a flier from CWOP. She brought Campbell to the Bridge Builders storefront, where he told his story to Rosa Rosado.

Rosado contacted Bronx Defenders and, as NYNP put it, "Robert suddenly had his own legal team – a lawyer with both the time and the inclination to talk with him about his case, a social worker to do research and co-ordinate service planning and a parent advocate to provide ongoing support."

"We are the counterbalance, and parents need that for this system to function properly."

--Kara Finck, attorney, Bronx Defenders

"We were able to get a ton of information in a very short time. Our parent liaison called shelter workers, we got in touch with relatives in Georgia, our social worker spoke to Robert," says Kara Finck. By the first court date, Bronx Defenders was able to provide all the information to the lawyer for ACS and the children's law guardian.

But the judge was sick that day.

A few days later, however, all parties came together for a "Family Team Meeting," a key strategy in ACS' attempts to reduce foster care placement.

"At the conference, our social worker could really push and argue for the fact that these kids shouldn't have been removed and needed to be back."

In Robert's case, it took two weeks to get his children back. That's fourteen days more time in foster care than his children ever should have had to have endured, but far less time in foster care than they

would endure without Bridge Builders.

New York State has a good set of laws governing child welfare, says Finck. But they only work if all sides have something approximating equal resources. “We are the counterbalance,” says Finck, “and parents need that for this system to function properly.”

At Bronx Defenders, “most of our work is done outside of court,” says Finck. They gather information that ACS and the law guardian may not have, find alternatives to foster care with strangers, such as a suitable relative, and open a dialogue with all parties.

Typical court-appointed lawyers don’t have the time or staff to do any of that – and, even if they did, the ACS caseworker wouldn’t return their phone calls. It’s ACS policy that though its caseworkers and lawyers for *children* can consult all they want, the caseworkers are not allowed to speak to a parent’s lawyer.

But if that lawyer happens to have a social worker on staff, the caseworker *can* talk to the social worker.

The Bronx Defenders also can level the playing field at Family Team Meetings, also sometimes called Family Team Conferences (FTCs).

In theory the meetings are supposed to be a family friendly environment, in which anyone who might be able to help the family – relatives, neighbors, perhaps someone from the local church, sits around a table with ACS to work out a plan.

“But the reality of most of our parents is that they don’t have these resources,” says Shaolee Sen. “That’s why they’re here.” Indeed, many parents don’t have an extended family to rally ‘round them because they are themselves former foster children.

A report from the Citizens Committee for Children of New York, which is monitoring ACS reform efforts, confirms

that the theory behind Family Team Meetings is running ahead of practice. According to the report:

*“Workers who facilitated or participated in the 72-hour Safety and 30-day Permanency FTCs observed did not use the conferences as an opportunity to reassess the reason for the child’s removal, consider whether the conditions that warranted placement had been ameliorated or reconsider whether the child could be returned home. Time spent in 72-hour and 30-day FTCs observed was not used to address permanency questions or to reconsider the need for foster care placement ... ”*⁸

Though not mentioned in the report, one of the reasons might be that parents’ lawyers aren’t allowed in the room. The parent, alone, faces enormous pressure to sign the plan placed in front of her – whether it’s really what she needs or not. The conference, says Kara Finck, can become “an inquisition.”

But, again, if that lawyer has a social worker, and a parent advocate as part of the team – *they* get to go in the room. Thus, because Robert Campbell found Bridge Builders, he had someone by his side at his Family Team Meeting, arguing that his children never should have been taken away in the first place.

Finck recalled a case where ACS, the private foster care agency and others involved in the removal of the children brought ten people to the table. Had the parent been from another neighborhood, she might have faced all ten of them alone.

“But because the family was in the Highbridge Community and already know some of the Highbridge providers, we walked in with ten people as well. Just having those numbers alone changed the tone immediately. All of a sudden the foster care worker sees this person comes from a network of support, and people who can speak about their parenting abilities and their fami-

lies, and it lessens the tension in the room and the anxiety about this family and the children. From that moment on, we're able to move forward."

ACS has begun piloting an approach that takes into consideration some of the concerns of Finck and others. Instead of waiting until after a child is removed from the home to bring everybody together, why not do it beforehand?

That's the theory behind Placement Decision Meetings – a kind of SWAT team approach to keeping families together. The worker or supervisor preparing to remove a child from the home instead gets ACS to call a meeting that very day, sometimes in as little as an hour. For these meetings, not only are parents' lawyers in the room, they're an essential part of the process. Lawyers to represent parents, social workers to help those lawyers and parent advocates are literally on standby, ready to move on a moment's notice.

In part, says Anne Williams-Isom, the meetings are intended to reassure ACS caseworkers that it is safe to leave a child in his or her own home. "CPS workers are not always confident about the prevention out there. PDMs are all about getting the caseworkers into a room and saying: We know there's no milk in the fridge and mom was a couple of minutes late picking up the kids, but don't do the removal and grandma will pick up the four-year-old from pre-school and watch out for the 18-month-old. And mom will go to outpatient."

PDMs began in Central Harlem in the summer of 2005. The plan is to expand them to Highbridge within a year, because the Bridge Builders already have the infrastructure in place to provide the support that families will need at these meetings.

Back at the Highbridge Community Life Center, Joe Jenkins works to help eve-

ryone keep moving forward. As foster care coordinator, he helps parents get the help they need to get their children back. "I can act as a go-between with the caseworker, the foster care agency and the parent," Jenkins says. "Caseworkers have a hard time reaching the parent if the parent is in a shelter. I can walk to the shelter, update the parent and update the caseworker. I accompany the parent when they have important meetings with the foster care agency or in court."

When Hank Robinson walked into the HCLC storefront, he was just looking for someone to observe his next court hearing. Robinson felt the agency that had custody of his daughter had reneged on previous agreements to return her, and he wanted someone present who could be a witness if it happened again.

He got a lot more.

In the crowded courthouse waiting room, Jenkins buttonholed other parties to the case to explain how the Bridge Builders could help. "We're in the community. We're just a couple of blocks away," Jenkins told the ACS attorney handling Robinson's case.

In court, Jenkins explained the Bridge Builders program to the judge, and got two key changes in the service plan. The first change: Instead of the standard requirement for a parenting course and counseling, Bridge Builders would decide if that's what Robinson really needs. And if that *is* what he needs, Bridge Builders will provide it.

The second change: Bridge Builders will supervise visits between Robinson and his daughter.

"We have a more comfortable setting where visits can happen, as opposed to the agency. It's a house-like setting with a kitchen and a living room," Jenkins said. "And we can work with parents to make the visits productive before, during and after."

Robinson also now is in CWOP's

support group for parents with children in foster care.

Along with a place that's more like a house, there's also a garden. The Bridge Builders partners revitalized a community garden across the street from the HCLC storefront. "Parents and children can plant seeds and then come back and watch them grow," says Nanette Schorr.

If there is a theme to Bridge Builders cases when they come to court it could be summed up as "Let *us* do it." Let *us* supervise the visits, provide the counseling etc.

"The problem with a lot of agencies is, they're regimented in their hours, everything has to be done from nine to five," said Kara Finck. "But most people work nine to five." Bridge Builders can tailor the schedule of visits to those needs. When Bridge Builders provides the service, the service will be in the parent's neighborhood. They won't have to go to a sterile office, possibly in another borough, to visit their children. And the services are being provided by an agency in which the family has confidence, not the same agency that has custody of the child and may be recommending against returning that child to the parent.

The Bridge Builders project is still unfamiliar to many of those who work with families caught up in the child welfare system. The judge handling Robert Campbell's case didn't know about it. Neither did the child's law guardian, or the child welfare agency which placed his child. But after hearing about the program the agency caseworker asked if they could refer more cases to the program.

Bridge Builders staff hope to increase their familiarity to others in the system, and their effectiveness by getting one judge assigned to all Highbridge cases.

Sometimes a small victory means restoring contact between a father and son

during the father's final days. That's been the case for Jerry Andrews.

Mr. Andrews has terminal cancer. He moved to the Bronx from another state and wound up living with his son in a shelter. He first came to the HCLC storefront because he needed food. Family support worker Lydia Johnson helped him find a food pantry. Then, in January, 2005, the stress became too much, and Mr. Andrews lashed out at his son. The boy was taken away, straight from school, on a charge of excessive corporal punishment.

For five weeks, Mr. Andrews was denied even visits with his son. The entire experience – moving, living in a shelter, his father's illness and his father lashing out, had scared the boy, and he was afraid of visits, so ACS was demanding a complete psychological evaluation before there could be any. There also was confusion over whether he had legal custody.

Mr. Andrews' court-appointed lawyer had no resources to speed the process. And no one knew how much longer Mr. Andrews would live – and whether the boy would grow up regretting not seeing him in his final days.

Johnson referred Mr. Andrews to the Bronx Defenders, which took over the case. They cut through the red tape and got proof from the child welfare agency in Mr. Andrews' home state that Mr. Andrews has legal custody. They urged the judge to order a visit supervised by a therapist, with the boy's foster mother present, since the boy said he wanted her to be there.

And they began working to see if Mr. Andrews' sister would be willing to provide kinship foster care for the boy.

When Mr. Andrews was hospitalized, Bridge Builders got involved in what Kara Finck called "the very minute logistics" of arranging visits there.

"We were able to humanize the client to the court and get everyone to take a

step back and understand: This is about a father who is dying. Whatever happened on one day is important, but a lot more is going on right now.”

“We were able to humanize the client to the court and get everyone to take a step back and understand: This is about a father who is dying.”

--Kara Finck

And they made sure he was treated like a human being at the hospital. “Joe and [social worker] Jenny Crawford and I went to the hospital after the last court date to let him know people were advocating for him.” At the hospital, Mr. Andrews’ sister told them about how, when she complained that the room was a mess, a nurse replied: “Well, he’s homeless.”

“We made sure he was treated as well as anyone else,” Finck said.

Now, Bridge Builders is working on assuring the sister that she will have the support she needs if she’s willing to care for her nephew after his father’s death.

The word Kara Finck uses to describe what she does most often for her clients isn’t a legal term. It has nothing to do with court dates or appeals. The word she comes back to over and over again is “humanize.”

To the public at large, and to many in the child welfare system, most parents who lose their children to foster care are barely human. Rather they are seen at worst as evil and at best as collections of pathologies. So it’s easy for people who’ve never walked a step in their shoes to think it makes

perfect sense to load them down with meaningless tasks – like the parent of an infant required to take a course on how to parent teenagers, and afraid to stop going because it could be used against her -- and conclude that if they fail at any one task they must not really care.

“I have heard this said to me from all levels; lawyers, social workers, caseworkers: It always comes down to: ‘If you want your children back bad enough you’ll do it,’” says Finck. “And that construct is so destructive to families, to healing, to the reality of the process and way they’re treated during it.

“Most are single parents. They don’t have this great live support network of family resources because if they did they wouldn’t be here. So now they’re alone, their housing may have been changed [If they live in a family shelter, they can be thrown out]. Public Assistance has been changed, and suddenly they wake up all alone.

“People like to think -- and I’ve had judges say this – ‘Your job is to get your kids back.’ Actually, my client’s job is to stay in the shelter so she doesn’t get kicked out, and her job is to go to the [public assistance eligibility] appointment, which is in Brooklyn, and how does she get from Brooklyn to the Bronx in half an hour – and by the way, you’ve scheduled her next court date for her parenting class day, so then she’ll have missed one of the two she can miss.”

Finck laughs at claims that the system bends over backwards for parents, giving them multiple “chances.”

“I’ve never seen anyone bend over backwards for one of my clients. I’ve never even seen them lean over.” Typically, Finck says “they won’t even address my client by name or look the client in the eye.”

Finck recalls a meeting at a children’s psychiatric center. “My client is sitting right next to me, and I keep calling her

by her name. But they keep referring to mom, mom, mom [as though she's not in the room]. And I'm thinking: how would you like me to keep saying 'hey, psychiatrist, psychiatrist.'"

But it's not just individual birth parents who are dehumanized. In some quarters, entire neighborhoods like Highbridge have been written off.

But even in the most crime-plagued neighborhood, most people don't commit crimes. Even in neighborhoods where drug dealers congregate on the corner, most parents are doing everything they can to keep their children away from that corner. Even the poorest communities have neighborhood associations, community-based social service agencies, schools and churches that can form the foundation for helping child protective services keep children safe without forcing those children to leave everyone they know and love. The problem is, child welfare agencies have often been clueless about what these groups are and where to find them, and the community groups have been suspicious about working with agencies like ACS.

The Bridge Builders can't fix everything.

For example, the common denominator in case after case is housing.

nator in case after case is housing. Many of the examples in this publication involve someone living in a homeless shelter. And that's not unusual.

Three separate studies since 1996 have found that 30 percent of America's foster children could be safely in their own homes right now, if their birth parents had safe, affordable housing.⁹

A fourth study found that "in terms of reunification, even substance abuse is not as important a factor as income or housing in determining whether children will remain with their families."¹⁰

The Bridge Builders can't build affordable housing. Nor can they create more places in drug treatment programs.

But what they have done is tap into the strength of the community to weave their own safety net for its most vulnerable families.

"This community is very strong and vital, the people are incredible," says Meta Bodewes. "And some of them are up against so many odds."

Many start each day at the bottom of their own personal hill. And each day, the Bridge Builders are there to help them make it to the top.

¹ In 2003, New York City paid private foster care agencies an average of \$45 per child per day, for every child in a family foster home. That totals \$16,425 per child per year. This does not include any costs that may be incurred by ACS for overseeing the private agency. Costs for other forms of care, such as group homes, are higher.

² Peter Pecora, et. al., *Improving Family Foster Care: Findings from the Northwest Foster Care Alumni Study* (Seattle: Casey Family Programs, 2005).

³ *Tenenbaum v. Williams* 193 F. 3d 581 (2d Cir., 1999).

⁴ Leslie Kaufman, "City Often Took Children Without Consulting Court," *The New York Times*, Oct. 28, 2004.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Office of the New York City Public Advocate, *Justice Denied: The Crisis in Legal Representation of Birth Parents in Child Welfare Proceedings*. May 12, 2000.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Citizens Committee for Children of New York, New York City Child Welfare Advisory Panel, *Report on Family Engagement*, August, 2003, available online at <http://www.kfny.org/publications/nycwcap2003.pdf>

⁹ Deborah S. Harburger with Ruth Anne White, "Reunifying Families, Cutting Costs: Housing – Child Welfare Partnerships for Permanent Supportive Housing *Child Welfare*, Vol. LXXXIII, #5 Sept./Oct. 2004, p.501.

¹⁰ Ruth Anne White and Debra Rog, "Introduction," *Child Welfare*, note 10, *supra*, p. 393.