

GUEST ESSAY

I Will Never Forget That I Could Have Lived With People Who Loved Me

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By Sixto Cancel

Mr. Cancel is the founder of an organization dedicated to changing foster care in America.

When I was 15, an usher at my church offered to become my foster parent. Hers was one of the best foster homes I lived in. But she wanted a son. It was more than I was able to give.

I had been in foster care since I was 11 months old because of my mother's drug addiction and poverty. Adopted at age 9 by a racist and abusive woman, I was locked out of the house at age 13. For two years, I couch surfed with friends, then entered foster care again. I was told I was loved, that I was a part of a family, yet I would always find myself moved to a new placement, with all my stuff in a trash bag.

In the three months I lived with the church usher, I couldn't unblock the years of numbness I had developed to survive. It is difficult to hug back or reply, "I love you, too," when all you have ever known is betrayal from parental figures. Her doors soon closed to me.

I found out on a school trip. My social worker called to tell me that all my stuff had been packed and left at the Department of Children and Families. My next stop was to be a group home.

My younger brother lived in a group home for five years. I saw how workers there restrained him, took away his visiting "privileges" when he misbehaved and how he ate cafeteria food for every meal.

I refused to go. I knew that no matter how difficult it had been for me to join foster families of total strangers, an institutional context would be worse. I persuaded my social worker to find me yet another foster home.

My foster care placements failed not because I didn't belong in a family but because the system failed to identify kinship placements for me and lacked enough culturally competent, community-based services to keep me in a home that had a chance at success.

My brother and I were not alone in our experiences. The lack of support for kinship care and a shortage of foster parents mean our foster care system unduly and unnecessarily relies on restrictive, institutionalized group homes.

In the most recent available data, published in June 2020, there were over 43,800 children living in foster care institutional placements in the United States. And Black youths are disproportionately placed in institutions. Just as when I was a child, group homes are being used not as temporary shelters but as long-term placements for foster youths.

I never returned home, was never placed with kin. I aged out of the foster care system at 23. Two years ago, more than six years after I aged out of care, my biological sister invited me to a family reunion in New York City. I was introduced to family I had never met and discovered that four of my aunts and uncles were foster and adoptive parents. I learned that one aunt, years earlier, found my father — who didn't even know I existed — sleeping in a junkyard. She then took him into her home and raised him. But he didn't find out about me until it was too late; he died before we could meet. The same aunt went on to adopt four siblings and fostered for 35 years, longer than I had been alive.

I pulled out my phone and searched the distance between my aunt's home and where I grew up: 58 miles. That's how close I'd been to family members who would have taken me in, who I would have loved to have lived with. But the system never thought to find my family.

When I left the foster care system, I founded a nonprofit, Think of Us, to promote systems change for foster care. We partnered with the Annie E. Casey Foundation and Casey Family Programs to conduct research to collect the stories of foster youths in group care.

The result is our new report, "Away From Home: Youth Experiences of Institutional Placements in Foster Care."

In our work, I learned I had been right to fear group homes. Themes of neglect, harm and loneliness, as well as physical and sexual abuse, repeat through the stories we gathered from 78 foster youths going through the group care system. When group homes are used as replacements for families rather than as treatment interventions, they perpetuate a cycle of spiraling trauma and harm.

As a result, we are making a bold call: Children should not be placed in foster care because of poverty. If children do enter care, it should be because of true abuse or neglect. These children should be placed with kin first and with foster families as a last resort. We want to see an end to the use of unnecessary group home placements in foster care.

In many ways, the group home system exists because of the failures of foster care family placements. We can fix that. Many people believe that institutional placements are necessary; our research shows that group homes can and should be dispensed with.

Ending group homes starts by expanding the support we give to families. If we give more and give first to families, kin and communities, we can prevent a lot of youths from having to go through the foster care system at all.

Second, we can reduce the scope of group homes by placing children in foster care with kinship relations first. These are the nonimmediate family, community and other relationships surrounding children before care.

Prioritizing kinship placements means expanding the legal definition of kinship to encompass more of the loving adults who are in youths' lives already. That way, we can stop needlessly extracting youths from their communities just because a trusted and familiar adult doesn't meet the state's definition of next of kin.

Already, some states — including New Mexico and Washington — have an expansive definition of kin that allows children to be placed with a vetted adult they already know and trust. Others, like Michigan, recognize next of kin as only legal relatives. Important relationships — former stepparents, godparents, family friends — are generally unable to step in.

We can also support kinship relationships by expediting and streamlining the licensing process for kin. Paperwork should never determine whether a child has a loving home with kin.

Identifying kin should not be held back by bureaucracy. New Mexico increased initial kinship placements from 3 percent in 2019 to over 50 percent in 2021. One of the biggest changes involved simply asking youths questions to help identify existing, supportive relationships in their lives. More states should follow the practice of asking youths to help determine who would be a good foster parent.

Finally, in those instances when kinship is not possible, we should redirect funding to help foster care services find, engage with and aid eligible and loving foster families and homes. Removing children from their communities and placing them with complete strangers, as happened to me so many times, should be only a last resort. A more data-driven approach can help the system select foster care parents who live nearby, speak the same language, have the same faith and affirm all elements of a youth's identity.

Then, once we have the right foster parents, we also must make sure these parents have the support they need to be effective. My placement with my foster mom at age 15 could have lasted if she and I had had the support we needed to address the strong emotions we both were feeling.

Ending institutional placements and reforming our foster care system will not be easy. Part of the journey will require preventing unnecessary entries into foster care and providing the right support structures for families while encouraging and supporting kin to take in foster children and growing the number of loving foster families available.

But waiting to start that journey puts more youths at risk of abuse, trauma and harm in group homes. Foster care youths need stability, and they need continuous, personalized care — not long-term group homes, which are traumatizing, punitive and debilitating. We have to make changes now.

Sixto Cancel is the founder of Think of Us, a nonprofit that addresses the crisis in foster care.

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