

Child Welfare Systems During COVID: Can We Improve How We Help Families?

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New York, United States -- The NGO Committee on the Family-New York held its monthly program as a webinar on November 19 on the topic "Families Coping with COVID-19: Challenges and Opportunities in Child Welfare." As has been well documented, the most disadvantaged families, who often are subject to state intervention, are the most impacted by COVID-19 on multiple levels. The panel discussed policies and practices within the child welfare and foster care system in New York from the perspective of valuing parent-child bonds and family cohesion. Almost 40 people attended the webinar, including UN staff and NGOs accredited at the UN.

Dr. Jane Spinak (Edward Ross Aranow Clinical Professor of Law; Director, Adolescent Representation Clinic, Columbia University Law School), briefly summarized the history of welfare and foster care system in the US. She explained that despite its intention to promote safety and permanency for children through adoption, the system has disrupted families, often when unmerited. Dr. Spinak stated that there is a tendency to focus too much on problems within the family, even when sometimes these problems are either within a normal spectrum or unfounded. Supporting low-income families by reducing poverty and providing basic health care and better schools, she argued, is a better way to strengthen families and boost family cohesion. The need for such assistance, especially child care, has become painfully evident during the economic downturn and school closures brought about by the Covid-19 pandemic.

Mrs. Jeanette Vega (Assistant Director, Training and Policy, RISE [parent support organization for parents in the New York City child welfare system]) spoke up for the capacities of parents to solve their own problems and utilize their own resources. She explained that parents who do not know effective discipline methods can too easily be accused of abuse: Often these parents do not receive help but instead are seen as bad parents. As a result, these families resist asking for needed services or support out of fear of further accusation. Mrs. Vega argued that the child welfare system needs to change to better recognize parents' rights, potential, and capacities. Mrs. Vega added that programs such as RISE provide the encouragement and training that increase parents' abilities to handle their challenges while keeping their family intact.

Mrs. Imani Worthy (Parent Leader, RISE) emphasized that parents need outlets for stress, such as speaking with other parents and being offered new opportunities for learning skills. Providing such support has been shown to enhance parents' problem-solving capacities.

Dr. Ben Freer (Co-chair, NGO Committee on the Family) moderated the panel and questions and answers. During the Q and A, all three speakers spoke about the importance of fathers and that the child welfare system often either ignores or assumes the worst of the fathers. It was said that the system tends to think that replacing the father with a government check is sufficient. However, the child's own identity suffers without the powerful bond with a father, they argued. They all agreed that more needs to be done to encourage the father's engagement with the mother and child. It appears that the foster care system will provide more sustainable family well-being when it fosters family strength and the integration of the father into the family.