

Marguerite Casey Foundation: Listening Circles Opening Hearts & Minds

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I. Listening Circles ~ Opening Hearts and Minds

Listening

may be considered by many to be an art lost on the philanthropic community in this country, but not for the Marguerite Casey Foundation. With open hearts, minds, and spirits, members of this newly endowed private foundation took their questions about grantmaking on the road to listen and hear the voices of people in communities throughout the country. Established by Casey Family Programs in 2000 to enhance its reach beyond programs serving families and youth, the Marguerite Casey Foundation is dedicated to affecting system-wide change through strategic grantmaking. The question Foundation leaders pondered – how to empower children, youth and their families – became the centerpiece of an inquiry taken directly to six communities across the country for insight, learning, and innovative ideas.

Listening Circles are recognized in many communities as gatherings for people to share common and not so common experiences with one another. A Listening Circle is like a forum or “town hall” meeting in that it provides a place and time for public discourse. Issues of the day are aired and debated – raising awareness and at times leading to community-wide decisions. Yet the concept of Listening Circles reaches deeply into the heritage and tradition of ethnically diverse communities across the globe. Whether held in African society among elders under the fabled Baobab tree, in Native American communities as talking circles, or in Latino communities as encuentros, Listening Circles are not only places for a meeting of minds, but for the sharing of what is in our hearts. Listening Circles hear the personal truth a husband, wife, child, or young person struggles to confront, and they embrace an individual with collective wisdom. Listening Circles give people the courage to drag the ugly into the open so that it may be made into something more beautiful. Listening Circles reflect the belief that we never are alone in our world. The world – no matter how it may treat us – can be enhanced or overcome by the unity of many people in whose love and commitment we abide. Listening Circles are the harbinger of great celebrations – marriages, births, coming-of-age ceremonies, and home-going rituals. It takes courage to listen – courage the Marguerite Casey Foundation discovered in its quest to listen to both the hearts and minds of people throughout the country.

The Marguerite Casey Foundation convened Listening Circles in six cities across the country and listened to 600 voices over six weeks in time. The communities of Los Angeles, California; Baltimore, Maryland; Mobile, Alabama; Rapid City, South Dakota; El Paso, Texas; and Yakima, Washington reflected a diverse array of geographic, ethnic, cultural, and socioeconomic perspectives. Every Listening Circle brought together individuals, organizations, and families from across the community. Family members, state and city officials, community leaders, business representatives, local public agency staff, young people, elders, faith-based community members, and leaders of innovative programs and services arrived from throughout the regions where Listening Circles were convened. In Mobile, participants traveled from Louisiana, Mississippi, and Tennessee to join the Listening Circle. In Rapid City and Yakima, members of Native American tribes journeyed for hours from their reservations to listen and be heard. In El Paso and Yakima families listened in Spanish as conversations were simultaneously translated.

All shared willingly and eagerly – honored by the invitation to share their thoughts with a national Foundation.

Once welcoming remarks were extended, and in two cities after Native American prayer was offered in honor of the gathering, a small panel of community guests opened the afternoon exchange of ideas. As deft facilitators managed the event, the Marguerite Casey Foundation posed three questions to the panel members and the community-wide audience. These questions became the centerpiece of memorable testimony, inspiring life stories, and powerful charges to act swiftly and surely to combat the outrageous conditions many children, young people, and families are confronting. The three questions posed during the Listening Circles were:

- What creates healthy, well-developed, strong families and children?
- What would it take to change the child welfare system and other systems that impact the lives of families and children?
- How would you leverage \$30 million to ensure the well being of children, families, and communities?

The six hundred voices spoke of diverse needs, but they spoke in one voice. These voices represented families of many different neighborhoods and cultures, multiple systems and sectors, varying ages and ethnicities, and widely divergent political perspectives. Listening Circle participants unanimously called for respecting and valuing families; empowering families and holding them at the center of systems of care; promoting grass roots activism and leadership; collaborating across agencies and systems; changing unresponsive policies; and galvanizing public will to support families in ways that help avoid crises and ultimately lead away from dependence on systems. This report attempts to capture the voices of Listening Circle participants across the country so that their answers to the Marguerite Casey Foundation may be widely heard.

II. Our Families

Family means more than words can say. Each individual’s concept of family is shaped by his or her cultural heritage, traditions, language, and perspectives on the world. When Listening Circle participants were asked, “What creates healthy, well-developed, strong families and children?” those present responded with heartfelt passion and deep conviction.

Listening Circles in every city engaged in sharing definitions and characteristics of families. In every city, community members shared views on what “family” means to them. In sum, the family was characterized as a group of people who surround a child in many different ways and whose composition changes with time. Listening Circles generated discussion of five primary characteristics of today’s families.

1. Families are no longer composed of “traditional” parent and child relationships. Instead, families are complex and changing units that include, but extend beyond, the nuclear

family and biological ties. Families today may include only one parent or many loving grandparents. Some families consist of siblings striving to remain together and raise themselves. Today's families are composed of many types of relationships, including those with non-custodial fathers, foster families, kinship care networks, adoptive families, and other types of "resource" families.

2. "Family" inherently is a cultural notion grounded in the heritage and belief systems of a child's parents and other members of the family's group. Every community has cultural norms and traditions that inform and guide the relationship of a child to the family. Therefore, "family" needs to be self-defined and valued by those within the community that surrounds a family – not defined by the expectations or cultural norms of others. Alex Hernandez, a young man in Yakima admonished, "I've been hearing that you want to teach the parents, but what if what my parents teach me is good for me, then how can you teach us another way? I don't want to let anyone outside my family change what my parents teach me." Respect for how groups or communities of origin attribute meaning to family is essential. David Gaither Muhammad, a panelist in the same Yakima Listening Circle, further illustrated the significance of self-definition for identifying "family" when he remarked:

One interesting example of family is when you see gangs. For many of those groups – street organizations of young people – what drew them to those groups was a sense of family. These groups give them brotherhood, unity, connection, bonding, and what they see as love. Unfortunately, we see them as gangs. If we take the positive, then we'll see that this really is about family.

3. Parents in most families want to be able to care for their children. For determined families the loving bond parents and children share persists, regardless of the circumstances they face. A panelist in one Listening Circle confided, "I think of incarcerated mothers and say, 'Would I like to find a home for that kid!' but that person's bond with her mother is important." Marilyn Mason-Plunket of People to People shared, "We need to look at non-traditional families. We work with the Share Program in Yakima to encourage non-custodial parents to maintain a connection with [their children] in addition to any financial support provided. If we can help both parents maintain a bond then the children will be healthier." At their core, most families are resilient and can survive difficult circumstances by remaining together and preserving family ties.
4. The family – not the individual child – needs to be the center of society's attention. Families need to keep the healthy development of children at the center of their existence. "Metaphorically, children need connections – a family who wraps around them, people who can give and take," commented Janice Goldwater, of Adoptions Together in Baltimore. Families in many cultures rely upon the community beyond themselves to do this. Dr. Carol Wilson Spigner of the University of Pennsylvania School of Social Work reminisced, "I grew up in an African American community in the 1940s. In my community, there was a common concern for kids, a valuing of kids." Yet today the

balance between family and community responsibility is fragile. The health of families is mutually and reciprocally related to the well being of communities.

5. All families need “the basics” – food, shelter, and clothing. Equally important as physical needs, however, are intangible needs such as healthy emotional and psychological development. As a Spanish-speaking woman in El Paso shared, “I believe it is very important that the family nucleus is spiritual for kids.” Every family needs caring, consistent relationships; reliability; trust; hope; faith; spirituality; high expectations; unconditional love; nurturing interactions; accountability; listening and communicating with one another; and the ability to call on each other forever.

After Listening Circle participants shared these impressions of what “family” means, they discussed the challenges many families face as they struggle to survive today. While families are resilient, and at times heroic, they are not infallible. They need support from family members, other families, the community at-large, and our society. Several supports and services were identified as critical for families to be healthy, well developed, and strong.

1. Child Care – A critical issue raised by Listening Circles in every city was the need for high quality, affordable, accessible childcare. In every city, stories were shared of women struggling to work and care for their children. Carol Burnett of the Mississippi Low Income Child Care Initiative joined the conversation in Mobile and commented, “Women are hiding their children in McDonald’s bathrooms; leaving their homes at 4:00 a.m. traveling to jobs, leaving children home alone before they go to school; and leaving their children at home while working at night.” The safety and ability of children to be nurtured in stimulating settings is of paramount concern. In Los Angeles, Yolie Flores Aguilar of the Los Angeles County Children’s Planning Council commented, “Starting with good early childhood development programs, we need to support working families. I get calls at least three times a week from people looking for childcare because it doesn’t exist.” When childcare options are available, the quality of care must be carefully examined because low salaries often make hiring the best staff difficult.
2. Education –An issue of unparalleled concern was that of education. Listening Circle Participants shared their dismay with the failure of public schools to educate children equally. Statistics on the educational attainment of young people in Mobile and Rapid City provided evidence that children and young people are not learning, an egregious situation that inhibits them from reaching their highest potential. In Mobile’s Listening Circle, Karen Watson, Director of the Positive Action Committee, described numerous inequities.

Sylvania had a public education system that had decided it was impossible to serve all children, so the children receiving the best education were children of the Mayor, City Council person, banker, ruling out African American children. They not only used racism to create inequity but classism as well, so even white people without resources were being subjected to substandard education. . . . We have looked at racially biased academic tracking practices. Segregating the children

still happens through racially biased disciplinary action practices. Children of racial minority groups and poor children are treated differently with discipline. People are not doing this by mistake.

In every Listening Circle, improving education was cited as the single most important undertaking for enabling children, youth, and families to thrive. Education was defined broadly to include learning in K-12 schools; alternative and community-based schools; postsecondary institutions; vocational training centers; and the workplace. Multiple types of educational interventions were recommended, including providing intergenerational and family learning; parenting education; literacy among mothers; early childhood interventions; pre-school and after school programming; programming for children and youth with special needs; reproductive health education and family planning; technology instruction; and providing culturally sensitive curricula and instruction.

3. Jobs and Economic Development – A major reason cited by Listening Circle participants for stress in the family is a lack of gainful employment. Parents need and want to work, to earn family-supporting wages with benefits that enable them to sustain their families. However, in most communities, only low-wage jobs are available, resulting in parents working long hours, struggling to keep afloat financially, and spending less time with their children. Unemployment, “working poor,” welfare reform, and other specific types of workforce issues were presented. In the Baltimore Listening Circle, Tracy Brown commented, “Work policies, such as parental leave, family leave, health benefits, and others, contribute to the ability of a parent to be available to her/his children.” In border communities like that of El Paso, these issues are even more challenging. One member of the Catholic Archdiocese of El Paso commented, “I know of an undocumented man trying to make a living for his family, but his working results in his children being taken away into the system in the U.S.” Ideas for strengthening workforce opportunities included improving long-term access to job training, supporting postsecondary education, investing in entrepreneurship, and forging linkages at the local and state levels between community economic development and workforce development.
4. Promoting Individual and Family Care – Several examples were offered of ways in which the health of individual family members affects the overall well being of a family. A strong appeal was made for supportive services in the areas of substance abuse prevention and treatment; mental health care, especially for depression; assistance with physical and mental disabilities; parenting courses and training; domestic violence prevention and treatment; culturally embedded practices that promote healthy self-identity; and interventions that overcome destructive “mentality” and negative attitudes. Similarly, participants encouraged the development of more family-centered supports and services for reaching families before they end up in crisis, as well as for treating parents and children together. As one Los Angeles Listening Circle participant shared, “Families need guidance and resources on raising children and youth.”
5. Housing – Without a home, families are unable to survive intact for long. As the nation’s homeless population rises, more families and children are living on streets and in shelters.

A young person struggling to survive and to keep her sister and mother together grapples with the issue of housing as shared by Nell Bernstein, editor of *A Rage to Do Better*, during the Yakima Listening Circle:

Her mother and 9-year old sister are homeless. My next-door neighbor runs a family shelter; she agreed to find a bed for them. She [the older sister] said, ‘We need to make sure no one from Child Protective Services will come and take my sister away. If my mother loses my sister, she’s going to lose it, and I’ll lose them both.’ She’s 22-years old trying to get through school. I asked her, ‘What’s best for your sister?’ She said that it would probably be best for her sister to be with her mother in a place. That’s not an option. . . . We need to put the young person at the center, ask what they need, and figure out how to get it.

Young adults making a transition from foster care to interdependent living need places to live. Young people who have been involved in the juvenile justice system and are returning to their families and communities need transitional housing options. Young welfare families need homes where they can raise children in safety. Investments must take into account the need for increased availability of affordable housing for entire families. During the Los Angeles Listening Circle, Sister Diane Donahue of Esperanza Community Housing Corporation advised, “Start with housing, but connect it with access to health care, English as a Second Language courses, literacy, and computers.” In Baltimore, panelists and participants recommended reviving the concept of settlement houses, which combined addressing housing needs with community organizing, as a model for the future.

6. Enhancing our Neighborhoods – Listening Circle participants commented on the role the environment contributes to the outlook of children, youth, and families. Whether a family is surrounded in the inner city by deteriorating and dilapidated buildings interrupted by liquor stores on every corner; on a Native American reservation with no libraries, parks, or recreation space; or in the rural South in isolated communities whose air and water are polluted by nearby factories, the quality of life families experience is directly affected by the environment. Cordelia White Elk of the Oglala Sioux Tribe Regional Programs in Rapid City, South Dakota shared a concrete suggestion, “On the reservation, we lack basic buildings. Part of the funding can help us build and construct facilities.” Communities are suffering as the physical infrastructure around them falls apart. Investments are needed in the construction of culturally attractive and meaningful neighborhood facilities that contribute to the health and well being of families.

III. Policy and System Reform

Policy and system reform were cited as essential for promoting the well being of families. Listening Circle participants shared perceptions drawn from personal experience and based on their expertise working in policy, in public systems, or in community organizations interacting with public systems. Listening Circle members in each city were

asked, “What would it take to change the child welfare system and other systems that impact the lives of families and children?” As Listening Circle participants shared insight about the role of policy and public systems in the lives of families, they imparted four overarching observations.

1. Policy is not always responsive to families. Policies are the result of legislation and court rulings which focus primarily on individuals – an individual welfare recipient, a sole neglected child, a non-custodial parent, a prison inmate. Policies at the federal, state, and local levels generally do not acknowledge the relationships individuals have with family members or implications for families. A member of the Catholic Diocese of El Paso described a woman in jail for a minor offense, “She has a two-week old baby and can’t get out of jail to care for her own children.” In Rapid City, Murton Tyse, Board Member of South Dakota’s Children’s Coalition implored, “We need to make the system children-sensitive and family-responsive. We [in systems] have ownership of children. We need to let families have that responsibility.” Policy advocacy is essential at all levels of government to encourage family-oriented improvements. Some policies may need to be fully dismantled and reconstructed under new law to respond more effectively to the needs of a family.
2. Public systems of all kinds, including schools, child welfare, juvenile justice agencies, courts, and others, are driven by policies, laws and regulations that are often outdated and conflicting. Perhaps Mary Artino from Homes of Hope Foster Family Agency, illustrated this conundrum best during the Los Angeles Listening Circle. Mary commented:

“We don’t have a structural analysis of the [public child welfare, criminal justice, and other public] system[s] based on utilization. We keep looking at different pieces of the system, not how it all works together. We work with families with fathers in prison. While a father is in prison, he’s charged for unmet child support payments. When he gets out of prison, he has no job, no housing, and is \$30-\$40k in debt. We’ve got training for this father, but he can’t get to work because he doesn’t have a car, and he’s trained in an area [of specialization for his job] that requires the ability to respond when called. Even if he gets a car, he has to declare bankruptcy because of unpaid child support. We need to look at the whole family and how the entire system of agencies can work together to support the family.”

3. Public systems tend to be overburdened, under-funded, under-staffed, insular, culturally insensitive, and unable to deliver high quality services to families. Even dedicated child welfare workers that participated in the Listening Circles acknowledged that systems are often inefficiently managed and difficult to access by families. Many support recipients encounter relatively high degrees of diagnostic discretion when seeking services. Judgements made by direct-line workers sometimes result in confusion regarding individual values and frustrate families in their search for supports and services. Committed caseworkers strive to overcome these challenges, and many achieve success despite difficulties within the system. Rev. Everett Bell, Los Angeles Metropolitan Churches, commented, “Many people don’t like the system. What’s valuable about the

system? We can look at benchmark civic organizations that had to re-make themselves because they didn't like who they were. If we could find out how they did that, we might use those lessons to re-make the system." In El Paso's Listening Circle, a family court judge acknowledged that laws and policies disenfranchise families, and she recommended working on a holistic approach that would connect the work of separate agencies.

4. Public systems and agencies often are not culturally competent with respect to the heritage and traditions of families. Agencies often are located outside of the communities they seek to serve, and the well meaning people who staff them are unfamiliar with the culture, language, and beliefs of people in the communities. In Yakima, Linda Jones, an enrolled member of the Tulalip Tribe and a panelist observed, "We have created systems that require compliance with certain things that may not be culturally appropriate in our families, and if families don't tow the mark, then we take them to court with a piece of paper." Nancy Shea, Executive Director, Mental Health Advocacy, commented during the Los Angeles Listening Circle, "We are an agency serving Asian and Pacific Islander communities, and we know that one size does not fit all." These sentiments were echoed in El Paso when a state university professor emphasized the need for providing supports to families that reflect the diversity apparent in multicultural settings.

Listening Circle audiences recommended three types of responses to these observations: (1) Prevention (2) Transformation (3) Cross-Systems Reform. Beyond these recommendations, the clearest message Listening Circles conveyed was a belief in the power of people, families, and authentic, grass roots leadership to change the way policies are developed and systems are governed.

1. Prevention

The overwhelming cry from 600 Listening Circle voices was for families to stay away from the public child welfare system. Discussion of this sentiment began in Los Angeles with panelists conveying through firsthand stories and analyses of data their conviction that investments should be made not in sustaining public systems but in preventing families from needing them. The perception that public systems are intransigent and unlikely to change any time soon led to an ongoing consensus that one of the best courses of action for society must be to assist families before they end up in crises.

Invest in strategies to prevent families from possible encounters with the system. Public investments need to be made at the "front end" to ensure that families steer clear of the child welfare system instead of at the "back end" where treatment is sometimes suspect. Working with families to understand what is happening in their lives can prevent interventions by the system. Strategies that promote the healthy transition of young people to adulthood prevent adults and young families from exposure to the system.

Early Intervention

Identify families when they are in need but before they reach a point of crisis. When families are on the brink of disaster, there are sometimes opportunities to intervene effectively. Early intervention presumes that families can be identified, not on the basis of perceived deficiencies, but on the basis of experiences the parents themselves are struggling to address and for which they ask for help. Informal settings where families relax and share supportive friendships with others are the most likely places for identifying warning signs of fragility early enough to intervene effectively. These organizations constitute informal networks of support because they usually operate independently of formal programs and services offered by public agencies or nonprofit organizations. Faith-based organizations, ethnic community associations, and other neighborhood groups are often able to intervene early when families are in need of assistance. In many instances, informal networks of support receive little attention from outside funders. Rev. Everett Bell, Los Angeles Metropolitan Churches, emphasized the cost-effectiveness of early intervention.

In Los Angeles County, 36,000 children are in foster care. The budget for the Los Angeles County Department of Child and Family Services is nearly \$1.4 billion. That means we're spending somewhere in excess of \$30k per child. So tell me, does the focus need to be at the back end? Wouldn't it be more cost effective if we were able to help a single mother go through job training or a few men to go through anger management courses before telling them we'll take their children? Are there signs regularly identifiable that we can begin to address before they become crises? To fix anything after its broken costs more than if we do something before it's broken, but we don't have enough people who ask that question. We need to address an issue before it becomes a problem. Shaping that question in the minds of policy makers and public is what needs to happen.

Judge Kathleen Cox commented during the Baltimore Listening Circle, "I see issues only through the lens of the court system. Whether they reach child welfare or juvenile justice, families are already in a crisis mode. I see Maryland court divisions trying to introduce family interventions earlier. Child welfare and juvenile justice systems do what they can to address 'damage control' with families in crisis, but we need aid through early identification. We need to look at other systems and other community-based organizations. Base-points for early intervention include education, recreation, and churches. Not only do we need earlier identification but a support system that perhaps parallels child welfare but from different points of entry."

2. Transformation

A number of Listening Circle participants expressed a slightly different viewpoint based on the perception that public systems are difficult to change but always will exist. These participants concluded that fundamental flaws in the current system necessitate a complete overhaul and replacement of child welfare with an entirely new and different structure. In Baltimore, Dr. Carol Wilson Spigner cautioned, "Child welfare is designed to be a residual system, a system of

last resort. We need to figure out what needs to change within the system and what needs to be added. I don't think you can take a system of last resort and turn it into a system of prevention. Where would we build prevention [into the current system]? We need to grapple with this.” Sharing this perspective, participants in three other Listening Circles suggested ways of fully revamping the current child welfare system.

In Mobile, Alabama, discussion focused on the fact that laws, policies, regulations, and programs drive the child welfare system – not people. One Listening Circle member recommended constructing a new system with families at the center and a family liaison who is connected to a cross-sector team of providers and other resources. In her words,

It's that one-on-one connection that's needed – people to come into the home and to make that connection. When we do child abuse prevention the one-on-one connection is most important. I've never met a family that doesn't know what it needs. They know what they need. If we could wipe the slate clean and start all over, I can see all the agencies doing what they do, but one person who connects with the family and makes sure the family gets all the services they need. As Karen [Watson] said, if we could find some way to USE those people you talked about – people, people, more people – and then maybe we could make a difference.

A distinctive approach for constructing a new system was presented by Cordelia White Elk of the Oglala Sioux Tribe in Pine Ridge during the Rapid City Listening Circle. On the Pine Ridge Reservation, Native American community members have designed an integrated child welfare system that is culturally embedded and fully housed within the community of a child's family of origin. Cordelia explains:

We've been working on the Pine Ridge reservation to create an integrated system. Many times children fall through cracks and aren't served well. We pulled together elders, children, and family members. We've created an initiative to address a long-time community need. We've developed a seamless system in which money flows and is shared. Plans for families are strength-based, and resources are shared. Our integrated system of child welfare services is community-based and provides Lakota social workers. It has one-stop shopping – to go to one place for many resources. It results in better understanding among agencies and families. Oglala children are living with their families – healthy families who understand and live Lakota culture. Children are placed in Lakota families with access to transportation, recreation, and a public park in every community. Our vision arose from a needs assessment. Casey Family Programs and the American Humane Association conducted a needs assessment on the reservation. We went to people in the community and asked them what is needed rather than making decisions based on college courses that often don't work. . . . There is great need for this.

Similarly, Linda Jones of the Tulalip Tribe shared news of another initiative to respect Native American families' bonds within their communities of origin. Linda shared that she was taken from her family at six years old and raised in the foster care system until age 18. She described the need to use data and research to convince elected officials of the need for change. As a result of Linda's efforts, changes were instituted under law. "We entered into a protocol with the Tulalip Tribe – all Tulalip children need to be in a Tulalip community. This takes partnering with the federal government because they set policy regulations," Linda explained; "the child welfare experience in Tulalip has been enhanced significantly by my bad experience."

3. Cross-Systems Reform

The final perspective offered by the majority of Listening Circle participants as a primary solution was that of reforming child welfare and other systems affecting families. Listening Circle audiences offered specific types of strategies and interventions that would lead to improvement, namely: policy reform; cross-sector collaboration; professional development; cultural competence; and nearness to communities.

Policy Reform

In every Listening Circle, participants spoke of the need to address policy reform at the federal and state levels. During the Listening Circle in Baltimore, Darryl Cox, Director of Strategic Planning and Policy for the Pennsylvania Housing Finance Agency, provided an example of how laws need to be changed:

A woman who seeks a Section 8 voucher may be told that she needs to go live in a homeless shelter to be eligible for Section 8 housing benefits. You must show you are in dire need [in order to be eligible for services]. There is a failure politically on the part of legislators when local and county administrators need to regulate people to find proof that they are in need of services. If someone knocked on the door of an agency and said s/he was hungry, in need of food, the system would respond by saying, 'What is your address so we can check your need? Sorry, but without an address, we can't feed you.' ... We have to strain for symmetry. Bring unequal halves together – bring change on the ground and changes in policy and in law.

In addition to examples of policy changes needed in housing, income security, and child welfare, several judges who participated in Listening Circles in Baltimore, Rapid City, and El Paso commented that structural changes are necessary to recognize the need to protect the family, not strictly the individual alone, under law.

Family-centered laws and policies would recognize the relationship between individuals and their families. Jan Richter of the Benton Foundation, described to the Baltimore Listening Circle audience, "There is a disconnect between what the law needs – inflexible principles, and what it takes to work with families – a good sense of what a family needs and the flexibility to respond. The problem lay in the tension between these two issues. The child

welfare system needs to deal with this clash. Child welfare has the resources to get families what they need. We need folks in D.C. to make sure that budget appropriations get families what they need. No one there [on Capitol Hill] represents families' at-risk, vulnerable families, to make sure that they get what they need." In El Paso, the Listening Circle audience described particular ways policy affects families in border communities. "Here at the border, the question of families is an international one. Our families are both united and divided by an international line," Cindy Arnold explained. Arturo Vargas expressed concern that though this issue is particularly apparent in some areas, it is significant nationwide by adding, "Families are divided by our laws. Parents are aliens while children are citizens. Every single state is dealing with an emerging Latino and immigrant population."

Listening Circle audiences in Rapid City, Yakima, and El Paso recommended making it a priority to place children removed from their birth families in a child's community of origin. Moreover, participants in Baltimore, Mobile, and Yakima indicated a need for higher investments of public and private resources to address disparities in low-income inner city neighborhoods, small rural towns, and on Native American reservations. Participants recognized that any progress in changing public policy and systems would require a number of stakeholders to organize strategically for political efficacy. In Los Angeles, Baltimore, and Mobile, audiences stated a need to strengthen the ability of local practitioners and leaders to work together on policy and political advocacy aimed at improving the lives of children, youth and families.

Cross-Sector Collaboration

Audiences in all six cities emphasized the need to promote collaboration, networks, and cross-sector interventions among multiple systems. Listening Circle participants urged that connections be made between the public, private, and non-profit sectors. In addition, they suggested cross-disciplinary interaction among those who work in universities and other research institutions; people living in economically distressed communities; representatives of businesses; and professional service providers. By working directly with families to manage resources from many sectors, caseworkers might improve upon success.

Professional Development

Professional development for agency staff was a highly cited need among Listening Circle audiences. During the Baltimore Listening Circle, Fred Taylor of For the Love of Children in Washington, D.C. commented, "We need an aligned system with the birth family, adoptive family, and all forces lined up in support of frontline practice. The challenge is to train workers in a child welfare system to become a system that drives the case." Rose Johnson, Director, Mobile County Department of Human Resources, shared an example of efforts to cultivate a closer rapport with families:

"One methodology in our reform is to meet with families and ask them what they need. We have found tremendous success with this, but it's been a seat change, a

cultural change for our staff. Take Individual Service Planning, for example. The first time I went to a meeting, a juvenile probation officer would not go into the room with the family. I realized then how challenging it is for caseworkers in agencies to change. It takes a daily effort to train staff to understand what we're talking about here. It is a power shift – it's about sharing the power."

Frontline training was recommended not only for child welfare caseworkers and administrators but also for teachers and police officers who, as one Mobile participant characterized them, are the social workers of "last resort" called upon in the wee hours of the morning when domestic situations involving fragile families erupt.

Cultural Competence

Culturally competent procedures, programs, and practice are essential in every sector that seeks to work meaningfully with families. Listening Circle participants spoke often of the need for culturally competent interventions. These types of interventions need to be created by members of ethnically diverse communities to respect and reflect the values, perspectives, and heritage of children, youth and families. Tim Standing Soldier commented during the Rapid City Listening Circle:

"We cannot erase 200 years of literal and cultural genocide in two minutes. Judge KonenKamp said that the role models used to be our parents. Sixty years ago, our parents were told what they were doing was not good, so that's what happened to role models. People who created the problem can't solve it. Have empathy, but you need to give resources to people with that group to solve their own problems. You can't do it. Agencies need cultural competency training by Native American people."

In response, Linda Vargas of the Lower Brule Sioux Tribe described a successful economic development strategy that promotes entrepreneurship among Native American children, youth, and families on her reservation. Through a Welfare-to-Work partnership with the Small Business Administration and a culturally sensitive curriculum developed by Native Americans, children and adults are working toward self-sufficiency. Yet another participant suggested that Native Americans be supported through education and training to become teachers and social workers in their communities rather than working in less meaningful entry-level jobs. In the Native American communities of Rapid City and Yakima, the predominantly African American communities of Baltimore and Mobile, and the heavily Latino communities of Los Angeles and El Paso, Listening Circle participants declared the need for culturally competent approaches to working with families in their languages and in their communities.

Community Connections

Finally, Listening Circle audiences described a need to locate the offices of agencies and services within reach of communities. Proximity – both in relationships with families and in

delivering services – is a crucial factor affecting access to and utilization of supportive resources. Dr. Carol Wilson Spigner commented, “Huge public systems – education, child welfare, and health care – have very little connection to communities and very little interaction with people in communities. Without this connection, public systems feel little sense of accountability to communities.” In some communities, audiences spoke of the need for systems to be physically located within or near communities. Otherwise, families are compromised by the need to drive long distances and to travel from one agency to another seeking support.

Engage Us

Throughout the Listening Circles, people were outraged by injustice portrayed through life stories and statistically quantified descriptions of the conditions of low-income families and children. Listening Circle audiences asserted the need for informed public outcry and organized civic engagement to overcome the legacy of historical disparities apparent in today’s economically challenged communities. Recommendations for mobilizing citizens ranged from building public will by disseminating information on the condition of families to supporting community activism. In Los Angeles, participants affirmed Yolie Flores Aguilar’s call to action when she stated, “Unless we are building major community mobilization and engagement on some of these issues, it’s just not going to change. We need major, radical efforts in communities. Unfortunately, not many organizations are willing to invest in mobilizing communities. I possess a fundamental belief that communities can make change.”

Promoting family-centered public systems and family-supportive communities could be the goal of several types of civic engagement strategies. Audiences suggested building public will by raising awareness of family issues; developing a communication and media strategy; organizing people in communities to engage in policy advocacy; launching a social marketing campaign to improve the public’s perception of families; and strengthening the ability of indigenous leaders to mobilize their communities for long-term action. Gustavo Cardenas, a Casey Resource Council member, told the El Paso Listening Circle audience, “Community organizing is needed to make sure families are aware of the issues.” In Baltimore, Francine Walker of Hearts and Homes for Youth, outlined an approach for engaging citizens through media and technology:

A paradigm shift for many foundations would be to use some funds to work with the media to change perceptions. Media can change society’s perception of something overnight – that’s good and bad. Some people wouldn’t think of using limited resources to work on media, but if done positively, a media strategy can be quite effective. The Marguerite Casey Foundation could invest \$160,000 per state to hire a State [Media and Communications] Director. Parents need a liaison. Help must come from the independent sector. Within every state, promote a media strategy that involves each organization. Hire a Communications Director, and focus the spotlight on your efforts for five years. It ALWAYS takes a crisis for change to occur. At the deep end, someone independent of government is needed to show the pieces. Put on a website

information that says, Parents, we know you're busy, but here's a web address. Send a note to your congress person about this issue that affects families.

Others elaborated on ways to engage citizens in efforts that reach beyond policy. Carol Gundlach, Alabama Coalition Against Domestic Violence, spoke to the Mobile audience cautioning, "Passing legislation is only the first infinitesimal step in getting change because family help is far removed. We can pass all the laws we want, but we must do local organizing to get communities involved. If I had \$30 million, I would devote it to developing local people, local organizations, to act." A cry for informed community voices, proactive citizenship, and public media attention echoed throughout the Listening Circles.

IV. Leveraging Resources

Leveraging resources proved to be a topic Listening Circle audiences were gratified to discuss with the Marguerite Casey Foundation. They valued the opportunity to respond to the question, "How would you leverage \$30 million to ensure the well-being of children, families, and communities?" Listening Circle audiences applauded the commitment made by the Marguerite Casey Foundation to invest \$30 million annually in grants that strengthen families and build strong communities. Participants acknowledged that any level of investment would likely fall short of the need to promote family well being among the numbers in need of support. Therefore, this investment was considered to be uniquely significant because of its attention to the needs of families in economically under-resourced communities. Specifically, Listening Circle comments emphasized five key themes regarding how funds might best be used, and a number of innovative funding ideas surfaced.

Themes for Leveraging Resources

1. Focus on Those Who Would Benefit Most

Every community has families who are struggling. Participants in every Listening Circle agreed that the challenge for investing limited resources will be to focus on the children, youth and families whose needs are most profound. Several communities are in dire need of assistance and are not often the recipients of funds. When asked where these families live, Listening Circle audiences responded that families most in need of assistance live in three areas: (1) Native American communities on reservations and in nearby cities; (2) in ethnically diverse border communities where families confront issues of immigration; and (3) rural communities, especially those in the mid-South region of the country. In all three instances, those attending Listening Circles described ways in which these three communities are neglected by funders, despite society's awareness of their existence and documentation in data and research of substandard living conditions and negative family outcomes. Listening Circle participants emphasized the need to focus on two groups in communities: (1)

young adults, especially those leaving foster care, juvenile justice, and welfare; and (2) mothers and grandparents as primary caregivers raising small children.

2. Ensure Grass Roots Penetration

Listening Circle attendees recognized that current investments to improve family outcomes through grants to public agencies and systems were necessary but not sufficient. Participants stressed a gap in funding for community organizing and mobilizing for change. In addition, they advised the Foundation to strengthen the infrastructure within communities by investing in grass roots, neighborhood based practice. Listening Circle audiences agreed that special attention is merited for faith-based organizations, associations within ethnically diverse communities, and other informal networks of support. These types of networks are generally closest to the family and are often overlooked or not eligible for funding because they may not have 501(c)(3) status. Related to the notion of supporting informal groups was the suggestion to invest in indigenous community leaders and leadership development.

3. Select Instrumental, Multi-faceted Investments

In the six cities, Listening Circles generated recommendations for healthy families that involved a range of types of interventions, none of which would be adequate in isolation. Therefore, audiences encouraged the Foundation to pursue multidisciplinary (policy, research, and practice-oriented) investments. Similarly, Listening Circle audiences recommended providing incentives for multi- and cross-sector investments that connect interventions in education, workforce development, housing, and other categories of support to families.

4. Connect Us To Each Other

A related opportunity for funding became apparent to those who participated in the Listening Circles. Participants often cited the lack of support for organizations to meet and work together, a factor that exacerbates the disconnection among service providers and their isolation from communities. Therefore, suggestions were made to invest in local and regional networks and cross-disciplinary partnerships at the local, state and regional levels. Moreover, participants considered national networks to be valuable sources for gaining and exchanging information on promising and effective approaches to working well with families.

5. Hear Our Voices

Listening Circles from Los Angeles to Yakima expressed resounding support for an approach to funding that enables the public at-large, policy makers, and public system leaders to hear the voices of families and communities. Ideas included investing in community organizing and social marketing through various media and

communications strategies. Listening Circle participants based these recommendations on the influence public perception has on policy and decision-making. Popular media generally neglects or negatively portrays circumstances of families in under-resourced communities. Authentic community voices are needed to convey in genuine ways the sentiments and aspirations of families.

Innovative Funding Ideas

The concept of “leveraging” resources inspired several innovative ideas. The Listening Circle participants responded to Marguerite Casey’s appeal to think creatively of compelling approaches and intriguing possibilities. The following list features examples in roughly four categories: community organizing; partnership building; practitioner-driven innovations; and system reform and policy advocacy.

1. Public Advocacy for Families

The Marguerite Casey Foundation was told in every Listening Circle that the voices most important to hear are those of families. Yet families in need are those whose voices are least heard, and organizing community voices is one activity most foundations do not support. One innovative idea broached in Los Angeles and again in Baltimore centered on creating a “campaign for families.” The campaign might include a public news and media component; grass roots mobilizing; youth, parent, and family advocacy programs to promote improved policies; training and infrastructure support for community empowerment.

2. Networking and Partnership Building

In every city, Listening Circle audiences valued the opportunity to gather in a room with diverse stakeholders who are committed to improving the lives of children, youth and families. To continue the Listening Circle exchange, audiences in every city recommended support for convening and building ongoing networks of partners. These networks would operate to bring local, state, and regional organizations, businesses, and policy makers to the same table for sharing information and engaging in policy strategies that promote family well being.

3. Practitioner-Driven Innovations

While Listening Circles generated long lists of the types of supports families need, a handful of innovative practice-driven responses to those needs were identified by participants. These responses merit thoughtful consideration. One suggestion was that every police officer or caseworker should carry an information card that can be handed to a young person with information on where to go for help in a crisis. Another idea was to develop an assessment tool that promotes caring relationships between caseworkers and young people or families. The “relationship inventory or portfolio” would enable people to measure the strength and

value of interaction between people. Every Listening Circle audience recommended investing in the development of culturally competent tools, methods, and training. Suggestions for specific interventions like 24-hour childcare; family-based, intergenerational learning; transitional housing for young people and whole families; and family (as opposed to individual) treatment for substance abuse and mental health issues arose repeatedly.

4. Cross-Systems Reform and Policy Advocacy

The child welfare system and other systems are in need of reform. Promising models were cited in each Listening Circle to promote healthier systems. Among the ideas presented for system reform, two innovations emerged. One proposal was to create a family-based case manager who interacts with multiple agencies on a team and meets personally in one-on-one meetings with families to learn what is happening from the families' point of view, ask them what they feel they need, and then work with the team to respond in culturally respectful ways. An idea recommended by Native American participants was to establish family-centered services wholly within a family's community of origin. Listening Circle audiences stated that policy reform is absolutely necessary for most systems to change. Policy changes may include changing a state's constitution; managing the politics inherent in imbalances of power between a state's Governor and the legislature; advocating for tax policies that support all families, not just the wealthy; and investing in lobbyists dedicated to family issues. An idea for addressing policy reform at the federal level was to invest in a non-partisan organization that could review and analyze the potential impact of pending legislation on families. A "family impact statement" or report could be issued on how policies are likely to affect families much like environmentalist "watch dog" organizations examine legislative proposals for their potential impact on the nation's natural resources.

VI. Connections and Unique Opportunities

In bustling downtown Los Angeles, sultry summertime Mobile, and every other Listening Circle city, Marguerite Casey Foundation staff and Board members heard diverse voices – some bellowing, others whispering. People from across these communities shared from their hearts and minds what families need. While the unique circumstances of each city contributed to the breadth of perspectives gathered, these six hundred voices spoke with an astoundingly singular voice. Four messages resonated throughout all six Listening Circles: a profound need for family-centered policies and systems; a call for grass roots leadership and advocacy; an awakening to the power of networks and collaboration; and a plea to invest in our nation's future by investing in young people.

Listening Circle audiences were concerted in their belief that the Marguerite Casey Foundation has embarked upon a quest likely to be fulfilled if they continue to listen to the voices of people in local communities. In Los Angeles, Miyoko Oshima, President of the Southern California Association for Philanthropy, opened the round of Listening Circles by saying, "The issues are vast and the problems immense. Having organizations join together around these issues is most welcome. The approach taken by the Marguerite Casey Foundation is to be commended – to

ascertain needs in communities by listening to the people who live in those communities. This is a wonderful happening.”

Six cities and six hundred voices later, Linda Jones of the Tulalip Tribe in Yakima shared her thoughts on the value of listening as she remarked, “A Caring, nurturing community makes a family healthy. A community in which no two biological parents are alone is a healthy community -- a community that believes children are gifts. . . . The Marguerite Casey Foundation’s Listening Circle is the first I’ve heard of a foundation asking what to do to spend their money on families and children.”

As the Marguerite Casey Foundation’s leaders and Board members strive to develop responsive and informed approaches to grant making, they are well positioned to echo the sentiments and charges of those who lent their voices to these Listening Circles. If the dedication demonstrated by traveling the country to listen to the voices of those less heard is any indication of the Marguerite Casey Foundation’s convictions, then it is likely that, having listened, they now will have the courage to act.