



Safe Families for Children

Racine & Kenosha

# Strengthening Relational Connections as an Evidence-Based Approach to Preventing Violence in the City of Racine

**Submitted to:** City of Racine Community Violence Prevention Providers

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## Foster Care's Impact on Community Violence

Safe Families for Children is a 20-year-old nonprofit dedicated to keeping children out of the foster care system by coming alongside isolated families and building a comprehensive network of volunteers to create a support system available in times of crisis. It is these support systems that provide a variety of solid options for families to turn to, preventing the kinds of desperate decisions that can lead to the involvement of Child Protective Services.

According to the 2023 Out-of-Home Placement Report by the Department of Children and Families, Racine is the 7th highest county with children living away from their parents in kinship placements, foster care, or group home environments. The community impact of these situations in regards to curtailing violence has been carefully documented and studied by many organizations, including the Annie E. Casey Foundation, who summarized in their online report<sup>1</sup>:

1. 50% of the homeless population spent time in foster care.
2. 16% of youth who were in foster care at age 17 and surveyed at age 21 had been incarcerated in the last two years.
3. 18% of all state incarcerations and 9% of all federal incarcerations were in foster care at some point in their lives.
4. Foster care kids are twice as likely to engage in illicit drug use, five times more likely to be drug-dependent and up to four times more likely to have other substance use disorders.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> "What Happens to Youth Aging Out of Foster Care." Annie E. Casey Foundation. <https://www.aecf.org/blog/what-happens-to-youth-aging-out-of-foster-care>

<sup>2</sup> "Psychiatric symptoms and substance use disorders in a nationally representative sample of American adolescents involved with foster care." National Library of Medicine. <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC1472845/>

5. Only 54% of kids who were in foster care at age 17 are employed part or full time when they reach the age of 21.

These statistics are important to the conversation of preventing violence in our community because all those issues (drug use, unemployment, housing instability, incarceration) have all been identified as increasing the likelihood of youth violence.<sup>3</sup>

### **The Unique Interventional Strategy of Safe Families for Children**

In response to the need for social connection, Safe Families for Children recruits, trains and empowers volunteer community members to build relationships with families experiencing social isolation. SFFC creates organic support networks using four types of volunteers; Family Friends, Family Coaches, Host Families, and Resource Friends, all of which come together to create what we call a Circle of Support.

*Family Friends* support parents through friendship and mentoring. Examples of this could include; texting or calling during the week to offer encouragement, helping parents prepare for job interviews, assistance in budgeting, providing occasional transportation, etc. The majority of our referrals involve friendship requests.

When a new referral is opened, they are always paired with a Family Friend(s) and a *Family Coach*. Their coach will collaborate with the parent in setting goals, share local resources, and check in with the Family Friend to see how the relationship is progressing. Coaches touch base with their parents once a week to discuss ongoing goals and provide steps to achievement. They also meet virtually every week with our Family Coach Supervisor, Jessy

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<sup>3</sup> “Risk and Protective Factors: Youth Violence Prevention” US Centers for Disease Control & Prevention.  
<https://www.cdc.gov/youth-violence/risk-factors/index.html>

Burns, to ask questions and learn of additional community resources they can share. Their purpose is to use a volunteer relationship (as opposed to a “worker”) to offer encouragement and accountability in goal achievement.

Occasionally, a referral will request additional childcare support. *Host Families* provide safe places for children to stay while parents get back on their feet, when needed. If it is not an emergency request, we will connect the referral to the Host Family weeks in advance so they can get to know each other. This gives the kids an opportunity to visualize where they will be temporarily living, often replacing any fear or reticence with excitement and anticipation. Hostings are completely voluntary and referrals are welcome to pick their children up at any time, as they always maintain custody. A few examples of when a hosting may be requested include; parents participating in substance abuse treatment programs, childbirth when older kids are in the home, families experiencing a medical crisis or homelessness, or daycare assistance while waiting for the childcare voucher. Host Families also are required to have completed home safety studies similar to what is required for foster parents to ensure a safe temporary environment for hosted children.

The final volunteer role is that of a *Resource Friend*. These individuals are focused on providing tangible goods and services. For example, they may volunteer to make vehicle repairs or pay to repair a washing machine. They may donate furniture for a family about to be rehoused or cook meals for volunteers who are hosting children. Some even provide gift cards that are given to families as a form of celebration after achieving a goal.



All these different roles come together to support and strengthen the family identified as being “at risk” for foster care intervention, or a parent who is fleeing a domestic violence situation and needs to start over.

## **Training Volunteers in Trauma-Informed Care**

Family Friends, Family Coaches, and Host Family volunteers are all given an extensive 4-hour training in Cultural Competency, Implicit Bias Awareness, Protective Factors, Adverse Childhood Experiences, the HOPE Framework (Healthy Outcomes from Positive Experiences), and Trauma-Informed Care. They are encouraged to envelope isolated families in the circle of a caring community who understands the complicated underpinnings of poverty in its many forms. It is the goal of Safe Families to build stronger communities by connecting families as geographically close as possible to create a safety net of care around neighborhoods.

## **Safe Families for Children is Evidence-Based**

In November 2023, a study was published in the peer-reviewed International Journal on Child Maltreatment (IJCM) demonstrating that the Safe Families for Children model had empirical evidence demonstrating the efficacy of our methods of keeping children out of the foster care system. In June 2024, that study was revisited by the California Evidence-Based Clearinghouse for Child Welfare (CEBC) who gave Safe Families for Children (SFFC) their highest rating — “Promising Research Evidence” — stating that SFFC was “highly relevant” for child welfare practice. This step verified that we are, in fact, achieving our mission of keeping

kids out of the foster care system and building stronger, more resilient, families. As we achieve this objective, violence will be reduced in our communities.

## Goals and Objectives of the RFP

Safe Families for Children Racine/Kenosha is requesting \$30,000 to establish and facilitate the following between May 1, 2025 through September 30, 2025. (See attached Budget Proposal for specific costs.)

1. Staff presentations to Racine CPS, Women's Resource Center, and local COP Houses to promote the prevention model of Safe Families to the individuals working one-on-one with those parents who are on the edge of requiring foster care services or are 18 years old and aging out of foster care without support.
2. The addition of 15-20 referral families in the Racine area to "Active Status" within the Safe Families for Children program. Once a family is activated, relationships are established via text thread and a "Meet and Greet" held at Chic-Fil-A to share a meal with the referral family and all their volunteers, including children.
3. Providing each of those referral families with...
  - a. Weekly connection with their Family Coach or Family Coach Supervisor for goal assessment and resource development.
  - b. Weekly connection with their Family Friend for emotional support or transportation.
  - c. Hosting support if needed, with staff check-ins to ensure children are being properly cared for while their parents are indisposed.

- d. Staff oversight of volunteer relationships, facilitating events to bring families together physically and encourage memory-making
4. Training 10-15 additional volunteers in Adverse Childhood Experiences, Trauma Based Informed Care, Protective Factors, and other important skills to enhance their ability to connect and encourage families in crisis.
5. Completion of a Protective Factors Survey at the beginning of each relationship and repeated every 2 months to gather empirical data of the efficacy in achieving the objectives of parental resilience and support.

## Experience and Evaluation

Safe Families for Children has been operating in Racine since 2021. Heather Gaither was appointed the first full-time Director of Development in January, 2024. Since that time, SFFC Racine/Kenosha has seen...

- 158% increase in open referrals from 2024 to 2023.
- 200% increase in intake calls received requesting services.
- 223% increase in the average number of parents/children served every month.

A current ongoing study is being conducted to measure the long-term effect of the relationships being established with SFFC in the area by following up with referrals after 3 months, 6 months, 1 year, and 2 years to see if they are still using their Circle of Support.

## **Staff Experience**

Before accepting the position of the Director of Development, Heather was a Family Coach Supervisor for Safe Families, and before that a citizen volunteer and Advisory Board Member since 2018. She has a Bachelor's Degree in Social Work and Political Science and worked as a "Child Counselor" for a foster-care alternative nonprofit in Nashville, TN for several years before moving north. She launched her own private business in 2007 before selling in 2024, giving her a vast amount of experience in management, marketing, and community relations.

Jessy Burns, the Family Coach Supervisor for SFFC Racine/Kenosha, has worked in a variety of social service organizations, including the Job Corps. Her lived experience as an African American woman who moved from the poverty class to working class makes her indispensable in offering volunteers and referrals training on bridging racial and socio-economic gaps. She is working on a BA in psychology at UW-Parkside.

Lillie Andrus, the Intake Coordinator for SFFC Racine/Kenosha, has a BA from Liberty University and uses her experience working in several group home facilities in West Virginia to offer encouragement to families as they work through the intake process. Not all intake calls are accepted, as SFFC prioritizes those families that have indicated a deep desire and need for connection to preserve the volunteer pool. Families requesting only transactional needs are referred on to other agencies.