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OPINION

My Brother's Troubling Story Shows Why Philanthropy Should Avoid Investing in Institutional Care

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On that first visit, my brother was nearly unrecognizable. It had been seven years since I last saw him; seven years since we had lived together for just one year, when I was 6 and he was 7.

During the intervening time, our lives in the foster-care system had taken different paths. I had spent time in and out of foster homes. My brother, by contrast, was deemed too emotionally troubled to be placed with a family following the sudden death of his adopted mother and was put in a state-run institution.

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Those diverging paths eventually turned into a chasm. By the time I was in my twenties, I had founded [Think of Us](#), a nonprofit dedicated to transforming child welfare. I testified before Congress. My brother spent most of his twenties incarcerated or homeless.

Through all this, I remained haunted by that long-ago day when I visited my brother at the prison-like facility that was his home for eight years. I remember being greeted with metal detectors and pat downs upon arrival. I expected our reconnection to be a moment of joy. It was not. The strain of daily life and all the medication he was forced to take had left him disturbed, dull, and not at all like the talkative, energetic kid I remembered.

I believed he brought this on himself. I was conditioned to feel that way by staff at the facility who told me he was violent, who listened in on our calls, and who took away his privileges, including the right for me to visit him. I did not see how the adults created a system that amounted to state-sanctioned abuse — that it was that system, not my brother, that was to blame for what happened to him.

I've been thinking a lot about my brother's story lately amid [calls in some circles](#) for greater philanthropic investment in institutional care, mostly driven by [news reports](#) of kids sleeping in child-welfare offices because of a lack of space in congregate facilities. Based on my own experiences as a foster youth and those of my brother, along with decades of research and data, I am certain that more institutional care is not the solution and would, in fact, cause palpable harm.

At a time when the Biden administration has opened doors to a genuine overhaul of the foster-care system, those of us who have dedicated our lives to this cause, including those in philanthropy, should not be

tempted to move backward into an era when institutional care was the norm. President Biden's 2023 budget has the potential to spur historic changes by significantly increasing federal reimbursements to states for the costs of placing foster children with relatives or close family friends and decreasing reimbursements for those placed in institutional settings.

The presence of these new approaches in the president's budget is the result of decades of innovation and experimentation made possible by philanthropic support. These include investments in technology to locate the family members of foster kids and in programs that train relatives to care for foster children with severe mental-health needs. Now is the time to ramp up that work.

That should start with dispelling myths about the benefits of institutional care. I hung on to many of those myths myself until very recently when my organization released a study based on young people's experiences living in child-welfare institutions. I heard my brother's story echoed in the stories of the young people we interviewed and finally started to realize that I had judged him all wrong. Let's uproot those myths starting now.

Myth #1: Children are placed in institutions because of severe mental-health needs. Proponents of institutional care say these facilities are necessary because some children require short-term intensive treatment to stabilize them. In reality, 40 percent of children in institutions have no clinical need for nonfamily care, according to the Children's Bureau. Black boys, like my brother, are nearly 30 percent more likely to be placed in institutions than other foster youths.

My brother entered institutional care when his adoptive mother died. In his grief, he acted out in ways that were developmentally appropriate. Rather than responding with support, the system deemed him too "emotionally disturbed" and shut him away in institutions, where he would stay, except for one year, from ages nine to 18. Our research shows that his story is all too common. If these children had access to high-quality care aimed at helping those who experience trauma, most could have grown up with the love of a supportive family.

Myth #2: Institutional care is about healing. While there are excellent facilities that help children overcome trauma, they are not the norm. Institutional care has been shown to stunt children's healing and development. Most young people we spoke with told us how their time in institutions compounded their trauma.

Growing up, I didn't believe my brother when he said that staff made him fight other children, that some were inappropriate sexually, and that he feared for his life. But young people we spoke to told similar stories about the neglect, harm, and loneliness they felt and the physical and sexual abuse they endured. These are not the conditions that allow children to heal.

Myth #3: Deinstitutionalization has resulted in children sleeping in child-welfare offices. As the child-welfare field works to emphasize families over facilities, supporters of institutional care claim that, without institutions, youths would have nowhere to go. This is patently absurd.

The placement crisis in child welfare stems from the long-term failure to license and retain high-quality foster homes. This failure to appropriately provide homes for children should not be used as justification to preserve the status quo.

Instead, the causes of the crisis should be addressed by investing in prevention and finding high-quality foster homes for young people, especially homes where children are raised by people they already know and trust.

This is personal for me. A few years ago, my brother and I learned we had an aunt who lived only 58 miles away from us when we were kids. She was a foster parent who could have provided a loving home. But those in the system never put in the effort to find her. Similarly, the youths we interviewed said they were told repeatedly that they would have to stay in facilities because there weren't enough homes, because they were too old for a family, or because the licensing process was too difficult for their relatives.

What Grant Makers Can Do

For centuries, philanthropists have supported society's most vulnerable: children who lack a home or family. Despite the best of intentions, that funding has often gone toward outdated systems, such as the orphanages of decades past or the institutional care settings of today.

But philanthropy has also played a vital role in funding groundbreaking research and programs that improve outcomes for thousands of foster kids. As a 15-year-old boy, I was able to participate in just such a program — the Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative. It provided me with the tools to succeed outside the child-welfare system and changed my life. More foster kids need access to such programs.

Rather than invest in antiquated structures that deepen racial inequity and childhood trauma, philanthropy should build on hard-won progress by continuing to innovate and by encouraging governments to embrace family-centered approaches to child well-being.

I recently asked my brother what would have helped him most during his years in the child-welfare system. His one-word answer: family.

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