

## Problem

Foster children and youth need safe, stable, and loving family homes to help them heal from the trauma they have experienced. While caregivers strive to nurture and care for the vulnerable youth in their homes, barriers accessing crucial community-based, trauma-informed services during moments of tension and instability often impede foster youth from stabilizing and thriving in home placements. Caregivers and youth need real-time assistance to navigate misunderstandings and frustrations. Without immediate supports and services, they can feel helpless and unable to manage critical situations, leading them to give up hope that they can overcome these challenges. Ultimately, this can leave youth feeling further traumatized, and possibly facing another placement change, hospitalization, or institutionalization. Even worse, in many circumstances, caregivers call the police because they lack other, more appropriate options for immediate help. Engaging law enforcement can often escalate rather than calm these situations, leading to the inappropriate criminalization of traumatized children.

## Solution

A coordinated response system consisting of (1) a statewide hotline and (2) county mobile response units that are trained in working with child welfare populations. The hotline would be available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week and staffed by specialists trained in conflict resolution and de-escalation to provide immediate assistance over the phone to help defuse difficult situations. If specialists determine that in-home support is still needed after speaking with the child and/or caregiver, they may dispatch a county mobile response unit to stabilize the situation, assess the caregiver's and youth's needs, and connect the family to existing community supports and services. The mobile response unit would also be available 24/7 and include child welfare and trauma specialists, as well as peer partners when available.

## Outcome

The **Family Urgent Response System (FURS)** will:

- ◆ Increase **stability** for abused and neglected children and youth and ensure they live in safe and nurturing homes;
- ◆ Increase access to in-home supports to help children and youth heal and avoid **re-traumatization**; and
- ◆ Reduce law enforcement involvement and the needless **criminalization** of traumatized youth.

## Contact

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## Recent Youth & Family Experiences

These accounts represent first-hand stories from children and youth in foster care and their caregivers who have benefited from mobile response and coordinated response systems nationwide. Some details have been changed, including their names, to protect their privacy.

Nina, an eight-year-old, was placed in the care of a foster family due to severe domestic violence in her home. Nina was traumatized from being removed from her family and would scream and hit when she felt upset or anxious in her new home. Jeanette, her caregiver, didn't know what to do when this happened and questioned whether her home was the best fit for Nina. Jeanette reached out to the mobile response team for help during a particularly difficult moment. The clinician helped de-escalate the situation, coached Jeanette on how to help Nina during tense moments in the future, and shared other local resources that could help. This guidance from the mobile response team helped Nina stabilize in the home and supported the family's efforts to bond.

Damian had been in foster care since he was 12. By age 16, he had lived in more foster homes and group homes than he could count and had changed schools many times because of the moves. These constant changes left him feeling lonely, upset and frustrated. After transitioning to a new group home, Damian called a mobile response team for help. He was angry with the staff and couldn't calm himself down. The mobile response team talked to Damian and helped him decide how to share his feelings with the staff, deterring a call to the police. Following the call, the mobile response team collaborated with his social worker to determine how to create more stability for him in his placement and school.

Ana, an 11-year-old, had been separated from her father a year earlier following allegations of neglect. She longed to be with her family and siblings who lived outside the U.S. Ana was severely depressed and had recently become more withdrawn and isolated. Her foster mother, Maria, contacted a mobile response team when Ana said she wanted to harm herself. Ana talked to the mobile response clinician about her loneliness and, together with Ana and Maria, the team created a safety plan and worked with Ana's social worker to connect the family to more services in the community to support Ana's needs.

Ivy was handcuffed at just 7 years old, charged with a crime at 9, and sentenced to a juvenile detention center at 12 because her caregivers didn't have anybody but the police to call in times of crisis. In the juvenile justice system, she never found the dignity, love, and stability she needed to thrive. Instead she was taught that there was something wrong with her. Ivy is now a young adult and was excited to hear about FURS. "I like this bill because foster parents, relative caregivers, and group homes call the police when they feel all out of options and overwhelmed. This always hurts the kids. A response system has the potential to protect youth from these interactions with law enforcement."

Lily, age 9, had been living with her Aunt Joan and her family for the last five years. Lily found it hard to express herself when she felt sad, disappointed, or mad and sometimes those feelings came out as angry outbursts, physical aggression, or the destruction of property. After Joan reached out for help, a mobile response and stabilization unit was dispatched to the home and additional services were put in place, including in-home therapy for four hours a week and behavioral assistance for six hours per week. At a later follow up visit, Lily shared with the mobile response and stabilization team that she had been feeling better lately as she was using the breathing exercises she learned from her therapist and writing down her feelings when she was upset instead of yelling or breaking things. The caregiver also reported a significant improvement in her own stress level as a result of the support provided after the mobile response and stabilization team became involved.