

Problem Solving Initiative Fixing Foster Care

Fall 2020 Syllabus

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Course Description: Welcome to the problem-solving initiative on Fixing Foster Care. We're excited that you've decided to join us. In this course, multidisciplinary groups of students will devise potential solutions to problems confronting the foster care system. Students will be split into three teams and assigned a particular policy topic. From then, the class will proceed in two parts. In the first part, the teams will explore their assigned policy domain to get a more refined sense of challenges and possible solutions that warrant further research and elaboration. Each team will draft an 8 to 10 page memo with their findings and present those findings to the group on October 21st. In the second part of the class, each team will dig into particular policy solutions with an eye to presenting them to policymakers who may be in a position to implement them. The final work product will be a 20 to 30 page policy memo, along with a 15 to 20 minute presentation to stakeholders on November 18th. In this course, as in all the problem solving initiative courses, students are the leaders in advancing the course objectives. Course instructors will be team leaders rather than traditional professors delivering pre-established content. In light of all this, your vigorous participation this coming semester will be influential in shaping the particular outcomes of our course.

Topic Areas:

EXPEDITING REUNIFICATION: The focus of this work group will be on how systems might be able to expedite the reunification of children in foster care with their parents. Achieving family reunification is a priority for all state child welfare systems. While children leaving the foster care system are more likely to exit via reunification as compared with any other exit type (reunifications account for about 50% of all foster care exits, as compared with about 20% for adoption and 10% for emancipation)(Child Welfare Information Gateway), recent data from federal audits reveal that states, including Michigan struggle to achieve this goal in a timely manner. Delays exist in how agencies provide services and courts convene hearings and in many other aspects of the system. This workgroup will seek to understand why Michigan struggles on this measure and will propose solutions to address it.

AGING OUT AND THE TRANSITION TO ADULTHOOD: The use of the phrase "aging out" to describe the departure of adolescents from the child welfare system indicates a developmental process through which foster youth transition into adulthood. Although the transition to adulthood was historically viewed as a relatively brief stage of development, the current evidence suggests a more lengthened stage—in part pulled at the front end by the early onset of puberty and stretched at the back end by the delays in marriage and career employment (Steinberg 2014). Adolescents associated with the child welfare system encounter

significant barriers in the transition to adulthood and as a result, various federal and state policies have been put in place to help facilitate a more viable transition by providing both hard and soft services while foster youth achieve milestones such as living independently, obtaining a diploma, attending college or maintaining steady employment. Some youth transition less successfully than others and become involved with the criminal justice system. The focus of this workgroup will be on the population of youth making this transition to adulthood as they exit the child welfare system. In part, this group will work to understand the policies and practices in place facilitate a successful transition – and generate ideas on how the State could better support this population.

RESIDENTIAL CARE FOR CHILDREN: The term residential or congregate care facilities represent a broad category of placements (substitute care settings) that include group homes, half-way homes, campus based homes, emergency shelters, self-contained settings, and staff secured setting (Child Welfare League of America, 2005). In general, residential care services represent an option of last resort. That is, child welfare systems attempt to work with children and families in the least restrictive environment. Such practices reflect the 1980 Adoption Assistance and Child Welfare Act (P.L. 96272) which established the foundation for a continuum of care (Stuck, Small, & Ainsworth, 2000). When less restrictive environments are unavailable or insufficient with regard to meeting needs of individuals, child welfare systems move youth up the continuum of care and into more secure settings. There is a healthy debate regarding the benefits and use of residential services for victims of child abuse/neglect. This debate is quite relevant to the child welfare work in Michigan given the recent death of an adolescent at the hands of facility staff. The focus of this work group is to understand how residential care is utilized in Michigan, to understand whether children are spending an appropriate amount of time in residential care and to offer improvements for the use of this particular treatment modality.

Course Objectives: By the completion of this course, students will be able to:

1. Articulate the role of their discipline in addressing the topic of the course.
2. Define and understand the identified problem.
3. Describe methods to communicate across disciplines and with key stakeholders to discuss this problem.
4. Develop the skills to work collaboratively to create innovative professional perspectives and practices that assist with solving the problem.
5. Reflect on the systemic factors that perpetuate and make it difficult to solve the problem.

Class meetings: Wednesdays, 3:20-6:20pm. Zoom info is on Canvas.

Attendance, Class Participation, and Opt-Outs: Class participation is an essential part of the course, as we will spend time in class applying the concepts and research ideas you have gathered. Class attendance and participation is mandatory. If you are unable to make a class, please email us in advance. Office

hours are by appointment. This course requires significant participation and preparation. In any course in which group work is an integral component of the course, students may have concerns about workload distribution within the group. We are hopeful in light of the real world applications of our work, that “free riders” will not be an issue. However, peer assessment will be part of the evaluation of the course. Each student will complete a self and peer assessment form at both the midpoint of the semester and at the end.

That said, we are aware that the material covered in this course might include topics some find difficult or upsetting to discuss. If you would find it personally difficult to discuss a particular topic in class, let us know in advance, and we will not expect you to participate in the relevant conversation. It is important for you to develop the skill of speaking publicly about hard legal issues and complicated family struggles, but we do not wish to put any of you on the spot to discuss a subject that you, for personal reasons, do not wish to have to talk about in the classroom setting.

Beyond that, with COVID-19 still raging, we recognize that one of us may become ill, need to take care of someone who is ill, or be emotionally affected because of the effect of this pandemic on their loved ones. And with our class being conducted online, we also anticipate that some of you will sometimes have technical difficulties with your equipment or internet connectivity. For all of these reasons, this year more than ever it is important that you keep the lines of communication open with us about your circumstances, whatever they are, so that we can (a) help you as best we can, and (b) prepare accordingly so our class sessions can run smoothly. This course is meant to challenge and motivate you, not to stress you out or add too much to your plate during times of intense emotional strain. If you are facing difficult circumstances and need to opt out of participating in a class session, tell us. If you know that you will not be able to join us for an online class session, please tell us that, too.

Zoom Stuff: The biggest potential drawback to remote learning is that it can inhibit student engagement and participation. This semester, we want to combat this by creating a welcoming and inclusive virtual learning community, which requires each of us to be actively engaged in each class. To do so, we ask that you adhere to the following guidelines during class:

- Display your full name on your screen

- Please turn on your video during class if you are comfortable doing so. (Pick a virtual background if you'd like, as long as it's not distracting.) Turning on your video helps build community and encourages engagement. It also helps us as your professors. If you choose to turn your video off during a specific class, or for a particular portion of a class, you don't need to explain why your video is off. But please let us know if you are uncomfortable turning on your video at all. Creating a safe and welcoming learning environment is one of our top priorities.

- Please close out of all other programs, apps, etc. on your computer so that you are not distracted.
- Keep your microphone muted when you aren't speaking to the class or in a breakout room.
- Please don't stress if a pet or a kid wanders across your screen. One of ours will likely do so several times a class. We might just ask that you introduce them. We'll do the same.
- During class, feel free to use the chat function to comment on the discussion, raise questions, etc. If you have a question, feel free to use the "raise hand" feature on Zoom, physically raise your hand, or simply interject when there is a pause.
- There may be times in which your technology fails you or other circumstances impair participation. Don't stress about it. Just do your best; and please let us know if there are ways we can make things easier for you.
- All of our class sessions will be recorded and posted on Canvas, so if you have to miss a class due to illness or technical difficulties, you will be able to watch later to see what you missed.

Building Community: We believe that building community is critical to the learning experience. As such, we'll take time each class to get to know one another. We might begin class with a short icebreaker. During class, we'll be doing a lot of small group work using breakout rooms. And please call us by our first names! At the beginning of the course, you will have the opportunity to share your preferred name and pronouns.

Discourse: We will discuss and debate various issues as they relate to parenting, state monitoring of children, CPS and of course the decision to remove or return a child to the biological parents. All of us come to this course with various experiences and values, as well as assumptions, prejudices, and stereotypes. Disagreements are expected and in fact welcomed as long as we respect diverse opinions and refrain from attacking one another personally. Remain open to evidence presented, which may conflict with your own viewpoints and perspectives. We seek to develop a culture and climate where people can freely explore and exchange ideas.

Feedback: We want to make sure this is the best learning experience possible for each of you and will work hard to improve each week. To help with that, here is the link to a Google Form (<https://forms.gle/cbDEiFZpn226oJD78>) where you can leave anonymous feedback anytime you want. (The link is also on our Canvas page). Let's not wait until the midterm eval to fix what isn't working.

Class Structure: Each week, class will be a mix of short lectures on substantive topics, and group discussions and presentations. The last hour will be an opportunity for your small groups to meet.

Weekly Reading Reflections: Students are required to develop a weekly response (a free flowing paragraph or two is sufficient) to the readings. This is not a summary of the reading (although you should be familiar with the main points/arguments). Rather what did you walk away with in terms of thoughts or connections or applications – perhaps to other readings – or current events – or policies or practices in the field? You should end your reflection with at least two discussion question for class. This will be helpful for us to structure and guide discussion. We will also pose some of these questions to the guest speakers. You are required to post your reflection/questions by midnight on the Tuesday before class.

The first three weeks of the course will be an introduction to problem-solving methodology and will be with students from all the PSIs. Professors Bridgette Carr and Ann Verhey-Henkey will be leading the class. Our first class focused just on foster care issues will be on 9/23.

Speakers: To bolster your understanding of the policy environment, we have invited a roster of guest speakers who are prominent players in the state and national foster care community. While not every speaker will be directly relevant to your group's topic, they will provide useful context and could spark ideas for many groups

Invited Speakers and Required Readings

9/23: Joe Ryan and Vivek Sankaran

Dorothy Roberts, *Shattered Bonds*, chapters 1-3

James Dwyer, *Liberal Child Welfare Policy and its Destruction of Black Lives*, introduction

9/30 Christopher Church, Senior Director, Strategic Consulting, Casey Family Programs

Sankaran and Church, *Easy Come, Easy Go: the plight of children who spend less than thirty days in foster care*. *University of Pennsylvania Journal of Law and Social Change*.

Font and Gershoff, *Reforming the Foster Care System: Legislative and Judicial Efforts in Foster Care and Best Interests of the Child*

10/7 Jennifer Rodriguez, Executive Director, Youth Law Center

Casey, Outcomes for Youth in Congregate Care

Casey, Rightsizing Congregate Care

Cook et al. Complex Trauma in Children and Adolescents

10/14 Mark Courtney, Professor, School of Social Work Administration, University of Chicago

Introduction: Why Focus on The Transition to Adulthood for Vulnerable Populations? *D. Wayne Osgood, E. Michael Foster, Constance Flanagan, and Gretchen R. Ruth*

The Transition to Adulthood for Youth “Aging Out” of the Foster Care System
Mark E. Courtney and Darcy Hughes Heuring

Michigan DHHS, eligibility for extended foster care

10/21 Mid-semester Presentations

10/28 Jooyeun Chang, Director, Children's Services Agency, Michigan Department of Health and Human Services

Patrick Barry, Professor, University of Michigan Law School

Courtney et al. Evaluation of the Impact of Enhanced Parental Legal Representation on the Timing of Permanency Outcomes for Children in Foster Care

Sugrue, E. Evidence base for avoiding family separation in child welfare practice

Zinn, A. E. & Slowriver, J. (2008) Expediting Permanency: Legal Representation for Foster Children in Palm Beach County. Chicago: Chapin Hall Center for Children at the University of Chicago

11/4 Alan Detlaff, Dean, University of Houston School of Social Work

Kristin Webber, Director of Equity, Inclusion and Justice, Center for the Study of Social Policy

Now is the time for abolition.

Payne, C. Alternatives to Congregate Care. San Diego State University

11/11 Rob Geen, Director, Policy Reform and Advocacy, Annie E. Casey Foundation

Center for the Study of Social Policy. Better outcomes for old youth of color in foster care

Courtney et al. Report from CalYouth, Outcomes at 21

Important Deadlines:

10/20: Written report on scope of problem.

10/21: Presentations on scope of problem.

11/18: Capstone Presentation

12/11: Final written report incorporating feedback from the capstone.

Grading:

In this seminar there are five components to your final grade (totals 99 points)

- (a) Attendance and Participation (20 points)
- (b) Weekly reflection and questions (14 points)
- (c) Midterm (problem oriented) paper (25 points)
- (d) Final (solution oriented) paper (30 points)
- (e) Class presentation (10 points)

In this class, an “A+” = 100%; “A”= 95-99%; “A-”= 90-94%; “B+”= 87-89%; “B”=84-86%; “B-”= 83-86 pts.; “C+”= 77-79%; & “C”= 73-76%. Anything lower – we should talk in person.