

BEYOND SYSTEMS TO COMMUNITY CARE AND CONNECTION

MESSAGE TO CHILD WELFARE SYSTEMS

Jodi and Natasha (whose names have been changed for this story) are two young women in their twenties who work as advocates for change in the child welfare system.

Jodi Harper, a Hawaiian native who is proud of her indigenous roots, isn't sure how many foster homes she has lived in since birth. While Jodi doesn't expand on the details, she emphasizes that her experiences in the foster care system in Hawaii were marked by instability and frequent change.

Natasha Jones, a Black graduate student and data specialist with a regional homeless coalition, spent her teen years in the foster care system in her home state of Tennessee. For Natasha, the system stepped in during a crisis point. But addressing one set of issues had the unintended effect of removing her from an extended community – one that provided positive cultural connection and deep roots.

Systems Should Build (Not Block) Connections

In a recent conversation, both Jodi and Natasha reflected on their strikingly similar experiences in a system that left them looking elsewhere for belonging, community, and a clear path forward despite being set up to provide them with protection and connection.

“The system addressed the harm to me from one environment, but it wasn't set up to consider aspects of my wider environment that were stabilizing for me and whether more could have been done to support those connections,” Natasha explained. “Systems get involved at a point in time – and that's usually at a time of crisis. Communities get to see the full arc of a person.”

This leads to real challenges in being “known” by a system.

Growing up in “the system” also made it more difficult to feel a strong sense of belonging or connection. Jodi shared this comes in part from systems being overly structured rather than human centered.

“It's unrealistic for navigating day-to-day life, the space where connections actually happen. There are little things that end up being big,” Jodi explained, “like relaxing the rules and policies so that foster parents are empowered to give kids normal teenage experiences – like having a sleepover at a friend's house – without it taking three weeks for the system to sign off on it.”

It was Natasha who most squarely named what she had most needed from the child welfare system:

“You might look like a system, but what I need is a relationship.”

Seeking Belonging and Community

Both Jodi and Natasha found communities outside the child welfare system that helped them build a sense of identity, belonging, and agency as well as a belief in their own futures. Jodi and Natasha both reflected on how "community" is about both caring for and building strengths in young people.

“ We shout **self-care** at youth who really need **community care**,” Jodi admonished. “Young people are often trying to forge these connections on their own. They need adults to come alongside them. We have the power to heal young people, but we need to build their capacity to create connections for themselves.”

Jodi found community at school.

“ At school, I developed a sense of belonging. I was able to develop a very different identity from the one I had in the foster system. At school I had the sense that something I was doing was right,” Jodi shared. “Seeing that I was able to thrive in one area made it possible for me to believe that my experiences in child welfare weren't my fault.”

She sees the development of "belonging" as distinct from the "behavior management" of a system.

“ **Communities are focused on belonging, not behaviors.** Communities are much better at teaching young people to stay regulated and modeling appropriate ways to self-advocate and respond to situations.”

Reflecting on the sense of belonging she found at school, Jodi noted:

“ It was good to have some of that modeled for me in another system (the school system) – one that operated more like a community for me. I needed adults to recognize my attempts at regulation and self-advocacy that weren't as effective as they could have been. I needed them to help me learn more effective models.”

For Natasha, two important communities emerged. A sense of identity affirmation from her faith community was coupled with support from the adults in her school community.

“ The faith-based community was a strong connection for me. These were folks who looked like me and didn't ask questions about where I came from.”

Natasha explained how the intentionality of supports from school staff played a major role when she was close to dropping out.

“ There were practices in place and adults wrapping themselves around me. When my grades started to slip, they stepped up and met with me. They asked questions and provided lots of accommodations. They also sought and funded some of my needs outside of the classroom – helping me get a therapist.”

Though their experiences were separated by thousands of miles and an ocean between, both Jodi and Natasha described similar characteristics in the people, places, and opportunities that made it possible for them to experience “community care” and start building the skills that they needed to thrive. Their teachers, program leaders, and faith community stepped into the roles of mentor and champion, provided instrumental support to ensure basic needs were met, and offered up positive alternative narratives for Jodi and Natasha to consider.



“ The school – teachers, counselors – made sure that I knew that when I graduated, I would have a shot,” Jodi reflected. “The school system operated more as a community than a system.”

The Importance of Connections When “Aging Out”

The essentials of community connections and navigation skills became even more apparent as these young women aged out of the child welfare system. For Jodi, this happened before she graduated from high school. She points to two strong connections with anchoring her and ensuring she remained at her school and graduated on time – a local Salvation Army program for youth transitioning out of foster care and teachers who went above and beyond.



Natasha's transition was bumpier. When she aged out the system, Natasha experienced an abrupt disconnection of health care coverage. As a young adult, she lacked knowledge of services she was still eligible for and experience in navigating the health care system. The system provided no liaisons or mentors to help her access services for former foster youth. When COVID-19 hit, Natasha was without health coverage and, suddenly, without stable income when her hairstylist business was sidelined.

To support herself, she needed a new job quickly, but she also needed basic on-the-job protections and health insurance if she did fall ill.

A community connection, the Tennessee Justice Center, provided the means to get reconnected. They helped her secure coverage as a former foster child, thanks to a little-known provision in the Affordable Care Act. The timing proved critical. The next week, Natasha contracted COVID-19; a missed or delayed connection would have been a significant setback.

Natasha's continued connection to the Tennessee Justice Center has facilitated her accessing other resources as well. In particular, they have helped her access information about how Chafee funds, which are designed to help current and former foster care youth achieve self-sufficiency and successfully transition to adulthood, can be used to support her in pursuing a graduate degree.

What next?

Both Jodi and Natasha see the child welfare system as a hard place in which to experience belonging, agency, and self-determination. But both are actively involved in bringing about change to the system that so greatly shaped their early lives.

Natasha emphasizes the need for leaders of these systems to think and act differently:

“ It comes down to the priorities and mindsets of those in power. We are seeing in our society – across different systems – the tremendous need for new, creative energy to reorganize systems to better meet human developmental needs. Systems can never be community for me, but they can facilitate and then move out of the way of my connection to community.”

*Systems will never fully replace the natural communities in which connection and belonging flourish. Systems should be striving to encourage connection to organizations and groups who can provide the long-lasting, supportive relationships youth and young adults need. Community and system engagement may look different, but systems can work in tandem with community-based settings to ensure that young people experience belonging in the spaces where they might most readily find connection. This is especially true if systems follow the advice shared by these young leaders: **help me build natural supports, then get out of the way.***

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