Perspectives from the Field

Dr. Mark Courtney
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This is the second in a series of interviews SPARC is conducting with our advisory board members and with other child welfare leaders. Mark Courtney is a professor at the University of Chicago School of Social Services Administration, and an affiliated scholar at Chapin Hall, also at the University of Chicago. Dr. Courtney's research on the adult functioning of former foster youth is one of the best examples of research that has contributed directly to positive change in the child welfare policy landscape. Dr. Courtney has also conducted research on independent living services, family reunification, and solution-based casework as a child welfare casework practice model. Among his many awards and accolades is a 2010 Award for Public Leadership in Child Welfare, and he was also named Social Worker of the Year by NASW in the year 2000.

In this interview with SPARC, Dr. Courtney discusses his research and its implications for child welfare advocacy. His advice to advocates include the following:

- *Advocates should push proposals that have a clear connection between the intervention and the intended outcomes (and if there is no connection it is incumbent upon them to point out that it might not be a wise policy choice);*
- *Advocates have a responsibility to ask "why are we continuing to fund this program?" at least as much as they advocate for more money for programs;*
- *Programs to extend foster care to age 21 must be designed differently for young adults, who are responsible for making their own decisions and becoming independent;*
- *Major findings from evaluations of the Chaffee Independent Living Program demonstrate that classroom-based life skills programs don't typically have much impact and going to college, versus having a GED, pays off for young adults in the long run.*

Below is a transcript of highlights from the interview.

SPARC: Most of us are aware that the Midwest Study was a seminal piece of research on the outcomes of youth transitioning from foster care, but some people may not know about the ways that it continues to be mined by researchers to inform policy and practice. Can you tell us about some of your more recent work on the study and the policy implications?

Mark Courtney (MC): First, a colleague at the University of California and I did a study looking at predictors of young people's earnings through their early twenties. It's not surprising that their earnings lag. But we also found that there are certain things about the youth when they are still in foster care – such whether they have a drug or alcohol problem, whether they're working while they're in care, how they're doing while they're in school in care – that are all predictors of their employment outcomes well into their twenties. We also found that allowing people to remain in care after 18 translates into significantly higher earnings into their twenties. That's a function of the fact that young people are provided with care and supervision between the ages of 18 and 21, which leads to them being much more likely to finish high school and go

onto college, which translates into later earnings. The good news, and really important news, is that college pays a lot for young people aging out of foster care, even though they're less likely to go to college. By contrast, earning a GED doesn't appear to translate to higher earnings. That's consistent with the broader literature that shows that the GED really doesn't buy you much. I'm aware that there are still a lot of people who will advise these youth to get a GED, and I think in many cases we need to stop giving that advice to young people.

Second, a colleague of mine looked at crime among youth transitioning out of foster care, and found that extending care appeared to have an effect in decreasing crime among young women. We haven't yet quantified that benefit, but we are able to say that extending foster care has an impact on crime. We want to continue looking at this over a long period of time.

Finally, another colleague, who is a pediatrician as well as a health services researcher, has conducted a series of studies looking at health outcomes for young people aging out of care. So far she's shown that people aging out of care are more likely to have sexually transmitted infections (STIs) than other young people. She has also done some work on early trauma and its relationship to sexual victimization of foster youth. And there is another paper, which is under review right now, that shows that former foster youth now in their twenties are much more likely than their peers to suffer from cardiovascular conditions and chronic health conditions. The clear implication for practitioners and advocates is that, given the Affordable Care Act (ACA) provisions allowing young people to retain their Medicaid eligibility until age 26, we need to get them connected to primary care physicians and engaging in more healthy behaviors.

SPARC: SPARC advocates are also increasingly developing some strategies to focus more attention on prevention. While the Midwest Study tells us a lot about improving outcomes for kids who are leaving the system or who already left the system, what in the research sheds light on how to ensure that children get what they need *before* they come to the attention of the child welfare system?

MC: One thing that not enough people know is that the vast majority of young people who will age out of the child welfare system entered care in childhood or adolescence, and a lot of them came into care because of problems they had with their family behaviorally. Focusing on family-based mental heath interventions with adolescents who enter the child welfare system is something that we need to do more of.

Several studies have shown that about three-quarters of young people aging out say they have at least one strong family connection and are close to at least one adult in their family. About three-fifths of them are in regular contact (at least monthly) with their mom, and they have lots of contact with other family members. From a permanency standpoint, you might wonder why they haven't gone to live with those family members, and most of the youth are quite clear that an intervention needed to happen in their family and it wasn't safe for them to remain at home, but at the same time, many of them will rely on those family members after they leave care.

Although it isn't easy to navigate these relationships, it seems to me that we could do more to help. There are a number of evidence-based interventions around parent-child conflict that have been tested using rigorous designs and have been shown to be effective in helping parents and

young adults and adolescents to get along better, but we just aren't using them enough. It may be that simply improving community-based health services for families with adolescents would prevent a lot of placement in foster care. Also, when young people come to the attention of the child welfare system in early or late adolescence, quite often the nature of the problem is adolescents and their parents not getting along at all, which has escalated into violence or parents wanting the kids out of their house or runaway behavior, etc. So these evidence-based interventions for families and young people need to be used and funded adequately more than they are right now by child welfare agencies and mental health organizations.

Even if we don't always succeed with these interventions in preventing placement, which we'd all like to do, by engaging families in this way from the beginning, we lay the groundwork for helping these young people manage these relationships after aging out. Far too often, once a young person has been in care for a while and we've exhausted a reunification plan, the system acts as though that young person does not have a family. We need to remember that all of those relationships are going to be perfect, but if we ignore them then the young people don't learn the skills they need to manage those relationships effectively once they are young adults.

SPARC: We know you're working closely with California and other states to track the implementation of foster care extension to age 21 so that other states can learn from those efforts. What should the field be attuned to, and stay attuned to, during this implementation?

MC: One thing we have seen clearly so far is how profoundly different foster care for adults is than foster care for children. When it comes to young adults, we make decisions in terms of how we craft policies, but they need to make all the important decisions. They have the legal right to do that. They can decide to stay in care, they can decide to leave care – it isn't prison. I think the public and a lot of child welfare officials still have a hard time wrapping their mind around that. It's actually appropriate for young adults to try to exercise their independence in ways that test the limits of our anxiety – as any parent of a young adult knows – but also pushes their limits. Crafting policies and practices that work for this group is a brave new world.

Also, the question of whether we need court reviews for this population is a fundamental one. Some legal advocates and child advocates believe strongly that in the absence of court review, child welfare agencies would abdicate their responsibility to provide suitable extended care, whereas county agencies usually assert that they don't need court oversight to do a good job. That's an interesting and important question, and we've seen a lot of variability across states and within states in terms of how active the court is with respect to continuing foster care.

Another big question is living arrangements. Right now, there is a big movement in child welfare to reduce or eliminate the use of group care. Yet young adults typically live in groups. They live in apartments together; they live in dormitories. But we know very little about what works for in that regard. A lot of folks in communities around the country are asking these questions.

To me, the biggest lesson learned so far from implementation is that this is very complicated. You cannot implement this type of program quickly or behind closed doors, and even if you do engage others, you must do so in a good-faith way and everyone must be ready for a bumpy road. A collective recognition that there will be bumps in the road, but if we all stay at the table

and learn from how things are going together, we're much more likely to have a good outcome than if we expect to make this happen elegantly overnight.

SPARC: You are also the principal investigator for the federal Chaffee program, which has been around for a much longer period of time. Can you tell us what you have learned that would be helpful to advocates who are seeking effective approaches for older youth?

MC: Sure. I want to clarify that the legislation that created the Chafee Foster Care Independence Program set aside 1.5% of that program's funding to identify and evaluate promising programs of potential national significance using the most rigorous methods available. The evaluation program was called the Multi-Site Evaluation of Foster Youth Programs, and for the first round of investigations I was one of the principal investigators on that study. What I want to be clear about is that the project was never intended to evaluate the Chafee program *per se* – the Chaffee program is a funding mechanism.

SPARC: That's a very important distinction.

MC: Yes. For our evaluation, we looked all over the country for programs – through site visits, talking to state independent living coordinators, attending all the big conferences, and also inviting the field to put forward their ideas. Our main conclusion from that process was that, for the most part, the field really hadn't done their homework that, as an evaluator and as a policymaker, you would want a field to do before implementing programs. Very few programs had a clear sense of their target population, outcomes they were trying to achieve, and how to measure those outcomes – the elements of a basic logic model. So the field in many ways was not ready for the evaluation of much of what was going on. The evaluation lays out these observations. And I would hope that the evaluation isn't interpreted as "independent living services don't work," but that when we went out and tried to evaluate programs we found that the field needs to get serious about going out and doing its homework on the evidence base.

We evaluated four programs: a classroom-based life skills training program and a tutoring program for young people who are behind in math or reading, both in Los Angeles; an employment support program in Kern County, California; and an intensive case management program in Massachusetts. Three of the four programs – the life skills training program, the tutoring program, and the employment support program – had no effect on any outcomes of consequence. Each of the evaluations has lessons for the field.

The life skills training program had two main takeaways. First, if you're going to operate some kind of life skills training program, you need to understand the training young people are getting already. I'm not saying it is enough, but if you're going to have a program that claims to improve outcomes, it really ups the ante significantly over what people are already getting. Second, it raises a question about how effective life skills training outside of day-to-day experiences is going to be. Many people who have raised adolescents will say that the way their young people learn those skills is by practicing them and having someone there to help. When we try to package that learning, it may not really correspond well to the way people actually learn how to do things.

SPARC: The "opportunity moment" lesson.

MC: That's right. For the tutoring program, the lesson was that too often we introduce interventions in the lives of these young people without understanding what their context is. The young people in the control group (those that were not assigned to get this tutoring) got tutoring at school anyway. In retrospect, if Los Angeles County, and maybe our research team, had paid more attention to what was going on in the education landscape, we wouldn't have been surprised, because No Child Left Behind basically required schools to provide tutoring to kids who are behind. Kids in foster care are often behind, and are often concentrated in low-income communities and in so-called failing schools. Who knows, tutoring might be effective, but if people in foster care are already going to get tutoring through their schools because they're eligible for it, then should the child welfare agency offer that?

The Kern County program was really an unemployment program. These programs generally, and this program in particular, are what we call "light touch" programs. While the program would send out a monthly email to young people, they didn't really aggressively try to engage the them. And so only about a quarter of the young people in the treatment group (the group who got the intervention) got anything more than a newsletter. Most of them just had a few conversations, if that, with a caseworker. If we think about the kind of effort that will likely be needed to significantly move the dial on engaging young people in employment programs, a light touch is probably not going to work.

It's important to point out that the lesson from all of these is not to ignore or avoid these programs. Yes, you do evaluations to see what works, but you also do evaluations to see what doesn't work and *why* it doesn't work. And I think there is a lot to be learned from those three evaluations, even though the interventions didn't show an impact.

The intervention in Massachusetts created specialized units of caseworkers with around 15 young people at any given time and offered casework services related to independent living than are normally provided. The program had an impact. These young people were more likely to have key documents like a driver's license, for example – and that's good, although it's hard to justify a program that intensive on that basis alone. The more impressive finding was that young people in the intervention were more likely than the control group to go to college and to stay there for more than a semester. That's hugely important given the low level of post-secondary educational engagement of young people aging out of foster care.

This may speak to the skill set of your average social worker around what they're going to be most likely to help young people with. One might argue that given the social workers in this program had gone to college, they knew something about that and could therefore advise the young person. So, to expect that social workers who are not job developers or have not worked in youth employment programs are going to be effective doing that type of work may be expecting too much.

Our analysis of the Massachusetts program also suggests that it had an impact largely through enabling or convincing young people to remain in care, because the youth in the treatment group were more likely to stay in care past 18, and in Massachusetts at that time, you had to be in post-

secondary education to remain in care. So there's a bit of a chicken or egg problem here. The caveat of this evaluation is therefore if you're in a state that has not extended foster care, it's not clear that the findings of this evaluation will apply to you. In other words, you may not see the kinds of benefits they see in education if you don't extend care past 18.

SPARC: How can state advocates use some of these findings more effectively in their work, to promote the things that work and not fund the things that don't work without losing the dollars?

MC: Well, a couple things. One, there's a thought experiment that I think is worth all of us thinking about, and that is to ask yourself periodically: "Is the money being spent on me, as a service provider, resulting in better outcomes for these young people? Is that investment in me a better investment than just giving them the money?" Advocates really need to focus on this notion of effectiveness. And when you see policies and programs were we've done some research that begins to question some of the effectiveness of these programs, and if somebody says, well the evaluation that was done in Los Angeles County, and that program is different from ours, then you need to ask, "Well, how is it different? Why do you think it would be that much better than what happened in Los Angeles County?" Why not evaluate whether it is indeed working, in spite of the fact that other evaluations have shown that it isn't.

The other thing advocates can do is build into your advocacy efforts creating a knowledge base going forward to see whether a policy actually results in improved outcomes for children and families – whether specific programs that you're seeking funding for actually have their intended benefits, is just something that's an ethical responsibility of advocates. Just pushing for more money isn't enough. You have to push thoughtfully for the kinds of investments and knowledge generation that allow us to reflect back on those policy choices and say: "This was a good policy choice, this is what we've learned, and we can move on from there, and here's what others can learn from us," or "It turned out that policy wasn't a great policy choice," or "That program didn't work, and because we've looked at it, we have some sense of why it doesn't work and we're in a much better position now to tweak that policy or program."

SPARC: Do you have any last, parting words for the advocates as we conclude the interview?

MC: Hang in there for the long term. I was fortunate to start my own career working in the child welfare system for five years, and between you and me, I've always considered myself an advocate. But I now try to do that in a different way by generating knowledge and evidence that folks can use to really help craft the best policies and practices. I still have friends who stayed in the advocacy community over the past 25 years. It's been over that long of a period of time that I've been able to see a real shift in thinking, and I can say that advocacy really does make a difference. Advocacy informed by the best knowledge we have makes a difference. So, hang in there, and your efforts will pay off.

SPARC: Thank you so much, Dr. Courtney, and we appreciate the time you've taken, the commitment you've made to SPARC through the Advisory Board, and we look forward to continuing to work together.