RECENTLY, LUTHERAN CHILD AND FAMILY SERVICES OF ILLINOIS took a good look in the mirror and said we need to do better by our children of color in the child welfare system. Everyone within the system knows inequities exist, but LCFS made the commitment to stand up, accept the responsibility of our role and ask, what can be done?

Agency leadership started with an internal pledge to become WIDE (Welcoming, Inclusive, Diverse and Equitable). “LCFS cannot fulfill the commitment to the families we serve unless we embrace the principles of WIDE,” shared LCFS President and CEO Mike Bertrand.

As a part of WIDE, it is crucial to address how implicit bias and institutional racism contribute to inequality for children of color. Of 16,000 youth in Illinois Foster Care, 54% are youth of color. Currently, the median length of stay for children of color in the state’s foster care system is 1,186 days compared with 913 days for white children, nearly a nine-month difference.

“If nothing is done, youth of color will likely continue to stay in foster care longer and fewer of them will have loving forever families,” explained LCFS VP and Chief Operating Officer Beverly Jones.

LCFS decided to take a strategic look at our work, how we do our work, and with whom we do that work. In September 2018 after reviewing agency data, LCFS began its journey to decrease the length of stay in foster care and increase the achievement of permanency for youth of color with target goals of 5% each.

An important component involved looking at how we partner with families — particularly families of color. The agency worked with staff on being collaborative in our interactions with those served. We asked youth, their parents, and extended family members what they needed to be successful, versus dictating what we felt they needed. This collaborative approach acted as a huge trust builder, and made a big difference in outcomes.

One year after beginning this work, LCFS far exceeded the original goals with an actual 34% decrease in the median days in care, and 15% increase in achieving permanency for children of color. We significantly moved the needle in assisting children in reuniting with their families; an important factor in children reaching their potential.

Camilla was a loving mother to her daughters Bianca (age 15) and Lila (age 4 — not their real names). Then one night her husband (whom she was separated from due to domestic violence) got drunk and crashed his car into Camilla’s house.

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Taking Action

IN FEBRUARY, WE CELEBRATE BLACK HISTORY MONTH, recognizing all of the significant and important African American contributions to our country and world.

As a Lutheran organization, Lutheran Child and Family Services of Illinois’ actions are motivated by faith, calling us to not only serve our neighbors, but also to address societal issues of injustice and inequity. This commitment includes taking a stance as an anti-racism organization, meaning we will actively work to dismantle racism in our society.

We also examined the effects of racism within our own agency. Specifically, we’re looking at how racism plays a part in hiring decisions, opportunities for leadership, and interpersonal interactions. Equally important, we’re focusing on how this issue affects those we serve and how we serve them. We know that people of color have very different experiences than Caucasians due to systemic racism, and in our corner of the world, we are actively taking on the responsibility to try to make sure that we are treating everyone equitably.

In this issue of Tidings, you will read about the disparate outcomes for children of color in the child welfare system that the vast majority of the children and families we serve fall into. But as I noted above, we are called to address racism on a wider basis for all children. That challenge was the focus of our recent Annual Meeting (see page 3).

Please join me in celebrating Black History Month. But more importantly, please join LCFS in working to dismantle racism throughout our communities, state and country.

He then proceeded to physically assault her. The authorities were called and Bianca and Lila were taken away from their mother and placed in foster care.

The reason given for removing the two girls from their mother’s care was that Camilla “had an attitude” when being questioned about the incident. “This type of language is too often used within the child welfare system to describe families of color. Moreover, it isn’t a reason to remove someone’s children from their care,” explained LCFS Program Supervisor Tamica Hatchett. “What parent wouldn’t be upset in this situation.”

LCFS believed in Camilla and advocated for her with the courts to have her children returned home. LCFS staff partnered with her to demonstrate that she had always done everything in her power to keep her children safe, including filing for divorce from her abusive husband. Within two months of coming into care, Bianca and Lila were returned to Camilla. LCFS continued to support the family with aftercare services, and Camilla voluntarily attended individual and domestic violence counseling to help her heal from the trauma she had experienced. Today, the family is together and thriving.

In the words of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., “Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.” Addressing institutional racism and implicit bias is a journey and our work continues. We’re proud of the work LCFS is doing and know that there is much more to be done. We hope that you will join us in our efforts.

Thank you for being the power behind this important work and our journey to dismantle racism brick by brick.
FOR PAUL SCHRAGE, THIS BIBLE VERSE BEST EXPRESSES HIS PHILOSOPHY AND FAITH. “The good Lord is going to take care of you and you just have to believe in that. Life gets a lot easier then.”

Known as the father of the McDonald’s brand, Paul worked for McDonald’s Corporation for over 40 years. There, as the Senior Executive VP of Marketing he achieved world-wide recognition for the brand. While Paul has lived an extraordinary life and has many wonderful stories to tell, when asked what is most important to him, his answer is simple, “God and my wife Jan.” Paul has been married to Jan, the love of his life, for 62 years. They have two grown sons and five grandchildren. Faith and family are what have always driven him.

Family is also how Paul is connected with Lutheran Child and Family Services of Illinois. Adopted as an infant through LCFS, Paul was placed with a family who raised, cared and loved him. As he got older, he began to wonder about his birth family. “I became curious. I wondered if I had brothers or sisters and if my birth parents were still alive, but I didn’t want to hurt my parents by searching.”

Eventually, that curiosity led Paul to search for his birth family. He called LCFS and was connected with then Director of Adoptions LaNell Hill. “I explained my story and that I’d like to learn something about my birth family. Unfortunately, LaNell said that due to the law at that time, I couldn’t get access to those records.”

Over the years, Paul stayed in touch with LaNell and continued to check in. Then one day, LaNell called Paul and told him that the rules had changed and Paul was able to obtain the records from his adoption. Eventually with the assistance of LCFS, Paul was connected with all of his half-brothers and sisters.

“LaNell hung in there with me enough to make that call on her own and tell me that I could gain access to records that were previously not available under the law. It was LaNell’s persistence that got it done and we’ve stayed in touch to this day.”

In the year’s following that call, Paul and his wife have formed a relationship with some of his siblings. He has valued learning more about his birth parents and really feels connected genetically to his siblings through the things they have in common. “I found that my parents never married. It’s amazing how much I look like my siblings from my mom’s side. And on my father’s side, I find that there is a common genetic creativity that has inspired some of our careers.”

Over the years, Paul and Jan have chosen to generously support LCFS’ mission to nurture and strengthen children and families in need. “LCFS and LaNell have meant so much to me over time. They provided me with the opportunity to meet my siblings. LCFS helped me, so I give back to help others that are being cared for there now.”

If you’re interested in learning more about the ways you can get involved with LCFS and support the children and families we serve, contact Vice President for Advancement Marylyn Rodgers at Marylyn_Rodgers@lcfs.org or 708-488-5557.

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LCFS ANNUAL MEETING: STOP THE CYCLE

IN JANUARY, LCFS brought together nearly 100 social service agencies, DCFS leadership, board members, supporters, and staff for its Annual Meeting. This year’s topic was Stop the Cycle: Dismantling Institutional Racism Brick by Brick — Achieving Racial Equity in Child Welfare.

The event’s keynote speaker Dr. Fred Wulczyn (Chapin Hall Senior Research Fellow and Director of the Center for State Child Welfare Data) shared that from the research side, we don’t know enough about the issue to understand and identify the causes behind disparate outcomes in the child welfare system. Attendees also learned about LCFS’ journey to dismantle institutional racism and achieve racial equity for the children and families of color we serve. LCFS VP and Chief Operating Officer Beverly Jones shared that, “Language matters. How we talk about children and families of color matters. And silence only makes the issue worse. So at LCFS we are continually asking ourselves, ‘what am I going to do to change the trajectory for children of color?’”

Finally, Beverly challenged everyone in attendance to think about what each of them could do to support children and families of color. “We’re talking about children. We can’t wait. We must take action now.”

LCFS is always looking for opportunities to partner with other organizations or individuals in order to better serve children and families in Illinois. If you’re interested in watching a recording of LCFS’ Annual Meeting or learning more about how you can get involved, visit www.lcfs.org/AnnualMeeting.
ESTATE GIFT COMMITMENTS ARE AN IMPACTFUL — AND EASY — WAY TO SUPPORT FUTURE GENERATIONS. But if they make you wonder “What about my loved ones?” we can help. It’s possible to leave a legacy for causes you care about like LCFS and provide for loved ones after you’re gone. Consider these options:

- **Include a percentage in your will or trust** to ensure that your gift remains proportionate to your estate size, no matter how it fluctuates over the years.

- **Name Lutheran Child and Family Services of Illinois as a contingent beneficiary** of your will or trust so that we’ll receive your gift only if your other beneficiaries are no longer living.

- **Leave highly-taxed assets, such as those from your retirement plan, to LCFS.** We’ll receive these gifts tax-free. Leave other less tax-burdened assets, such as real estate, cash or life insurance, to your loved ones.

- **Stipulate that your gift to LCFS be given in honor** of someone you care about, leaving an “inheritance” that gives in perpetuity.

It’s never too early to plan your legacy. We’re happy to work with you and your advisors to arrange a tax-wise gift that’s right for you.

For more information on charitable giving opportunities available through LCFS or to get a free wills guide, contact Marylyn Rodgers at 708-488-5557 or visit www.LCFSLegacy.org.