2020 Report

Despite the coronavirus pandemic and continued upheaval in local journalism, Resolve Philly’s special reporting series, Our Kids: The Challenge and Opportunity of Philadelphia’s Child Welfare System, launched to great acclaim. Resolve’s investigative solutions reporter Steve Volk published 12 stories and is in a prime position to advance reporting in 2021 with multiple investigative articles, dozens more solutions-oriented pieces, and some non-traditional story-telling elements, likely including a podcast and an accompanying graphic novel. The following is a recap of the year and a look at our plans for completing this project in 2021.

WHAT WE’VE ACCOMPLISHED

Due to an unexpected pandemic and an attention-sucking election season, we made a strategic decision to tailor our coverage accordingly and reshape Our Kids to culminate in 2021.

When the pandemic first hit, our writer, Steve Volk, pivoted to generate a series of pieces about the particular plight faced by youth in foster care during a pandemic that affects them disproportionately. The coronavirus has forced them out of jobs, into precarious living situations and out of school. The shift felt necessary, given what was happening in the country, and in hindsight gave Steve more time to build relationships and learn about the foster care system.

A complete list of the stories he published is included at the end of this document, but highlights include “Foster Kids Left in Limbo,” which documented how local courts ceased key hearings at the pandemic’s outset, which left Philadelphia lagging behind Pittsburgh. Steve’s sources were telling him there was no discussion of restarting hearings at the time, but that changed quickly after his piece ran, a development he covered here.

Steve also chronicled the efforts of foster alumni to increase services for youth in state care throughout the pandemic, in articles like “They Got Us Panicking” and “Wolf to Foster Youth.” He was also able to report on the child welfare system from a different — and more accurate — angle than standard issue media coverage. In fact, numerous outlets across the nation rushed to write problem-focused stories about how abused kids would go unseen during the pandemic, since the lockdown prevented mandated reporters from coming into contact with kids showing signs of abuse. In contrast, Steve wrote “Coming Crisis” for NBC 10, in which he foregrounded solutions, exploring proven and effective preventive services to help parents experiencing poverty get the help they need.
Finally, Steve published “The Safety Net,” a long narrative about a program that provides more support to parents involved in the child welfare system. The article includes illustrations from an artist Steve found with input from child welfare professionals and foster alumni. It is exceptionally hard to bring color and life to foster care reporting, since there is a very legitimate reticence to be photographed. Resolve felt proud to have found a way to bring vibrancy to Steve's reporting through high-quality illustration. We will continue to work with Dylan Caleho going forward. Her comics-oriented style will help us see and share in a gritty, realistic fashion, the kinds of events that normally happen out of public sight. The illustration will also bring cohesion to the Our Kids series as Steve’s work continues to be published in outlets across the Philadelphia local news ecosystem.

In addition to reporting, Steve spent a lot of time and focus during the weeks and months in which our partner newsrooms were dealing with internal crisis and chaos preparing fertile ground for next year’s reporting. He has worked very hard, with support from Co-Executive Director Jean Friedman-Rudovsky and Resolve’s new Sr. Collaborations Editor Gene Sonn, to set out a story list that will yield impact and change. He has leveraged all the knowledge and contacts he gained during 2020 to move forward with several deep dive investigative and solutions-oriented stories and projects.

COMMUNITY-ORIENTED JOURNALISM

Steve has brought the community-focused Resolve Philly ethos to his reporting in a field that seriously needs it, conducting a listening tour of foster care kids, alumni, families and professionals in the field. His interviews often started in the same place: “So, what do you think I should know, and what should the public know?” This approach enabled him to come up with a list of stories that originated with his interview subjects rather than his own agenda. Looking toward the immediate future, he also plans to conduct a COVID-safe “mail drop,” going into various Philly neighborhoods to leave off a letter of introduction explaining his project and his interest in hearing from them alongside some clips of his past work. Steve has done this kind of reporting before he came to Resolve, going into neighborhoods that normally only see a reporter around after a shooting, to ask them for input on potential stories with good results.

He is also working with Derrick Cain, our Community Engagement Editor, to put on two or three socially distanced community events, where he’ll enjoy the opportunity to just sit and listen as community members break down their experiences and understanding of the child welfare system. Though the result will likely pay dividends in his reporting on investigative and solutions-oriented stories, it will more importantly build relationships with Philadelphians.

2021 REPORTING

DEEP DIVE INVESTIGATIONS

The Forgotten Kids will focus on what the city is doing to plug the foster care to shelter pipeline. (Spoiler alert: not much) This reporting includes new statistics showing that 40-percent of the homeless youth sheltering at Covenant House have experience in foster care. Steve has been banging away at the city with public records requests to take advantage of the data the Office of Homeless Services gathers, and have it cross-referenced with data from DHS to determine how many people accessing shelters had past or current involvement with the child welfare system.

What’s striking is that the high percentage of foster alumni who wind up experiencing homelessness is fairly well-known, but this hasn't translated to show what a high percentage of a city's homeless are current or past members of foster care. The story will demonstrate that the system is not producing the desired results, and how much pain and suffering (and money) could be saved if we right sized the system and took better care of the youth in state care.
The State of the City: As the calls for reform of child welfare services grow, Philly has remained stuck. Nationally, efforts to improve the foster care system have enabled 50% more children to stay safely with their families while Philadelphia has only seen an 18% change. This story will look at what’s making Philadelphia lag behind other cities, including faster requests from DHS to terminate parental rights; and the use of “voluntary safety plans,” which allow DHS to have a child moved to live with relatives while keeping them off the foster rolls entirely. (See “Hidden Foster Kids,” below.)

Prosecuting Parents: The city’s public defenders are tough on struggling parents—adopting a policy to oppose all family reunifications, no matter what their child clients want. A half dozen former public defenders are blowing the whistle on the public defender’s office for discriminating against poor parents to protect against any blowback that might come from a tragic child death.

The CUA Crisis: Several years back, the city adopted a new means of administering child welfare services to help children and families. The Community Umbrella Agencies, known as CUAs, are now both ubiquitous and also hidden. Ever since implementation of this approach, Philadelphia’s child welfare professionals have been concerned about whether CUAs act as shields for sub-par care, helping DHS avoid blame. We’ve launched a major investigative project, pulling court records, looking at the hundreds of lawsuits filed against Philadelphia’s CUAs and plugging them into a database for analysis, to look for patterns.

Help or Harm: Hidden Kids in the Foster Care System: Philadelphia has reduced the number of kids in foster care by entering into legal agreements that keep them off the books. At issue is the use of “Voluntary Safety Plans,” or VSP's, which allow DHS workers to move children around without proper documentation. Steve has been told it goes something like this: A social worker says to a parent: “I could conduct a child removal right now, but if you have a relative you can place the child with I will not enter them into the foster care system.” The policy is intended to benefit families and children. From DHS’ perspective, a social worker on the fence about a removal can get an at-risk child relocated to a home they deem more stable. But from the parent’s point of view, it often feels like coercion. Legally, VSPs should not last longer than 60 days, but sometimes they do, in part because parents don't want to invoke their legal rights for fear that DHS will go ahead and conduct a formal removal if the timeline is invoked.

The Money Tree: Have local and state governments been using foster care to paste over holes in their budgets? Steve is working with Daniel Hatcher, a University of Baltimore professor, who wrote a book about the way youth in foster care have been “commodified,” which incentivizes government agencies to conduct removals of youth experiencing poverty (more federal money is available when children are removed from economically insecure families). Even worse, a whole group of private firms have been created to help tap these federal funds — creating computer software and algorithms to identify kids in foster care who might be eligible for survivor or disability benefits, so government agencies can seize those funds and plow them into their general budgets. Hatcher has promised to help Steve ferret out what is happening in Pennsylvania and Philadelphia county, which he did not research for his book.

SOLUTIONS STORIES
There will be more than a dozen solutions journalism pieces that come out during 2021. Be ready for pieces on mental health among youth in foster care; what could be done to change the punitive impact of the state child abuse registry; and the increasing role foster alumni are doing to help youth coming up behind them.
There will be a story looking at what foster-youth advocates are learning from the Black Lives Matter fight for social justice and a big piece on an initiative underway in the Pennsylvania courts that is testing how legal reforms could reduce the number of youth in foster care.

There will also be a series on an upcoming cross-sector push to open the city’s dependency courts to the media, throwing light on the system as a whole. And other highlights will include a story on the history of foster care in Alabama, which went through a several years-period of great success—reducing the number of youth in foster care without compromising safety—and then faltered. Steve will explore how ‘bama got so good, and why it got bad again. He’ll also share the story of a Judge in Baton Rouge, LA who took it upon herself to actually treat child removals as the law is written, to be used as a last resort.

Finally, the series will culminate with two keynote projects—a one season, episodic podcast, with CB Community Schools as its central narrative, to tell the story of foster care and the need for reform at a national level. The podcast will also serve as the template for a potential graphic novel, illustrated by Caleho. It is our hope that these two projects will give the public two separate ways to experience everything we’re learning.