

[Donate Now](#)

[GET LEGAL HELP](#) [ABOUT US](#) [SUPPORT OUR WORK](#) [JOIN US](#) [PUBLICATIONS](#) [MULTIMEDIA](#) [NJ POVERTY](#) [STAFF](#) [DE MEMORIAL](#) [EVENTS](#)

Celebrating Reunification Starts with Understanding What Keeps Families Together



Nationally, 437,283 children entered foster care in 2018. The case plan goal was reunification for 56% of the cases opened. In New Jersey, approximately 50% of children who enter foster care will be reunified with their parents. LSNJ has a vision that more families will be reunified and even avoid removal in the first place, if underlying causes of removal are aggressively addressed by a child welfare system that is unified in that purpose.

More than 10 years ago, before the ABA's National Reunification Month was created, family reunifications were rarely discussed in conferences, nor were they celebrated by the child welfare community. There was an air of hopelessness and pessimism about the ability of families to successfully reunify. When LSNJ started celebrating reunifications of families at Family Reunification Day a decade ago, we learned, to the contrary, that most parents can ably parent their children both in the short- and long-term and that children thrive when they are with their parents, if they have strong agency support and access to resources. LSNJ started to focus on what was needed to expedite and increase reunifications for children and parents. We started to dig deeper and ask: What took so long to reunify this family? Why were family visits supervised? Why was the lack of stable housing a reason to delay the return of a child to his mother? We attempted to answer these questions and confront the barriers at Reunification Day events while celebrating incredible parents and their stories. Since then, we have honored close to 100 reunited families, and there have been no subsequent removals in those families.

At our annual celebratory event, parents speak to a large audience—typically more than 200 people—representing a cross-section of the state's child welfare community. Often parents say they never thought their children would be returned to them, until there was that one caseworker or lawyer or judge who changed their lives and made all the difference because they listened and believed reunification was possible. That one caseworker said, "You're going to get your child back." We strived and challenged ourselves to learn how to convince more people to believe that reunified parents would succeed in raising their children.

Our first year, we honored a mother who was incarcerated for almost two years before prevailing at her termination trial. She now owns her own business, and her two daughters are attending college.

We honored another mother whose rights to her five children were terminated before her youngest son was removed, then returned after two years of separation. The only reason given for those years apart from her son was the previous terminations. Her son is now in high school and belongs to the chess team.

We have honored fathers who were notified of their child's removal six months into the case. It was widely believed that a single father could not raise a child on his own, but we learned that indeed they can, and children have thrived

while living with their single fathers.

When we reviewed successful reunifications, we learned that the majority of removals and agency-involved interventions arise not as a result of abuse or neglect, but rather because of poverty, particularly the inability to access stable housing. We turned our attention to stabilizing the large number of families involved with the child welfare agency who are at risk of removal and soon realized that the same agency responses used for reunification could be used to keep families together. Those responses include assisting families with access to stable housing and providing substance abuse and mental health treatment programs.

We changed our focus to: How do we support our families to help them remain together, notwithstanding their poverty? After eight years of celebrating "Family Reunification Day," LSNJ renamed the event "Family Unification Day." The change emphasizes the overriding imperative of preventing poverty-driven removals, with their attendant trauma to children and parents, and acknowledges the great work that parents do to keep their families intact, while continuing to recognize reunified families and parents who have rebuilt their lives to bring their children back home.

In the spirit of supporting family unification, the celebration centered on the theme of prioritizing families and focusing on primary prevention. That year, when we changed our focus, we honored 11 mothers who recounted their lifelong struggles with housing insecurity, poverty, mental health issues, domestic violence, and substance abuse. They also told how their children motivated them to overcome seemingly insurmountable problems.

- Jessica said she "cried a river and a half" during the termination litigation, but felt motivated by her children and her attorney to better herself and win her case.
- Xiomara, who was poignantly reunited with her children shortly before Christmas 2017, thanked God for allowing her to receive the gift of reunification.
- Kisha deemed Family Unification Day a commemoration of growth, joy, and new beginnings for herself and for her family.

These mothers successfully reunited with their children because they were supported by their caseworkers, had access to housing, and received immediate therapeutic services for themselves and their children.

The most recent phase of our campaign to prevent family removals is a collaboration with the child welfare agency beginning in 2018. LSNJ started receiving direct referrals from agency caseworkers and attorneys on behalf of families needing legal assistance and advice in the pre-petition stage. Issues vary by case, but some of the most common concerns for families include access to public benefits, affordable housing, and special education. LSNJ uses a multidisciplinary model to provide strengths-based and holistic support of family needs. Since August 2018, the child welfare agency has referred more than 130 parents for assistance. Over 200 children have remained with their families. During that time, no removals occurred for LSNJ clients.

As New Jersey and the rest of the country look to celebrate families in June during Reunification Month, it will be under the shroud of COVID-19. Families are facing increased challenges in staying together due to lost employment and inability to pay rent. Post-removal, parents are being denied essential physical contact with their children through visitation. They are struggling with accessing resources and services because welfare offices are closed, and therapeutic providers do not provide teletherapy.

As we celebrate families this June, unified and reunified, we must resolve to take bold new steps to avoid separating poverty-affected families in the first place. During COVID-19, agencies must develop a rapid response plan to meet the needs of families. Social distancing protocols must neither inhibit nor delay reunification. Instead, to minimize trauma and to ensure family stability, the child welfare community must make every effort to facilitate family reunification. We must stabilize families, celebrate fewer removals, and believe as a community that these parents can provide safe homes for their children, and that being home with their parents is the best possible result for children.

Legal Services of New Jersey
P.O. Box 1357
Edison, NJ 08818-1357
(732) 572-9100

[Volunteer](#) | [Jobs](#) | [Internships](#) | [News Releases](#) | [Pro Bono](#)
[Contact](#) | [Donate Now](#) | [Client Stories](#)
[Legal Services in the News](#) | [Key Legal Developments](#)
[Site Map](#) | [Terms of Use](#) | [Privacy Policy](#)

Copyright © 2023 Legal Services of New Jersey

Other LSNJ websites:
www.lsnjlaw.org
www.probononj.org
www.njejla.org