

Helping Sick Parents Secure Their Children's Futures

In 1989, Ivy Gamble-Cobb found herself fresh out of college with a degree in health planning administration and a 2-year-old daughter. A native New Yorker with a passion for health care, she sent resumes to a handful of government organizations and hoped for a call. She received one offer, from a newly formed branch of the city's social services department—the Division of AIDS Services. She wasn't thrilled about the position, as AIDS at the time was a seldom-talked about disease. But she needed a job, so she accepted, thinking that she would soon move on to something else.

On her first day, Gamble-Cobb was sent on a home visit to a woman and her 7-year-old daughter.

During a recent hospitalization, the woman had been told that not only was she HIV positive, but that her condition had progressed to full-blown AIDS. In an attempt to prepare for the visit, Gamble-Cobb tried to imagine herself in the woman's place. But when she arrived at the house, the woman's first question caught her off guard.

"What will happen to my daughter?"

At that moment, Gamble-Cobb knew she would spend the rest of her career working to secure the futures of children whose parents suffer from life-threatening illness.

Today, she is executive director of The Family Center (TFC), an agency that provides social and legal services to parents suffering from AIDS, cancer, and other serious diseases. Many of the center's clients are single mothers with multiple children, and almost all of the families live below

the poverty line. TFC (thefamilycenter.org) builds relationships with families through youth and outreach programs, and offers services like mental health counseling, family conflict resolution, and case management. Social workers talk through questions like, "How do I talk to my children about my illness?" and "How do I raise my kids while dealing with my own grief and depression?" When a parent is ready to begin planning for his or her children's future, TFC's legal experts lay out available caregiver options and represent the parent in court. The center also serves caregiver households, which often include a sibling under 25 or an elderly grandparent caring for multiple children.

As executive director, Gamble-Cobb's biggest challenge is fundraising, and the current economic climate hasn't helped. She is facing the fact that some of the center's biggest supporters are no longer in a position to support it. In fact, Gamble-Cobb says, the center almost had to cancel two of its most important annual events—the holiday party and toy drive. Despite this year's challenges, Gamble-Cobb is determined to see TFC continue to succeed through the holiday season—and the years to come. She has always considered her job a privilege.

"People always say, 'It must be so depressing, so sad, to do what you do all the time.' But it's not—it's inspiring," she says. "I consider it a real honor to be able to help families dealing with terminal illness plan for their children's future. I have the best job in the world."

—Katie Main



Ivy Gamble-Cobb

Executive Director,
The Family Center