

As the Industrial Revolution saw America transform from a nation of farmers to a nation of factory workers, the nineteenth century saw a population explosion in cities across the land. While many urban-dwellers found success, many others were left behind in this new economy, leading to rising rates of crime, alcoholism, and other social ills. Sadly, it was not uncommon for children to be neglected, orphaned, or abused. Parental rights were ironclad and could be delegated to others, and physical punishment was considered a normal and even essential practice in establishing obedience. Orphans or children whose parents could not care for them were often placed in what today would be called work camps, which was more about free labor and not protection. Prevailing wisdom said that child neglect was not abuse, but merely a tragic, if unintended, consequence of life.

Slowly, things began to change. The child welfare system can trace its early roots to the animal welfare movement of the nineteenth century, when people realized that children, minimally, should be treated at least as humanely as domesticated animals. In 1829, against this backdrop, Orissa Healy and Eliza Wilcox founded The Ladies Orphan Society to provide shelter, care, and education to the orphaned, neglected, and abused children in the city of Albany.

- 1829 Orissa Healy and Eliza Wilcox create the Ladies Orphan Society and establish the Society for the Relief of Orphan and Destitute Children
- 1864 School for Children opens
- 1891 600 Children in resident and another 600 in foster homes or work placement
- 1904 Innovative “cottage-type” care begins at new campus on New Scotland Avenue
- 1933 “House parent” model is established
- 1937 First social worker hired
- 1961 Therapeutic services offered
- 1964 SATRI established
- 1965 First group home opens
- 1969 Day Treatment Program established
- 1975 Neil Hellman School opens
- 1976 Organization changes name to Parsons Child & Family Center
- 1979 Child Guidance Clinic opens
- 1988 Residential Treatment Facility (RTF) opens
- 1991 Service array expands
- 1992 Healy House opens
- 2003 Miriam House opens
- 2012 Parsons affiliates with Northeast Parent & Child Society in Schenectady, creating parent agency Northern Rivers Family of Services, one of the largest human services agencies in upstate New York
- 2018 Northern Rivers breaks ground on Behavioral Health Care Center
- 2019 Behavioral Health Care Center opens; work begins on Academy Place
- 2020 Academy Place, Northern Rivers’ new 24-bed agency-owned boarding house opens; Wasson, Rathbone, and Lathrop Cottages, housing the former Residential Treatment Facility (RTC), demolished; a new Short-Term Crisis Stabilization Program, North Star, opens in July