

Enhancing Permanency for Youth in Out-of-Home Care

Permanency for youth in foster care should include a permanent legal connection to a family, such as reuniting with birth parents, adoption, kinship care, or legal guardianship. However, when these options are less likely, workers can help youth pursue physical or relational permanency. Physical permanency is having a home or a place to be; relational permanency is having a relationship or connection with a caring adult (e.g., maternal and paternal kin, teachers, neighbors, former foster parents) (Mallon, 2011). Such adults may provide lifelong support that can help youth transition to adulthood, and they may even become a legal permanent option. In such instances, formalizing the permanent connection

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can help clarify what the youth can expect from the caring adult. In a study of California youth in care, the youth made distinctions among the different types of permanency, with most choosing relational permanence above physical and legal permanence (Sanchez, 2004).

Over the past two decades, the Federal Government and child welfare field have given increased attention to youth in foster care who transition to adulthood without a permanent connection to a family or caring adult (“aging out”) (Courtney, 2009). Recent evidence of this focus includes the enactment of the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008 (P.L. 110-351) and the implementation of the National Youth in Transition Database.

Despite this activity, the percentage of youth who leave foster care without a permanent family remains high. According to data from the Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS), the percentage of youth who age out increased from 7 percent in fiscal year (FY) 2002 to 11 percent in FY 2011 (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services [DHHS], Children’s Bureau, 2006; DHHS, Children’s Bureau, 2012).

Although the percentage of youth aging out of foster care has remained at 11 percent since FY 2009, the actual number has dropped from 29,471 in FY 2009 to 26,286 in FY 2011, an 11-percent decrease that has accompanied the general decrease in the number of children in foster care over the last 6 years (DHHS, Children’s Bureau, 2010a; DHHS, Children’s Bureau, 2012).

National statistics show that youth stay in foster care longer than younger children and are more likely to have case goals of emancipation and long-term foster care

(McCoy-Roth, DeVooght, & Fletcher, 2011). Additionally, youth who age out of the foster care system often leave with few skills, minimal education, and inadequate preparation for living as productive, independent adults.

Responding to these issues, the Federal Government and many States and local jurisdictions are focusing on this population and implementing laws, policies, and programs specifically designed to help youth establish permanent connections. Many of these help youth build on relationships they have established throughout their lives with kin, foster parents, teachers, social workers, and others; other policies and programs help youth establish new relationships that can lead to permanent family connections.

This bulletin addresses the specific challenges of permanency planning with youth and highlights successful models and strategies.

The Importance of Focusing on Youth and Family Connections

More than two-fifths (42 percent) of the children in foster care are aged 11 years or older (DHHS, Children’s Bureau, 2012), and these older children have a much higher average length of stay than younger children in care (McCoy-Roth, DeVooght, & Fletcher, 2011). Youth who exit care without a permanent family are at risk for a number of negative outcomes. The Midwest Evaluation on Adult Functioning of Former Foster Youth compared individuals who had aged out of foster care with individuals of the same age in the general population. At age 26, individuals who transitioned out of foster

care experienced more unemployment, lower incomes, more economic hardships (e.g., not being able to pay rent or utilities), poorer health, and higher arrest rates than youth of the same age in the general population (Courtney, Dworsky, Brown, Cary, Love, & Vorhies, 2011). Additionally, individuals formerly in foster care were more likely to not have a high school diploma or GED, not have health insurance, and receive government benefits (Courtney et al., 2011).

Youth who have been in foster care or residential care may have little opportunity to experience quality parenting. One extensive study of more than 4,500 pregnant and parenting teens in foster care showed that the children of this population spent time in foster care at a much higher rate than the children of non-foster-care teen parents (10 percent vs. 2 percent) (Dworsky & DeCoursey, 2009). This multigenerational cycle of children and youth entering foster care makes an even stronger argument for the importance of achieving permanent connections for youth, so that they can experience a positive relationship with an adult and go on to become successful adults themselves.

Worker Voice

“What I have found throughout my experience, is trying to break the cycle of older youth coming into care. . . Most of us experience love and parenting and then are able to parent when we are called to. With many of the teens who are in out-of-home care . . . parental love is lacking. Teens in independent living situations should also be taught parenting. They have children and then their kids end up in foster care as well. The chain keeps adding links rather than being stopped.”

— A permanency worker

Federal Legislation Supporting Youth Permanency

The growing focus on achieving permanent connections for youth led to the enactment of Federal legislation in 2008 that provides both incentives and requirements for States to focus on helping youth make permanent connections. The Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008 (Fostering Connections Act) amends titles IV-E and IV-B of the Social Security Act to promote permanency and positive outcomes for children and youth in foster care, including connecting and supporting relative caregivers and providing for and improving incentives for adoption. The Fostering Connections Act contains several provisions that help establish and strengthen youth permanency, including the following:

- Authorizing grants to State, local, or Tribal child welfare agencies and private nonprofit organizations to help children who are in or at-risk of foster care reconnect with family members through:
 - Kinship navigator programs
 - Efforts to find biological family and reestablish relationships
 - Family group decision-making meetings
 - Residential family treatment programs
- Requiring title IV-E agencies to identify and notify all adult relatives of their option to become a placement resource for the child, within 30 days of the child’s removal

- Creating a new plan option for States and Tribes to provide kinship guardianship assistance payments under title IV-E on behalf of children who have been in foster care and have a relative who is taking legal guardianship
- Amending the Chafee Foster Care Independence Program to allow services to youth who leave foster care for kinship guardianship or adoption after age 16
- Permitting States to extend title IV-E assistance to otherwise eligible youth remaining in foster care after reaching age 18 and to youth who at age 16 or older exited foster care to either a kinship guardianship or adoption, provided that they have not yet reached age 19, 20, or 21, as the State may elect, and are in school, employed, engaged in another activity designed to remove barriers to employment, or incapable of doing so due to a documented medical condition (Child Welfare Information Gateway, n.d.)

For additional information about the Fostering Connections Act, visit Child Welfare Information Gateway at <https://www.childwelfare.gov/fosteringconnections/> or the National Resource Center for Permanency and Family Connections at <http://www.fosteringconnections.org/>.

Youth Voice

"If I hadn't been given the opportunity to obtain permanency while in foster care, I am 100 percent positive that I would not be in the position I am in today. My foster mom ensured that I was treated like a traditionally raised youth and was identified as her son. I participated in extracurricular activities, school trips, and family vacations, which allowed me to feel a sense of belonging and create those lasting support networks that are of high importance when everything you had ever known changes overnight. Foster care was my saving grace; it gave me the chance to grow as a young man and transition into adulthood successfully. Permanency, whether legally defined or personally defined, should always be the number one goal when working with youth caught up in a system at no fault of their own."

— Jeremy, youth formerly in foster care

FEDERAL GRANTS ADDRESSING YOUTH PERMANENCY

The Children's Bureau has funded several grant clusters that focus, in whole or in part, on improving youth permanency outcomes:

- Diligent Recruitment of Families for Children in Foster Care: <http://www.adoptuskids.org/about-us/diligent-recruitment-grantees>
- Permanency Innovations Initiative: <https://cbexpress.acf.hhs.gov/index.cfm?event=website.viewArticles&issueid=123§ionid=19&articleid=3087>
- Family Connection Grants: <http://www.nrcpfc.org/grantees.html>
- Youth Permanency Cluster: <http://www.nrcadoption.org/resources/ypc/home/>

Strategies for Permanency Planning with Youth

Supported by Federal legislation, States and localities have developed programs and practices that offer permanent connections for youth in foster care and services for successful transition to adulthood. The following strategies for establishing youth permanency are drawn from child welfare research and practice.

Involving Youth in Permanency Planning

Involving youth in planning for their own permanency outcomes can greatly facilitate the process (Walker & Child, 2008). Youth can express their own ideas about how they want to achieve permanency and can help identify possible resources for legal, physical, and relational permanency. They also can supply information about family members, distant and near, as well as other people with whom they feel a connection. In addition, talking to youth and actively involving them in the permanency planning process can be therapeutic for them and help prepare them for the transition to a new family or situation. Youth who are involved in the planning process may take more responsibility for the success of the arrangement (Casey Family Services, 2007). For more information about working with youth, see the Youth Voice Toolbox at <http://www.freechild.org/YouthVoice/>. For ideas about empowering youth, visit the FosterClub website at <http://www.fosterclub.com> and the Foster Care Alumni website at <http://www.fostercarealumni.org>.

Example: The Homecoming Project (Minnesota)

Funded by a Children's Bureau Adoption Opportunities grant, the Minnesota Department of Human Services developed a program in 2003 focused on finding adoptive families for teens aged 13-17 years whose birth parents' rights had been terminated. The Homecoming Project engaged youth through an intensive one-on-one relationship between each youth and a recruitment specialist who met frequently with the youth, spent significant time with the youth, and treated the youth as a true partner in the adoption process. Recruitment decisions were made with the input of the youth. Youth also were encouraged to become involved in Our Voices Matter, a youth advocacy group that provided opportunities for public speaking, support groups, and leadership experiences.

The 5-year Homecoming Project showed significantly better permanency outcomes for youth involved in the project compared to a control group of youth. Evaluators attributed this to the extraordinary youth engagement component of the project. Not only were more of the Homecoming youth actually adopted, but these youth were also less likely to have signed an affidavit stating that they did not want to be adopted.

For more information, read Finding Permanent Families for Teens Under State Guardianship at http://www.dhs.state.mn.us/main/groups/children/documents/pub/dhs16_147732.pdf and Finding Adoptive Families for Teens at http://www.dhs.state.mn.us/main/groups/children/documents/pub/dhs16_143827.pdf.

Strengthening Family Preservation and Reunification Services

Maintaining children safely with their birth families remains the first priority for most children and youth. The most common case plan goal for youth is family reunification (Fajardo & Swope, 2012), and support services to promote this goal should be part of the case plan. The array of services needed depends on each family's circumstances but may include:

- Family support services that build on family strengths
- Coordination with other community services
- Services or training specifically tailored for the parent and youth
- Mental health services for the parent and/or youth

Example: Solution-Based Casework (Kentucky)

There is growing evidence for the efficacy of Solution-Based Casework (SBC) in child welfare practice, especially in the areas of family preservation and reunification. SBC is based on three elements: full partnership with the family, a focus on the patterns of everyday family life, and solutions that target the prevention skills needed to reduce risks in everyday life. The State of Kentucky has incorporated many components of SBC into its statewide practice model, and a research study looked at Kentucky's child maltreatment recidivism rates after 6 months among families that had open child welfare cases (Antle, Barbee, Christensen, & Sullivan, 2009). Approximately half of the 760 families had caseworkers who were implementing the SBC model, while the other half had caseworkers who were not implementing the SBC model. Families receiving support from SBC caseworkers had significantly lower maltreatment recidivism rates than families with non-SBC caseworkers. Results suggest that workers implementing SBC may be better able to help families keep youth safe in their homes.

For more information, visit the SBC website: <http://www.solutionbasedcasework.com/~solution/evidence-base>

Offering Guardianship and Subsidized Guardianship as Options

For youth who are reluctant to have legal ties permanently severed with their birth parents, as would occur through adoption, the option of guardianship may provide a legal and permanent family. Guardians, who may be relatives or nonrelatives (depending on State law), are given parental responsibility and authority for the youth by a court. The Fostering Connections Act offers States

and Tribes a new option to provide kinship guardianship assistance payments (GAP) under title IV-E on behalf of children who have been in foster care and for whom a relative is taking legal guardianship. To date, 18 States and the District of Columbia have extended guardianship assistance for youth up to age 21 who are in school, employed, engaged in another activity designed to remove barriers to employment, and/or incapable of doing so due to a documented medical condition (Children's Defense Fund et al., 2012). Prior to the Fostering Connections Act, a limited number of States applied for and received time-limited Federal waivers that provided them with more flexibility in using Federal funding for subsidized guardianship programs. Other States funded guardianship programs through State money or Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) funds. These types of programs may enable caregivers who have been receiving a foster care subsidy to become legal guardians without losing necessary financial support.

For more information about how jurisdictions are implementing GAP, read the Children's Defense Fund et al.'s (2012) *Making It Work: Using the Guardianship Assistance Program (GAP) to Close the Permanency Gap for Children in Foster Care* (<http://www.childrensdefense.org/child-research-data-publications/data/making-it-work-using-the.pdf>), which details the progress of 30 jurisdictions, including 1 American Indian Tribe. For information about State statutes regarding the placement of children with relatives, visit Child Welfare Information Gateway at https://www.childwelfare.gov/systemwide/laws_policies/statutes/placement.cfm.

Example: Permanency Guardianship (Maine)

Even before the passage of the Fostering Connections Act in 2008, Maine had established a State-funded guardianship program that provided a subsidy to families in which relatives or other adults became legal guardians of children or youth who might otherwise remain in foster care. In developing the program, which became law in 2005, Maine leaders also hoped that it would make it possible to keep sibling groups together more often in a permanency setting, increase the number of children remaining in their communities, and promote placement stability for children and youth.

After the passage of the Fostering Connections Act, Maine applied for and received approval to use title IV-E GAP funding for eligible families. The State continues to use State funds for Tribal children and others not eligible for IV-E funding. Since adding the Federal funding, the number of children and youth in permanency guardianships in Maine has grown from approximately 100 to about 300 (Children's Defense Fund et al., 2012). Benefits have included more timely permanency and a slight bump in adoption numbers, with about 10 percent of permanency guardianships having moved to adoption (Children's Defense Fund et al., 2012).

For more information, see the Permanency Guardianship Handbook at <http://www.fosteringconnections.org/tools/assets/files/ME-PERMANENCY-GUARDIANSHIPHANDBOOK-3-1-08-2.doc>

Maintaining Relationships With Kin

Maintaining relationships with kin can provide important connections and supports for youth. It may take some effort to locate relatives of youth and other adults important to them, but these individuals may be very happy to be found, which can lead to positive outcomes for the youth. There are many anecdotes of relatives and others who had lost contact with youth but, when they were contacted later, were delighted to establish permanent connections or be involved in the youth's transition (ChildFocus, 2007; Louisell, 2008; Iowa Foster and Adoptive Parents Association, 2008). In some cases, paternal relatives may not have received adequate attention initially from the child welfare system but are able to provide the needed family connection later in the case.

Some youth may resist adoption because they believe it requires severing relationships with their birth families, but exploring the possibility of open adoption may alleviate these concerns. Open adoptions allow for both a permanent legal family for the youth and continued connections with birth parents, siblings, or other relatives. Guardianship with a relative acting as the legal guardian is another option for many youth, and provisions in the Fostering Connections Act have made it more viable because guardians may now be eligible for financial support.

Example: Kinship Navigator Program (Ohio)

In 2009, using funding authorized by the Fostering Connections Act, the Children's Bureau awarded 24 discretionary grants for a variety of family connections projects. The Public Services Association of Ohio received a grant to develop an enhanced kinship navigator (KN) project in seven counties to support relatives caring for children and youth either informally or through the foster care system. Participating counties hired and trained KNs, who worked directly with approximately 1,000 kinship families to provide information and referrals (using community mapping), case management, and support group facilitation. Other services included child care, respite care, legal and court assistance, and financial assistance.

A comparison of outcomes between counties with and without the KN programs highlighted the benefits of the KN programs: Counties with KN programs placed children with kin more often than did other counties, and children and youth served by KN programs were more likely to exit agency custody to legal custody or guardianship to a kin caregiver, experienced fewer days in custody, experienced lower recurrence of maltreatment, and had significantly reduced foster care reentry rates compared to children and youth in counties without KN programs. In addition, satisfaction with the KN programs by kinship caregivers was high, with families acknowledging that basic needs were met, although legal assistance was a challenge.

KNs also performed a significant amount of outreach to faith- and community-based organizations. Once these organizations learned about kinship families, they were willing partners and generous donors, offering financial support and other resources, such as respite care.

For more information, see the Kinship Ohio website: <http://www.kinshipohio.org>, including the reports on the Kinship Navigator grant at <http://www.kinshipohio.org/resources.htm>.

Example: Extreme Recruitment (Missouri)

A coalition of Missouri partners (including the Missouri Children's Division, Missouri's Coalition of Children's Agencies, and others) applied for and received a Children's Bureau Diligent Recruitment grant, which the coalition used to develop Extreme Recruitment—a 12–20 week individualized recruitment effort for St. Louis youth who had been in the child welfare system at least 15 months (many for much longer). As part of Extreme Recruitment, the project hired two full-time private investigators to seek out and contact relatives and other potential family connections. The investigators had experience in finding people and knew how to use public records and other leads (attending a family funeral, for example) to track down potential family connections for youth. Within 2 weeks of hiring an investigator to track down relatives, the project went from a 23-percent contact rate to an 80-percent contact rate (talking to a live person) (Serdjenian, 2011).

For more information about Missouri's Extreme Recruitment, visit <http://www.foster-adopt.org/ForProfessionals/ExtremeRecruitment.aspx>.

Recruiting Foster and Adoptive Families for Youth

Not all youth have kin available for permanency. For some youth, permanency efforts must shift to foster parents and other nonrelatives. Recruiting foster parents for youth carries great potential for finding them permanent adoptive or guardianship families. For example, in FY 2011, foster parents became adoptive parents for 54 percent of the children who were adopted with public agency involvement (U.S. DHHS, Children's Bureau, 2012). Efforts to recruit foster and adoptive families for youth can include (1)

getting the message to the public about older children available for fostering or adoption, (2) highlighting the benefits of adopting youth, and (3) finding permanent connections for specific children.

Media and Social Media. The use of the media and social media to present children waiting for adoption and other permanency outcomes has grown tremendously. Photolisting on the Internet has become a prevalent practice, and youth can contribute by helping to craft their own stories. Prospective families reading the listings can find enough information on a particular youth to pique their interest so that they follow up with the youth's agency. The Federal Government sponsors a national photolisting service, AdoptUSKids (<http://www.adoptuskids.org>), in English and Spanish, through funding provided by DHHS. In addition, agencies have found some success with print campaigns, videos and videoconferencing, and television and radio campaigns, such as Wednesday's Child. (For additional information about social media and recruitment, visit Child Welfare Information Gateway at <https://www.childwelfare.gov/adoption/nam/professionals/sm-recruit.cfm>.)

Market Segmentation. Market segmentation, which allows agencies to focus recruitment efforts on families most likely to adopt children from foster care, also has become popular. Agencies can analyze data about current, successful foster and adoptive families, as well as data about youth in care and other factors, to help develop targeted recruitment plans for potential foster and adoptive families (AdoptUSKids, 2011). Those families can then be targeted through direct or other advertising methods.

Connecting Youth and Prospective Families.

Creating opportunities for families and adults to come into contact with youth who need homes is the key to broadening the pool of potential adopters. Activities sponsored by the John H. Chafee Foster Care Independence Program, such as job fairs, teen conferences, employment mentoring, and life skill groups, provide excellent opportunities for youth to meet caring adults who might become permanent connections. Adults who may never have considered adopting may become more open to the idea once they meet a particular child in need. Supportive relationships, such as mentoring, may also evolve into permanency options when adults find they have grown more connected to the youth. Adoption parties, in which waiting youth and families meet during scheduled fun activities, are another way of creating opportunities to bring youth and prospective families together.

For more information and ideas, read *AdoptUSKids' Increasing Your Agency's Capacity to Respond to Prospective Parents and Prepare Older Youth for Adoption: Going Beyond Recruitment for 14 to 16 Year Olds* at <http://adoptuskids.org/assets/files/NRCRRFAP/resources/going-beyond-recruitment-for-14-to-16-year-olds.pdf>.

Example: You Gotta Believe! (New York)

You Gotta Believe (YGB) is a New York City-based program that uses a Finding Families model to place teens and preteens from foster care into permanent homes. After YGB receives a referral from a city, county, or other municipal foster care agencies, it assigns a mentor to each referred teen. The mentor gets to know the teen and attempts to learn about adults who have been important in the teen's life and then contacts those adults to invite them to consider a parenting course. YGB also recruits families by sending staff members, current and former foster youth, and experienced adoptive families to talk to groups at places such as churches and street fairs. Families can join the 10-week training sessions at any point. These sessions are taught by YGB staff, adoptive parents, and youth and provide another opportunity for teens seeking permanent homes to meet prospective families. Once a teenager is placed with a family, YGB provides postadoption services in the form of telephone coaching and in-person support, support groups throughout the city, and support networks and adoption blogs that connect new and experienced adoptive parents.

The Children's Bureau has awarded multiple discretionary grants to YGB, and the Bureau awarded an Adoption Excellence award to the program in 2007. In one 4-year federally funded study, 98 of the 199 youth referred to YGB achieved permanency. An interesting finding from the study showed that prospective parents who signed up for parent training because they had a specific teen in mind for adoption were far more likely to meet all the requirements and to have a teen placed with them than were prospective parents who took the training but had no particular teen in mind for adoption (Avery, 2010).

For more information, visit the You Gotta Believe website at <http://www.yougottabelieve.org>.

Focusing on Pre- and Postplacement Services

The provision of appropriate and timely services may make the difference in whether permanency outcomes are successful for youth. Preplacement services should focus on:

- Helping youth understand the long-term benefits of having a permanent family
- Helping both the youth and the family decide whether the placement is desirable
- Providing the family with full background information about the youth
- Determining how and if connections to birth family members will be maintained
- Planning for the youth's educational, health, and other needs
- Preparing both the family and the youth for typical transition issues

The availability of postplacement services may make adoption, kin care, or guardianship possible for many families and youth that require additional assistance after placement. The NRC for Permanency and Family Connections offers extensive resources on working with youth and families to prepare them for youth permanency: <http://www.hunter.cuny.edu/socwork/nrcfcpp/info/services/youth-permanency.html>. Families may need postplacement services in several areas, including:

- Financial assistance or subsidies (most children adopted from foster care are eligible for subsidies)
- Community services (including medical or mental health services, educational services, and respite care)
- Support groups (for parents and for youth)

Example: It's Up to Me to ReConnect (Michigan)

The Children's Bureau funded the It's Up to Me to ReConnect project, which focused on helping youth achieve permanency while strengthening connections with extended families and involved the development of instruments to measure youth's readiness for permanency (the Openness to Permanency Scale) and the quality of a relationship between a youth and adult (the Quality Relationship Scale). The Openness to Permanency Scale addresses such topics as conflicted loyalty, self-esteem, and worthiness and can be used for discussions among youth, caseworkers, and families. The Quality Relationship Scale includes self-reports for both youth and adults as a way to assess communication, commitment, security, honesty, and respect in the relationship and also as a way for youth and adults to discuss these areas. For more information on this project, see the NRC for Adoption website at <http://www.nrcadoption.org/resources/ypc/grantee-projects/bethany-christian-services/>.

Exploring Relational Permanency

Although child welfare policies often focus on legal permanency, some youth may feel that the establishment of relational or emotional permanency is more important to them (Casey Family Services, 2005; Sanchez, 2004). Relationships between youth in foster care and nonparental adults, including other family members, professionals involved in the youth's life (e.g., caseworker), and adults informally involved in the youth's life (e.g., a friend's parent) can help improve a variety of outcomes for youth, including educational attainment, living situations, emotional well-being, interpersonal relationships, and coping (Ahrens, Lane DuBois, Garrison, Spencer, Richardson, & Lozano, 2011). The Permanency

Pact (<http://www.fosterclub.com/files/PermPact.pdf>), developed by FosterClub,¹ provides a formalized, facilitated process for adults to pledge and specify the support they can provide to youth in foster care. Mentor programs also can provide youth in foster care with additional relational supports, although these relationships may vary in terms of permanence and the types of support provided (Avery, 2011).

Youth Voice

“The search for permanence is long and complicated for most foster youth. Learning how to cultivate a healthy relationship as an adult is difficult if it wasn’t modeled for you. However, the growth opportunity provided by adult supporters, who can later become permanent connections, can make the difference. Some days it may mean that an older youth may have someone to call and check in with or to help with taxes. Or it may mean having someone who can attend your graduation or a major surgery. Creating permanent connections means maintaining those meaningful and supportive relationships into adulthood, despite being in foster care and lacking a permanent legal guardian.”

— Crys, youth formerly in foster care

identified frequency and quality of caseworker visits to both children and birth families as being significantly associated with better permanency outcomes (U.S. DHHS, Children’s Bureau, 2011). In addition, the stability of caseworker assignments can impact casework. Frequent changes in the worker assigned to a case may result in disruptions in permanency planning for youth (Landsman, Tyler, Black, Malone, & Groza, 1999).

Agencies should ensure that staff receive training and supervision support for working with youth and recruiting and working with families for youth. Training should include preparing both youth and families for permanency and providing postplacement support. Workers should know what services are available for families and should monitor families after placement. In addition, cross-training among caseworkers and recruiters may help them understand the value of each others’ jobs. For information about a Children’s Bureau grant cluster focused on the training of agency supervisors to promote effective practice with youth in preparation for independent living, including establishing permanent connections, visit https://www.childwelfare.gov/management/funding/funding_sources/independent.cfm.

Strengthening the Workforce to Support Enhanced Permanency

Staff who are overburdened with caseloads are not able to provide optimum services to youth and families. A summary of Child and Family Services Review (CFSR) findings

¹ Foster Club is a national organization for youth in, or formerly in, foster care, providing them with a way to make their voice heard and to exchange ideas and receive and provide support.

Example: Permanency Roundtables (Georgia)

One way to support the workforce is to bring in permanency experts and create new “specialist” staff positions to help caseworkers consider new ways to approach permanency. In 2008, Casey Family Programs, working with Georgia’s Division of Family and Children Services (DFCS), developed a Permanency Roundtable process designed to help youth who had been in foster care the longest achieve permanency and to help staff learn new ways of addressing permanency barriers. Each roundtable consisted of a 2-hour meeting that included a Casey Family Programs permanency expert, a DCFS master practitioner (a new role created to provide leadership to workers in the field), the youth’s case manager and supervisor, and a DFCS administrator or practice expert. Over 6 weeks, roundtable teams met to discuss the cases of 496 children and youth, including 269 teens. At each meeting, the caseworker presented the case, and the entire team brainstormed to identify permanency strategies and develop a permanency action plan (with an average of seven steps) for the worker to implement. There was structured follow-up to help the worker and supervisor, and the program included extensive data collection. At the 24-month follow-up, 34 percent of the teens had achieved legal permanency (i.e., reunification, adoption, guardianship), 36 percent had turned 18 and left care, and 27 percent remained in foster care.

For more information on the Georgia Permanency Roundtable project and similar projects in other States, visit the Casey Family Programs website: <http://www.casey.org/Resources/Initiatives/PermanencyRoundtables>.

Strengthening Court Supports

The court process can be a catalyst to achieving timely permanency outcomes for children and youth. Casey Family Programs

(2009) conducted an assessment of 11 court systems that have promising practices for achieving youth permanency and reported the following themes:

- Using interdisciplinary teams to work toward system reform efforts
- Ensuring that youth attend and participate in dependency court hearings
- Holding review hearings more frequently
- Providing data reports regularly to judges
- Holding Permanency Roundtables and case readings to focus on permanency
- Developing bench cards, checklists, and professional guides for judges, attorneys, and other court staff
- Providing cross and joint training
- Revising policies and guidance in order to implement new strategies

To assist judges and other court staff better manage court practice for child maltreatment cases, the National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges (NCJFCJ) developed *Resource Guidelines: Improving Practice in Child Abuse and Neglect Cases* (http://www.ncjfcj.org/sites/default/files/resguide_0.pdf). The NCJFCJ Model Courts program, which seeks to institute systemic, procedural reforms to improve outcomes for children in foster care, is based on these guidelines (Ensign, Davis, & Lee, 2009). An examination of youth-focused reforms implemented by the Model Courts noted several of the items highlighted by Casey Family Programs as well as benchmark permanency hearings, service provision and mentor programs for youth, and alternative dispute resolution programs, such as mediation and family counseling (Dobbin, 2009).

Example: Model Court Benchmark Meetings (Louisiana)

In 2007, the Orleans Parish Juvenile Court judge in Louisiana instituted the use of Benchmark Conferences for youth (14–18 years old) in foster care to ensure that youth felt supported and were receiving all necessary services. The conferences, which continue today, include the youth, the judge, the caseworker, and an adult of the youth's choosing and with whom the youth hopes to have a permanent connection. This adult, who is referred to as the Child-Identified Advocate, signs a formal pact filed with the teen's record that shows a commitment to having a supportive and ongoing relationship with the youth.

The youth is asked to prepare for the conference by talking with his or her lawyer, CASA, and caseworker and by completing a Youth's Report to the Court (which asks about the youth's interests and needs) and a Dream Sheet (which asks about the youth's goals for the next few years and how the youth plans to achieve them). There is an emphasis on education needs and goals and on engaging the youth in planning for the future. The Benchmark Conference also gives the judge an opportunity, through informal discussion with the youth, to find out about the youth's placement, school and classes, sibling access, and other important relationships in the youth's life.

This innovation is part of the NCJFCJ Model Courts program. For more information, access:

- The Benchmark Program Conferences packet (which includes the forms and pact, as well as other information): http://www.clarola.org/index.php?option=com_mtree&task=att_download&link_id=37&cf_id=24
- The NCJFCJ website: <http://www.ncjfcj.org/our-work/dependency-model-courts>

Barriers to Permanency for Youth

Youth in foster care face a number of barriers to achieving permanency specific to their situations. Recognizing these challenges may help child welfare workers seek solutions that can facilitate permanent families and connections for these youth.

Policies and attitudes may not reflect an emphasis on permanency for youth. Some child welfare professionals may believe the myth that youth are unadoptable (North American Council on Adoptable Children, 2009). Although the provisions of the Fostering Connections Act seek to change the approach toward permanency for youth, there is still work to be done to address this barrier to permanency. A cluster of Children's Bureau-funded grantees addressed this issue as part of their projects (DHHS, Children's Bureau, 2010b).

Sequential case planning and a focus on independent living services may be inadequate for permanency. The continued use of sequential case planning can slow the permanency process. When an agency waits until parental rights have been terminated before considering alternative permanency plans, the permanent family connection for a child or youth is delayed. In addition, agencies may focus primarily on providing Independent Living services to youth, believing that these services meet expectations for working towards permanency. While Independent Living services are important in preparing youth for adulthood, they are not sufficient to connect youth with permanent families or other permanent connections.

There are not enough families recruited to foster and adopt youth. Many agencies need to place a greater emphasis on identifying families who are willing to provide homes for youth, including strengthening efforts to find, engage, and support kin, including paternal kin, as permanent connections for youth. There is often a lack of focused recruitment for this group; in addition, youth who need families are often invisible to the community (Mallon, 2005).

Youth initially may be resistant to permanency planning. Many youth show initial or even long-term resistance to permanency planning that involves the termination of their birth parents' rights because they still feel emotional ties to their families. They may fear embarking on a relationship with a new family because of repeated past disappointments, or they may not understand the long-term consequences of being without a family as a young adult.

The court process may slow or hinder efforts toward permanency. Even when agencies and workers are focused on permanency for youth, their efforts can be hindered by court processes that are slow or by judges who are reluctant to terminate parental rights. Judges also may not be aware of the viability of finding adoptive families for youth. Another barrier in some cases may be the lack of a good working relationship between child welfare workers and courts and the lack of youth voice in court.

Conclusion

Youth face numerous challenges achieving permanency when exiting foster care. With an increasing percentage of youth aging out of foster care, it is especially important for child welfare agencies and other related professionals to be well-equipped to support youth on their path to permanency, be it legal, relational, or physical. The surging focus on youth permanency by Federal, State, and local governments, including an influx of grant awards targeting this area, should yield additional research, policy, and other resources in the years ahead about how to best serve, support, and collaborate with young people in care.

Youth Voice

Throughout this bulletin, a number of quotations from youth provide a sampling of the power of the youth voice in the permanency process. The NRC for Permanency and Family Connections has developed digital stories that highlight youth and reflect various perspectives of the child welfare system, including those of youth. These videos are especially useful for worker training and for family recruitment. To view these stories, visit http://www.nrcpfc.org/digital_stories/index.htm.

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