



National Association of Public  
Child Welfare Administrators

an affiliate of the American Public Human Services Association

## How States Are Implementing the Fostering Connections Act

### Maryland's At-risk Children

In July 2009, there were 8,756 children in foster care, a 15 percent decrease from FY 2007. Group home placements were also reduced by a notable 40 percent. The state focused its efforts on placing children in relatives' homes, which increased from 68 percent to 75 percent from 2007 to 2009, respectively. In FY 2007, 597 adoptions were finalized; in FY 2009, that number increased by 29 percent. In FY 2009, the state also received an Adoptions Incentive Award of \$196,000. Consequently, Maryland is seeing a rising trend in the number of children leaving foster care through increased adoptions, reunifications and guardianships.

In 2007, Maryland launched a comprehensive child welfare reform effort called *Place Matters*. The primary principles for this campaign include the following: safely keep or return children to their family; if children are placed in foster care, ensure that they are placed in family settings whenever appropriate and that they remain in their original community; and minimize children's length of stay in foster care. Maryland has attributed its reduction in out-of-home care and its increase in relative and adoptive placements to *Place Matters*. This results-based framework strives to improve the lives and well-being of Maryland children and families. Family stabilization and safe reduction of children in foster care are critical areas of focus.

Maryland's public child welfare system is state supervised and state administered. Services are administered to approximately 50,000 people annually through 23 local departments and Baltimore City. Maryland's Department of Human Resources collects and distributes child support payments, administers temporary cash assistance, nutrition assistance and medical assistance to families. Nearly 7,000 local employees provide these services as well as foster care, adoption and child protective services.

### Maryland's Budget Landscape

Maryland's FY 2011 projected child welfare budget figures are \$600 million which includes federal and state funds. Maryland state employees have been subject to furloughs which range from 3-10 days depending upon salary.

### P.L. 110-351 State Options

In 1997, the state operated a subsidized guardianship assistance program through the federal IV-E demonstration waiver project. However, the waiver expired in 2006 and the Maryland General Assembly passed legislation to authorize a state-funded program. Eligible children are court-committed and their relatives have signed a guardianship agreement. In Maryland, 1,700 children placed with relatives receive TANF child-only payments and 900 children receive Title IV-E foster care maintenance assistance. These two populations receive the same services and are tracked in Maryland's state automated information system, also known as MD Chessie. Although all relatives are offered the option of becoming foster parents, two-thirds of Maryland's relatives choose to receive TANF. The DHR indicates that these relatives feel a moral responsibility to place kin in their care rather than in non-relative foster care, but see the placement as temporary and expect the children to reunify with their birth families. Additionally, relatives do not want to go through the full home study and foster parent training process. The state does criminal background checks and safety assessments for all relatives as required by law. Maryland is in the process of submitting a Title IV-E state plan amendment to implement a federal guardianship assistance program that will complement its state's guardianship assistance program.

Maryland plans to implement the option to extend support to older youth. Maryland's statute allows youth ages 19 to 21 to receive support if they have a disability or are employed or enrolled in an educational or vocational program. Children who leave care and feel they need additional assistance may have access to a full range of independent living services, except return to foster care. Youth ages 18 to 21, however, who choose not to remain in care are able to receive voluntary after-care services. After-care may be provided for up to six months, and includes receiving limited financial support, assistance toward room and board, counseling, employment, health care and case management services. Maryland uses Chafee and educational training voucher funds to support transitioning youth. Maryland also has a state-operated tuition

voucher program that enables youth to attend a state post-secondary institution of higher learning free of charge. Medical assistance is extended to older youth through their 21<sup>st</sup> birthday.

### **Federally Recognized Tribes**

Maryland does not have federally recognized tribes, but the state provides foster care services to seven tribal children in care, which fulfills the requirements of the Indian Child Welfare Act.

### **P.L. 110-351 Mandatory Provisions**

The majority of P.L. 110-351's requirements are adequately aligned with the state's statute.

P.L. 110-351 relative notification standards are aligned with state statute. Maryland notifies relatives within 48 hours of a child's removal. Relatives are identified through birth-parent interviews and caseworkers diligently strive to locate them. Maryland's statute requires relatives to be notified through letters. Private and public agencies are also mandated to post notices through the Clerk of the Court's office.

The state is also required to place children with their relatives as a first-placement option as opposed to non-relative foster care. Maryland's priority is to safely place children with their relatives, if keeping them with their birth parents is not in their best interest. Agency staff gathers information at the family involvement meeting, which takes place at risk of removal usually prior to the child being placed.

Maryland works to ensure that foster youth have strong educational stability. When a child enters care, Maryland strives to keep him or her in the child's school district. If this action is not possible, the state makes efforts to enroll children in the nearest school district within five days. In 2008, Maryland passed legislation requiring agencies to promptly enroll foster children by expediting their school records within one week after they transfer schools. This policy helps minimize disruptions to children's educational well-being. The state is working closely with the Maryland Department of Education to implement the Fostering Connections educational requirements and on enrollment issues, but these procedures require considerable cooperation and collaboration with local education authorities. Identifying responsible parties for duties and administrative costs for transportation and other issues will be a challenge for Maryland. Meeting this requirement will require negotiation that will undoubtedly take longer than the time allotted by the act.

The state is in the process of aligning the Fostering Connections health care oversight and coordination requirements. Currently, all Maryland children who come into care have an initial health screening within 48 hours and a comprehensive health screening within 60 days. Maryland's children have a health passport that follows them until they exit care. Children's medical information is electronically documented in Chessie. This centralized data collection ensures that the current caregiver(s), medical providers and caseworkers have access as needed to the child's medical records. Maryland's Department of Human Resources exchanges information with the state's Medicaid office; however, this exchange is not automated. If the DHR and Medicaid move forward with an electronic information-sharing application, the state would need legislative action for database linkage and funding for technology upgrades.

Maryland is ahead of the curve in meeting the Fostering Connections requirements to serve transitioning youth. In 2007, Maryland's "Ready by 21" campaign was launched to improve the outcomes for older youth aging out of foster care. The initiative focuses on providing assistance for youth to have better access to education and training programs; find employment opportunities; develop and maintain supportive networks; manage their finances and navigate housing options. Maryland is required to work with youth ages 14 to 21 to prepare them for adulthood and provide them with independent living services in addition to their permanency plan. The state also uses the Ansell-Casey Assessment Tool to create benchmark activities and skill building techniques to help with youth transition.

According to state statute, youth must have a 90-day transition plan prior to exiting care. Maryland also has an annual Teen Conference where youth ages 14 and older discuss sexuality, dating, personal hygiene and conflict resolution. This statewide initiative helps prepare adolescents and older youth for adulthood.

Maryland's effort to maintain strong sibling connections is paramount. State statute requires children to be placed together unless there is compelling reason for separation. If this placement does not occur, caseworkers are required to document these reasons in the children's record. Additionally, the case record must include a probable visitation plan. Foster family recruitment efforts are diligently made to increase sibling placements, especially for large groups.

### **Family Connections Grants**

Maryland submitted an application for a Family Connections Grant. The state applied for the kinship navigator, family team decision-making, and intensive family finding programs to expand services. Several local management boards have kinship navigator programs; DHR currently does not have a formal navigator program. There are intensive family finding initiatives in Prince George's and Baltimore Counties that focus on making connections for older youth. Maryland successfully used Family Involvement Meetings at critical points in case planning: placement, change in placement, in-care planning intervals and transitional planning.

### **Opportunities and Challenges**

The state is awaiting additional guidance on several provisions of P.L. 110-351; however, Maryland has most of these requirements in place. Maryland will experience challenges implementing the educational stability provision of P.L. 110-351. The DHR has arranged meetings with the Department of Education to implement the requirements of P.L. 110-351. Maryland believes Fostering Connections creates meaningful opportunities for states to develop comprehensive health care plans for youth in care. The economic downturn, however, has played a critical role in the state's ability to implement its health care model statewide.

Regarding federal finance reform, the state believes that all children in need should receive federal assistance. Maryland encourages Congress to de-link the 1996 AFDC requirements on foster care and guardianship assistance to expand children's eligibility and increase prevention dollars to support front-end services.

### **Conclusion**

In 2007, the state launched a monumental child welfare reform effort called *Place Matters*, which focuses on safe reunification and timely permanent placement for at-risk children. Since that time, Maryland's foster care caseloads have decreased significantly and the state attributes this reduction to an increase in relative and adoptive placements. The state is ahead of the curve on most mandatory provisions and the DHR plans to expand its guardianship and older youth services by implementing the act's options.