

Family Connections and Permanency

Family is Everything

All young people in foster care need and deserve a family to count on in both good and bad times. No child should leave foster care without a permanent, loving, committed family. Long-term family connections are a major building block and cornerstone for preparing youth for the adult world.

Permanence means having an enduring family relationship that is safe, offers legal rights, and the social status of full family membership. Permanence provides a physical safe and stable living environment and emotional attachments that build trust and offer reciprocity. Permanence for those who experience foster care assures lifelong connections to siblings, extended family and other significant adults. Moreover, a permanent family affords young people with a sense of history, heritage and tradition. Research shows that a permanent supportive relationship and feeling connected to adults is important for a young person's well-being and lifetime journey.

Permanence

The array of permanency options available to foster children includes safe and timely reunification with their original family, adoption by a relative or non-relative, a tribal customary adoption for those with Native American ties, legal guardianship with a relative or other family, and as a last resort another planned permanent living arrangement.

- **Reunification**—considered the first option, family reunification is the planned process of safely reconnecting foster children with their families by means of a variety of services and supports.
- **Adoption**—when reunification is not possible and termination of parental rights has occurred, a child is considered available for adoption by relatives or those outside the family unit. Post-

adoption services are made available to help the new family thrive.

- **Customary Adoption**—performed mainly in tribal communities, this option does not necessitate the termination of parental rights and provides the child with continued ties to the community and culture.
- **Guardianship**—like tribal customary adoptions, the guardianship option also does not necessitate the termination of parental rights, and allows a relative or other significant adult to take legal custody of the child, while still maintaining a suitable and safe relationship with the parents that are unable to care for the child.
- **Another Planned Permanent Living Arrangement**—is any other permanent living arrangement not enumerated in the statute. Considered by many to be the option of last resort, when reunification, adoption or guardianship are not options, a compelling reason to use APPLA must be documented in a young person's case plan.

Portrait of Young People Exiting Care¹

In 2006, roughly 268,000 children left foster care, of which 53 percent were reunified with the parent(s) or primary caretaker. Eleven percent lived permanently with relatives with another 5 percent in guardianship arrangements. Seventeen percent of foster children in 2006 were adopted. And sadly, of those who exited foster care, 26,000 or 9 percent “emancipated” or “aged out” with no legal family to care or look out for them.

Research indicates and child welfare professionals concur that young children are more likely to find permanency than their older counterparts.² On September 30, 2006, there were approximately 510,000 children and youth in foster care, more than half or 269,000 were older youth, age nine and older. Ten percent of those in care in 2006 were living in non-

family like setting such as group home or institutional care. These tend to be older youth with emancipation or APPLA goals. Moreover, since 2001 the aging out population has grown 46 percent, an unprecedented number.

Exiting the system by “aging out” without a permanent family is associated with a range of poor outcomes for young people, including early pregnancy, criminal involvement, homelessness, lack of employment and/or dropping out of high school.

Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act

In 2008, building on the successes of the Adoption and Safe Families Act (ASFA/1997/P.L. 105-89), Congress passed the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act (Fostering Connections Act/P.L. 110-351). Like its landmark predecessor, the historic Fostering Connections Act, it focuses on increasing permanency outcomes for youth in care, particularly concerning adoption and guardianship. P.L. 110-351 also promotes connections, when appropriate and safe to do so, between foster children and their siblings, grandparents and other extended family members.

Fostering Connections went a step further by supporting young people in care past the age of 18 and providing additional time for child welfare agencies to find permanency options, increase family connections and prepare youth for adulthood. The law also ensures that states work closely with youth exiting foster care on creating a transition plan before they leave custody, which many states already do.

Permanency and Preparation for Adulthood

Permanency and preparation for young people in care should be done in a concurrent fashion. Every young person in foster care needs both a family and life skills to be given the best chance to succeed. Too often, life skills such as job training, continued education and money management are more likely to be provided for those who have the goal of APPLA when efforts to find families have been discontinued. Similarly, life skills are not always offered to those young people who are in permanency arrangements, even though they could benefit greatly. Some states are using a more holistic approach and integrating permanency and preparation so that youth are not ill-prepared to face adulthood.

Important Voices at the Permanency Table

Youth involvement in permanency planning and decision-making is absolutely essential. This empowers young people and gives them the opportunity to advocate for themselves. Additionally, it is imperative to include family members and other significant caring adults at the table.

States Focus on Permanency and Family Connections

States such as **Illinois** and **Massachusetts** allow young people to stay in foster care without restrictions past the age of 18. Other states allow young people to stay in care if they are in school or have a medical issue. Some states such as **Iowa, Indiana** and **Kentucky** allow young people who have decided to leave care to re-enter if they need to. This gives social workers more time to help locate possible permanency options for the youth.

Most states have policies where relatives are to be considered first. Prior to the passage of the Fostering Connections Act, 37 states, plus the District of Columbia, operated a state-funded guardianship program. Foster youth are legally placed with a caring relative such as a grandparent, aunt or uncle or a non-blood related adult such as a coach, teacher, neighbor or family friend. States continue to operate these permanency programs and fourteen states (including **Connecticut, Illinois, Maine, Missouri, Massachusetts, Michigan, Montana, New Jersey, Oregon, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, Tennessee, Washington** and **D.C.**) have applied to the Administration for Children and Families in order to implement the new federal Guardianship Assistant Program option under the act.

States such as **Florida** have made significant efforts increasing the numbers of adoptions from foster care, particularly for older youth.

Several states, including **Georgia**, have held permanency roundtables. At these events professional case consultants help social workers review case files and develop barrier-busting strategies to expedite permanency for young people before they age out.

In 2006, the American Public Human Services Association surveyed child welfare directors across the country about older youth. APHSA asked what strategies the state implements to locate, engage and connect youth exiting care with family resources, including siblings and other significant adults.

¹ AFCARS

² AFCARS

All states have transition or exit plan policies in place, as the Fostering Connections Act requires. These plans include details concerning the re-establishment of connections with birth families when appropriate and the identification of adults who can act as mentors. Additionally, the plans also include information on how to access health care, education and employment services. States such as **Connecticut**, provide a list of, phone numbers, addresses and e-mail contact information for adults. States vary in what age the transition or exit planning begins with some starting at age 14 (**Arkansas and Michigan**), 15 (**Idaho and Louisiana**) and still others at 16 (**Arizona and Colorado**). Understanding the importance of the youth's voice, these planning meetings include the young person as well as other caring adults.

Most states, including **Minnesota** and **Texas**, are incorporating Family Group Decision Making and Team Decision Making that aides in establishing permanent connections. With this practice, families and other caring adults are invited to participate in the decisions that affect the child's life, including type of placement, services, and other key decisions. The FGDM and the TDM may start at the beginning of placement and continue throughout the child's time in care.

Federal audits indicate that many states are doing well in maintaining sibling connections. States such as **Colorado** and **Maryland** describe a priority in policies and practice in placing siblings together in out-of-care and permanency settings. When not possible to do so, several states report hosting sibling camps and conferences and providing frequent visitation between brothers and sisters.

Although formal adult connections are important, the increased recognition that informal relationship may also be beneficial to youth in foster care is becoming increasingly clear. States such as **Florida**, **Nebraska** and **Tennessee** report having mentoring programs where caring adult guides and are positive role models that encourage youth toward career and educational goals. Mentors often become permanent connections for young adults exiting care.

Conclusion

Permanence for youth in foster care makes an incredible difference. A family connection can provide emotional support and a stable place to live.