STRATEGY BRIEF

STRONG FAMILIES

What are some **effective strategies for achieving permanency?**

Foster care is intended to be temporary: time-limited out-of-home care until a child can safely return home or, if that is not possible, until the child has a new permanent family. However, children across the country are lingering in foster care, turning what should be a temporary experience into one that may last into adulthood. When the child protection agency fails to connect a child with a permanent family, the agency is failing that child: youth who age out of care without a family are less likely to achieve educational goals, less likely to earn a living wage, and are more likely to become involved with the criminal justice system.[1] A permanency-driven child protection agency achieves timely legal permanency for all children, typically through reunification, guardianship, or adoption, as well as relational permanence, so that each child has at least one safe, stable, lifelong, family or family-like relationship that provides physical, emotional, social, and spiritual well-being.

A review of the literature identified a variety of promising and evidence-based strategies that child protection agencies can use to achieve permanency for children in out-of-home care.

casey family programs

A sense of urgency

Becoming a **permanency-driven organization** involves establishing a culture and philosophy of permanency as everyone's responsibility, not just the purview of the permanency caseworker. It requires a sustained sense of urgency that begins the moment a child comes to the attention of the agency with a call to the hotline. It means adopting a systemwide understanding that a youth's sense of belonging is fundamental to overall well-being,[2] and that relational and legal permanency is the only way to achieve that. It requires ongoing messaging and prioritization by leadership, at the executive level as well as throughout the organization,[2] in defining permanency as a right and an urgent need through regular permanency reviews, training series, data dashboards, supervisory tools, coaching sessions, and continuous quality improvement activities. It also requires making visible and meaningful what happens to youth if permanency isn't a priority: aging out of foster care into adulthood alone. For example, Anu Family Services, a private agency in Wisconsin, improved permanency outcomes by 84 percent after becoming a permanency-driven organization through extensive changes in practice that reflected these commitments.[2]

Casey Family Programs' **Rapid Permanency Reviews (RPRs)** are another approach to elevating the issue of permanency, and galvanizing agency attention and resources on permanency for long-stayers. RPRs take an in-depth look at expediting permanency for children who have been in foster care for more than two years and help agency leaders identify barriers to permanency and bright spots in permanency practice.[3] Preliminary data from three jurisdictions show that children who participated in an RPR achieved permanency considerably faster than children in cohorts from the year before RPRs were implemented. For example, in one jurisdiction, 74 percent of children who participated in an RPR achieved permanency, compared with only 35 percent of children from the previous year's cohort. Perhaps even more important are the systemic barriers that the process uncovers; addressing those barriers helps prevent additional children from lingering in care.

A stable workforce

Reducing worker turnover is an important factor for achieving timely permanency and equally important to a strong organizational culture. High turnover is a widespread challenge that impacts performance of child protection agencies, carries significant financial costs to these agencies, and, more importantly, has been linked to negative outcomes for children and families who come in contact with those systems.[4] One seminal study found that children in care who had only one caseworker achieved permanency 74.5 percent of the time, but as the number of caseworkers increased, the percentage of children achieving permanency decreased significantly: children who had two caseworkers achieved permanency 17.5 percent of the time, and only 0.1 percent of children who had six or seven caseworkers achieved permanency.[4]

Prior research has linked safety, organizational and supervisory support, organizational climate and culture, and worker stress, exhaustion, and job satisfaction with turnover and caseworkers' intent to leave.[5] Some strategies for addressing worker turnover include: manageable supervisory ratios and caseloads; mentoring and coaching; building a safety culture; flexible schedules; and a comprehensive system for ongoing learning and professional development.[5]

Visitation

If a child has been removed from the care of his or her parents, safe and timely family reunification is the preferred permanency option for most children. While children are in out-of-home care, it is important for them to have **consistent and quality visits** with their families. Research correlates parent-child visits with higher rates of returning home and shorter foster care placement.[6] A quality visit builds on parents' strengths and guides improved parenting, which may, in turn, improve the chances of children staying in their homes after reunification.

Agencies nationally have found that coached visits can be more effective than supervised visits.[7] **Visit coaches** are actively involved in supporting parents

to demonstrate their best parenting skills and make each visit fun for the child. They help parents take charge of visits, model for parents who may not be attentive to the child how to focus on their child's need, guide parents, and bolster parents in supporting the child's adjustment to foster care in part by facilitating a relationship between the birth and foster parents. With visit coaching, parents can use visitation time to build relationships with their children and enhance the transition from foster care to reunification.[6]

Teaming with parents

Building a **quality relationship between birth parents and resource families** is also integral to advancing family reunification. Ensuring that parents and resource families engage in building their relationship is in the best interest of the child, both while the child is in care and after the child transitions home. The Youth Law Center's Quality Parenting Initiative (QPI) is one approach that incorporates birth parent and resource parent teaming to strengthen out-of-home care. In fact, foster parenting is often rebranded as co-parenting, and foster parents are expected to support reunification by building relationships with birth parents, modeling safe and developmentally appropriate parenting, and mentoring birth families as appropriate.[8] Sites have reported measurable improvement in several outcome areas, including reunification.[9]

In addition, **family teaming models** — also known as family group decision-making, family team conferencing, permanency teaming, and team decision-making meetings — should be used regularly throughout the life of a case to increase family engagement in the child's case plan, especially when planning for permanency. They are designed to involve children, families, their support networks, and professionals as integral players on strengths-based, solution-focused teams. The team values the family's voice, while focusing on the safety, permanency, and well-being of the child.[10,11] One such model is Team Decision Making (TDM), a collaborative practice used by child protection agencies that includes family members for all decisions involving child removal, change of placement, reunification, or other permanency plans, rather than the traditional model of agency personnel making the decisions in isolation. Sites practicing TDM were nearly 30 percent more likely to reunify children with their families within 12 months of entering care, finding that lengths of stay were shorter when families were involved in placement decisions.[12]

Parent partner programs are another way to engage and support birth parents and have shown promise in improving reunification. Parent partner programs draw on the lived experience of parents who were previously involved with the child welfare system to assist currently involved parents. Parent partners[13] serve as mentors

and advocates, support birth parents in navigating the child welfare system and, most importantly, provide parents with hope that they can be reunified with their children. Research shows that these programs can increase reunification rates for participating families.[14] Parent Partner programs in Washington state and Contra Costa County, California, have noted the following benefits: in Washington, rates of reunification are significantly higher in counties in which there is a Parent for Parents program, as compared to counties without the program;[15] and, in Contra Costa County, 62 percent of children whose parents were mentored through the program were reunified within 18 months of removal, compared to just 37 percent of children whose parents did not have a Parent Partner.[16]

Another important partner for parents is their attorney. The federal government encourages high quality **legal representation** for parents[17] but does not require it; therefore, legal representation for parents varies from jurisdiction to jurisdiction. At least one evaluation found that when parents have an attorney to represent them in child welfare proceedings, reunification occurs more quickly, and when that is not possible, then permanency through adoption and guardianship is also achieved more quickly.[18]

Removing barriers to services is another critical role that child protection agencies can play in supporting reunification of families, including timely access to **in-home services**.[19] Among other things, in-home services aim to strengthen parental capacity and support healthy and nurturing relationships, in the natural environment of the family home.[20] In-home services can be especially appropriate while a child is transitioning back home, and post-reunification in-home services have been found to contribute to positive outcomes.[20] For example, Homebuilders®, a home- and community-based intensive family preservation service, has been found by the California Evidence-Based Clearinghouse as a promising intervention to support reunification; at least one study found that when families received Homebuilders® services, children were more likely to be reunified, and in less time than children whose families did not participate in Homebuilders®.[21]

KENTUCKY'S SOBRIETY TREATMENT AND RECOVERY TEAM (START)

- An intensive in-home program for families involved with the child protection agency that have at least one child under the age of 6, and also have a substance use disorder.
- Designed to prevent the need for placement by safely keeping children with their families, or to support safe reunification.
- START provides each family with a specially trained caseworker and a parent partner who together engage the family in individualized wrap-around services, including rapid access to substance abuse treatment and other services as appropriate.
- Outcomes indicate that at case closure, over 75% of children served by START remained with or were reunified with their parent(s), and for every $1 spent on START, $2.22 is saved on out-of-home placement costs.

https://chfs.ky.gov/agencies/dcbs/oc/Pages/start.aspx

Finding and engaging kin

When children are placed in out-of-home care, it is the agency's responsibility to ensure that children are able to maintain relationships with their extended family and fictive kin. If those relationships don't exist or have been disrupted, it is also the agency's responsibility to build or rebuild them. Research

shows that children placed with relatives experience greater placement stability and permanency through guardianship than children placed with non-relatives.[22] To connect children in care with relatives and fictive kin, and nurture long-term relationships in permanent families, effective **family search and engagement (FSE)** strategies can be implemented from the moment they enter care.

When kin are identified but live in a different state than the child, this can pose significant barriers to achieving timely permanency. The Interstate Compact on the Placement of Children (ICPC), which sets forth the procedures that states must follow in order to place children across state lines, is often known to be a time-consuming process with no accountability for ensuring that the process moves forward in a timely manner. The new National Electronic Interstate Compact Enterprise (NEICE) aims to improve the ICPC process by transferring data electronically from state to state, and to increase accountability by providing information about the status of cases that are in process. One evaluation of NEICE in six states found a 20-40 percent reduction in time to placement for children.[23]

Another strategy for expediting placement with a relative across state lines, particularly in communities that are close to the state border, is a **border agreement** between neighboring counties and states, such as that between Georgia and Alabama.[24]

Supporting guardianship

If reunification is not possible, child protection agencies are responsible for ensuring that children and youth achieve legal permanency through guardianship or adoption. For youth who are reluctant to have legal ties permanently severed with their birth parents, as would occur through adoption, guardianship may be a more appropriate path to 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.

Historically, one barrier to guardianship has been the lack of ongoing financial support to permanently care for the child, such as the subsidies available to adoptive families. In 2008, the Fostering Connections Act offered states and tribes the option, under Title IV-E, to provide **guardianship assistance payments** (GAP) to relatives who take legal guardianship of children who have been in out-of-home care. This assistance appears to be making a difference: nationally, the percentage of children exiting care to guardianship has steadily increased from 6 percent in FY2010, to a high of 10 percent in FY2016, the most recent year for which data from the Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS) is available.[25]

In addition, the Family First Prevention Services Act of 2018 allows states to receive federal reimbursement for up to 50 percent of their expenditures for **kinship navigator programs** that meet certain criteria. Kinship

navigator programs are often a critical source of information and support for relatives caring for children, including information on how to become legal guardians for those children and how to access services after the child protection agency is no longer involved.[26]

Diligent adoption recruitment

Comprehensive, multifaceted **diligent recruitment** involves a systematic approach to recruiting, retaining, developing, and supporting a pool of adoptive families who reflect the diverse demographics and needs of children in need of placement. Implementing comprehensive diligent recruitment can help achieve improved placement stability and permanency for children[27] by identifying relatives or, when relatives are not available, non-relatives who are willing to become a child's permanent family. Some elements of a diligent recruitment plan noted by the National Resource Center for Diligent Recruitment include:

- Analysis of the current pool of families: using data to track and analyze information about current adoptive families can help identify gaps and needs, to inform recruitment of new adoptive families, including market segmentation.
- Partnerships with community groups: building meaningful partnerships with agencies in local communities and with specific groups, such as military and faith-based communities to develop a pool of adoptive families that are more likely to match the characteristics and needs of the children they serve, as well as embedding community-based recruitment teams in specific geographic regions.
- Using a customer service model: treating potential adoptive families with respectful customer service to lay the foundation for trusting partnerships between families and the agency. For example, ensuring that every call is answered by a live person who can answer questions, or that messages left after business hours are returned the next business day, gives a positive first impression that the family's call is important.
- Increasing the rate of retention of prospective foster and adoptive parents: supporting resource families so that they feel equipped to meet the needs of the children in their care, including: connecting waiting families with other waiting families so that they can begin to build a support network; creating a formalized peer support network of new and experienced resource families; and providing families with information and training to effectively address children's specific needs.
- Engaging effectively with diverse cultural, racial, and economic communities: building relationships with diverse communities and populations to recognize and honor the diversity of children in care, as well as the diversity of adoptive families, training staff in cultural humility, and finding ways to address language barriers.
- AdoptUSKids photolisting: using this free service available to employees of all public and private child welfare agencies to either list children who are in need of an adoptive family, or to help adoptive families find a waiting child.
- General, targeted, and child-specific recruitment: employing a three-pronged approach that includes general recruitment strategies to build interest and awareness of the need for adoptive families (such as billboards and Public Service Announcements on radio programs); targeted recruitment strategies to focus on specific communities that are most likely to become adoptive families for children with specific characteristics (such as older youth, LGBTQ youth, or sibling groups); and child-specific recruitment to help identify adoptive families for a specific child, such as:
    - **Wendy's Wonderful Kids (WWK)**, which focuses on recruiting adoptive families for children ages 9-18 in foster care, particularly children most at risk of aging out of care (e.g., older youth, youth with mental health challenges, sibling groups, and children who have already been in care for significant periods of time and in multiple placements).

Managed by the Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption, WWK has shown some promising results:[28] at least one study found that children served by WWK were 1.7 times more likely to be adopted than children not receiving WWK services.[29]

- **You Gotta Believe (YGB)**, a New York City-based organization that focuses exclusively on finding permanent families for young adults, teens, and pre-teens in foster care, working with them to identify significant people in their lives or elsewhere who will make an unconditional, lifetime commitment to them. YGB has made successful matches in 50-60 percent of youth referred.[30] In one 4-year federally funded study, 98 of the 199 youth referred to YGB achieved permanency, and prospective parents who signed up for training because they had a specific teen in mind for adoption were far more likely to meet all requirements and have a teen placed with them than those who took the training without a specific teen in mind.[31]

To learn more, see related resources at Casey.org/effective-strategies-achieving-permanency.

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