Children's Services
PRACTICE NOTES

For North Carolina's Child Welfare Workers

From the NC Division of Social Services and the Family and Children's Resource Program

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NC Focuses on Timely Permanence

Repeat a word often enough and there's a risk it will become a mere sound, devoid of meaning. Thankfully, the meaning of the word "permanence" is in no danger of being lost in North Carolina.

That's because most of us get into this work because we believe every child deserves a safe, loving, permanent family. Permanence is something close to our hearts.

All the same, it helps to get occasional reminders about why the things we value are important. That's where this issue of *Practice Notes* comes in. In it you will find data about our performance around permanence, as well as a message from the Chief of Child Welfare Services in NC about why urgency matters in our work. You'll also find information about a new permanency-focused effort made possible through special funding from the legislature, as well as resources and research-based suggestions for enhancing your work with families and children.

Taken as a whole, we hope this issue will be a heartening reminder not only about why timely permanence matters, but about our state's strong commitment to do a better job achieving this goal. ◆

> **We do this work because we know in our hearts how much permanence matters.**
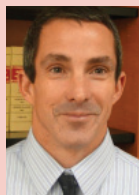
"We Need a Sense of Urgency"

Interview with Chief of Child Welfare Services, NC Division of Social Services about Timely Permanence in North Carolina

Kevin Kelley

To get a statewide perspective on time to permanence, why it matters, and what's being done to improve it, *Practice Notes* spoke with Kevin Kelley, Chief of the Child Welfare Section of the NC Division of Social Services. (*This interview has been edited for style and length.*)

Why is achieving timely permanence for children important?
It's important to dispel the myth that once a child is removed from the home, the risk is gone. While risk has been mitigated, there is still a lot of risk to the child's well-being. Simply by being in foster care, a child can get stuck developmentally. It's hard for them to deal with a living situation where their whole world is on hold.

We need to achieve permanence to ensure children's well-being, both now and in the long run.

Is there a child who comes to mind when you think about why permanence matters?
I saw many in my time as a foster care services worker. One example was a young man of 12 or 13. He had a lot of developmental work that needed to be happening with him that wasn't happening. I have to admit that as a worker at that time I was comfortable dealing with his health needs, but not the cause of those challenges, which probably had something to do with the amount of time he was in foster care and the fact that permanency wasn't even on the horizon.

The longer a child is in care, the more comfortable everyone gets. On the surface it appears to be an acceptable situation. But it's not.

We need to have a sense of urgency about this. Our urgency must actually intensify the longer a child is continued next page

in care. We have to somehow build our system to continue that sense of urgency because it may not seem to be a crisis, but it is and it needs to be addressed.

What's going well in North Carolina with regard to time to permanence?
In the past several years the number of children in foster care in our state has been reduced. This is due primarily to the declining rate at which children enter care. All of this has positioned us to have a smaller caseload, which is very desirable.

Another bright spot is that, compared to the national average, we have a fairly small number of children in foster care. That is creeping back up, but it is still true. We've done a good job reducing the total number of children in care. We are bringing only those children into care who truly need to be protected by the system. (*Note: see the next article for more on NC's performance in this area.*)

Our ability to achieve timely permanence depends a lot on our partners. What can DSS agencies do to influence key partners on this issue?
Although we don't have direct control over other systems, child welfare agencies can help drive improvement. Obviously the performance of the behavioral health system, and I mean both the Division of Medicaid Assistance (DMA) and the NC Division of Mental Health (DMH), is strongly connected to permanence for children. The Division of Social Services is actively forming partnerships to help them see the needs. For example, we are trying to communicate to the folks who oversee Medicaid that it is worthwhile to devote resources in certain ways that not only help children but that make the most sense fiscally in the long run. We are taking part in regular meetings with DMH, DMA, and their vendor, Community Care of North Carolina (CCNC).

Going forward, we want to be a better player at the table of the man-

> **"Our urgency must actually intensify the longer a child is in foster care."**
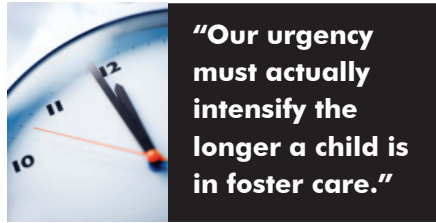
aged care system. There is a lot to learn and things change frequently, but we are making a difference by being involved.

Workers and their agencies can help by communicating with service providers when they see needs that aren't being met. When we can help providers serve families and children quickly, effectively, and efficiently, everyone benefits.

At the local level managed care organizations continue to evolve. They are being more selective about who they engage as providers. County DSS agencies can help the system make those decisions. DSS can also help providers get the attention of MCOs. Help your MCO understand which providers are using evidence-based practices that are important and valuable to you.

What about the courts?
The Administrative Office of the Courts has an information system (JWISE) we think will help shed light on how the court system could improve the rate at which court cases are continued. Continuances seem to be the lynchpin. If we want timely permanence, we need the court to have timely hearings.

Having more conversations with attorneys and judges might be another way we can improve the system.

We hear about the need to use data to track and improve performance. Are there performance measures related to timely permanence that are especially helpful to follow?
While we all have to pay attention to confidentiality, sharing data with providers is very helpful, particularly if you have a service provider that is serving multiple children for your agency. Looking at their data and

sharing your data with them, you can start to see patterns of performance. Use this data to have conversations about how those who do the work at the client level can improve results.

Like many states, NC has seen a steady rise in youth aging out of care without permanence. How are we addressing this trend?
We have the Generally Assembly's permission to develop a guardianship assistance program. The target population for this program will be kids for whom adoption has been ruled out as a permanent plan and who are currently placed with a relative licensed to provide foster care. This program is needed because some relatives hesitate to adopt because they don't want to taint relationships with the child's parents or other relatives. At the same time, we are asking the relative to assume full financial responsibility for the child, which may be difficult or impossible for them. Assisted guardianship is a way to overcome this barrier to permanence.

And of course we need to continue to work to find adoptive homes for children who need them—*especially* older children. Youth who belong to [the youth advocacy group] SaySo will tell you "Don't say a 16-year-old can't be adopted, because they can!" We can't ever forget that.

Any final words for county DSS staff about timely permanence?
Don't feel bad if you don't have a solution to the permanency question for every youth. I'm not saying you should stop trying, but achieving timely permanence for every child in foster care is a collective responsibility. I hope you make this clear to every one of your current and potential service providers.

Permanence is a multifaceted problem. We need to own it collectively. Partnerships and collaborations are very, very important to improving time to permanence. ◆

NC's Performance on Time to Permanence

One way to assess the capacity of our child welfare agencies to work with families and partners in other systems is to look at the speed with which children in foster care achieve permanence through reunification or other means.

How is North Carolina doing in this area? In some ways you might say we are victims of our own success.

Like much of the country, we've changed our way of working over the past 15 years. Today we're placing fewer children in out-of-home care. As a result, there are many fewer children in foster care today than there were in the late 1990s and early 2000s (see Figure 1). That's a good thing, because the families of the children who do enter foster care face complex challenges. Many on the front lines in our state agree that it is harder than it used to be to resolve these families' cases quickly.

We see this reflected in the amount of time kids spend in care. As Figure 2 shows, this is increasing. The median length of stay (LOS) in foster care in North Carolina today is the longest it has ever been: in 2011-12, the most recent year for which we have complete data, the median LOS was 474 days. As Figure 3 shows, North Carolina lags behind in performance on LOS compared to most states.
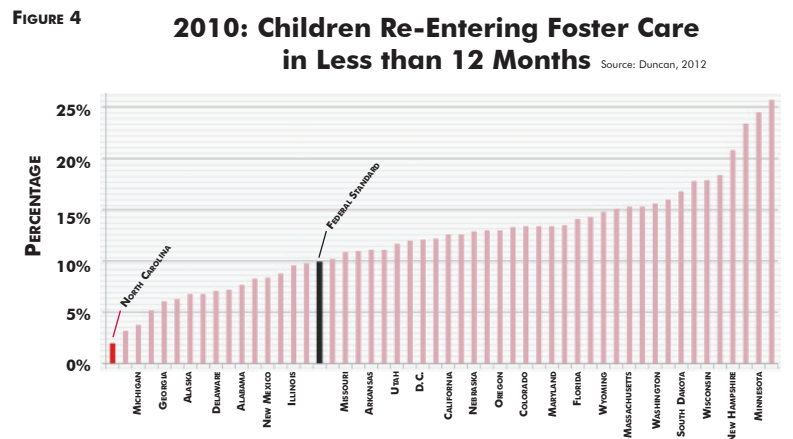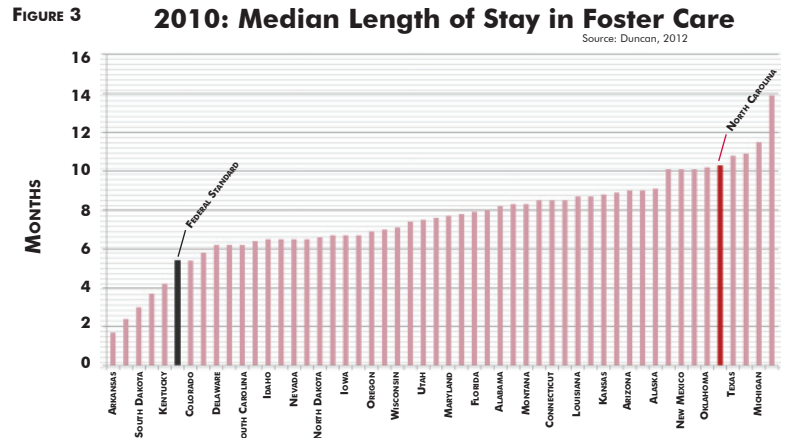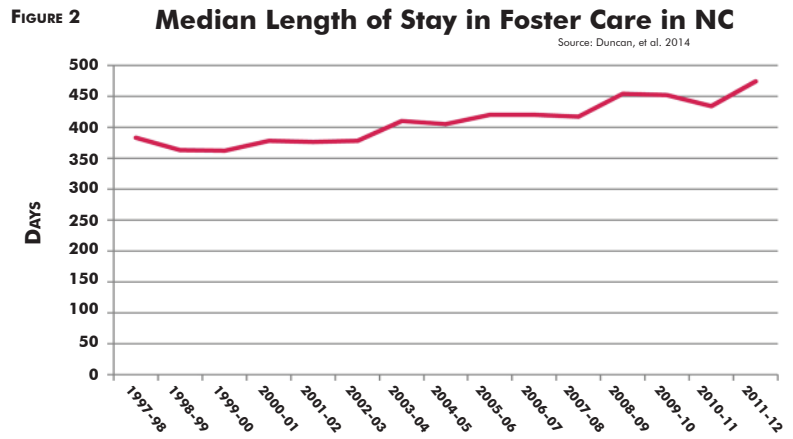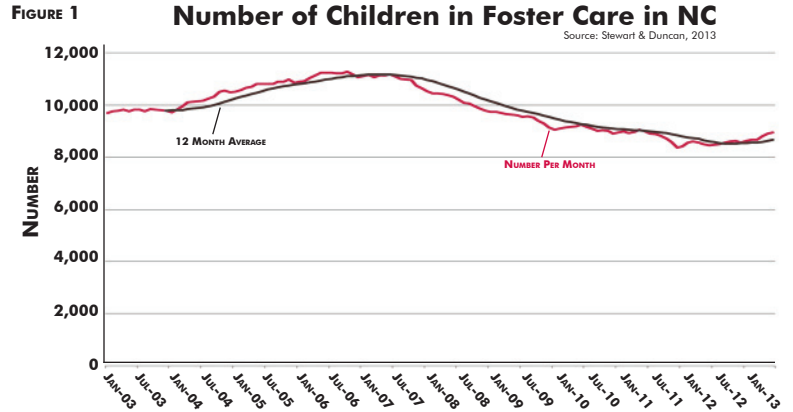
Clearly, this is an area in which we would like to improve. As Kevin Kelley, Chief of the Child Welfare Services Section in the NC Division of Social Services, states elsewhere in this issue, foster care is supposed to be temporary. Although it mediates safety risks, it cannot give children the permanence they need to develop and thrive.

Our natural response to this information is to look for ways to "pick up the pace" when it comes to finding permanence for children through reunification and other means. This is something we must do.

But in the process we must be careful. For a while now it has been true that when children in North Carolina leave foster care, they are less likely to re-enter care than they are in other states, including states that perform much better than we do on LOS. Figure 4 illustrates this.

Can North Carolina find a way to achieve permanency faster for children in foster care while keeping the rate of re-entry into foster care low?

It is a challenge we are eager to accept. These are measures we will continue to monitor closely.

FIGURE 1

Number of Children in Foster Care in NC
Source: Stewart & Duncan, 2013

FIGURE 2

Median Length of Stay in Foster Care in NC
Source: Duncan, et al. 2014

FIGURE 3

2010: Median Length of Stay in Foster Care
Source: Duncan, 2012

FIGURE 4

2010: Children Re-Entering Foster Care in Less than 12 Months
Source: Duncan, 2012

3

NC's Permanency Innovation Initiative

Using Promising Strategies to Improve Family Engagement and Permanency Outcomes for Children in Foster Care

In 2013 North Carolina's General Assembly launched a new effort to strengthen engagement of biological families and improve permanency outcomes for children in foster care. Amending Chapter 131D of the General Statutes, the legislature created and funded the "Permanency Innovation Initiative," a pilot project that increases investment of state dollars in strategies designed to help children achieve permanency.

> **This initiative invests state dollars in promising approaches to permanency.**

Overview

Under this initiative, funding is provided to enable Children's Home Society of North Carolina to provide services to improve permanency outcomes for children living in foster care, to improve engagement with biological relatives, and to reduce costs associated with maintaining children in foster care. Through the Permanency Innovation Initiative Children's Home Society will provide:

- **Child-Specific Adoption Recruitment Services**. Based on the Wendy's Wonderful Kids Model developed by The Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption, this program works with children in foster care to develop and execute adoption recruitment plans tailored to the needs of the individual child. Available for children ages 9-17 in participating counties.
- **Family Finding Services**. This program uses intensive services to discover and engage relatives of children living in public foster care to provide permanent emotional and relational support, including adoption, legal guardianship, or legal custody. Available for children ages 9-17 in participating counties.
- **Permanency Training Services**. Children's Home Society will assess participating county DSS agencies' readiness to implement Family Finding and Child-Specific Adoption Recruitment and provide training to support the effective delivery of these services.

Children's Home Society (CHS) is a nonprofit organization with a strong focus on finding permanence for children. Since it was founded in 1902 CHS has placed more than 15,000 children with loving, adoptive families. Furthermore, CHS has years of experience with Family Finding and Child-Specific Recruitment and has been part of national efforts to test the effectiveness of these approaches.

Participating Counties. Between now and June 30, 2014, thirty-two county DSS agencies will have access to CHS's Family Finding services and 12 will have access to its Child-Specific Recruitment services. Need and logistical considerations guided which counties were selected. See the box below for a list of the specific counties served during this time period.

The NC Division of Social Services' Teresa Strom, contract administrator for the Permanency Innovation Initiative, says "Our hope is next year—since the funding is expected to increase—we'll be able to expand the number of counties served by this initiative."

Funding and Oversight Committee. The General Assembly appropriated $1 million for state fiscal year (SFY) 2013-14 and $2.75 million for SFY 2014-15 to support the Permanency Innovation Initiative. Funding for the initiative became available January 1, 2014.

To oversee these funds and the initiative as a whole, the legislature authorized the creation of a "Permanency Innovation Initiative Oversight Committee." This 11-member committee will:

1. Design and implement ways of collecting and analyzing data to help it evaluate the success of the initiative,
2. Identify short- and long-term cost-savings in the provision of foster care,
3. Oversee program implementation and ensure fidelity to the Family Finding and Child-Specific Adoption Recruitment models, and
4. Study, review, and recommend other policies and services that may positively impact permanency and well-being outcomes.

To learn how members are appointed to this committee, how long these appointments will last, and the frequency of meetings and chair appointments, please refer to G.S. §131D-10.9A. As of this writing it is hoped that this committee will meet for the first time in spring 2014.

Family Finding Services				Child Specific Recruitment	
Alexander	Craven	Iredell	Robeson	Burke	Pitt
Beaufort	Cumberland	Lincoln	Rutherford	Cabarrus	Rockingham
Buncombe	Davidson	McDowell	Sampson	Cleveland	Rutherford
Burke	Forsyth	Mecklenburg	Scotland	Davidson	Union
Cabarrus	Gaston	Pitt	Union	Forsyth	Wayne
Caldwell	Guilford	Polk	Wake	Pasquotank	Wilson
Catawba	Haywood	Randolph	Wilkes		
Cleveland	Henderson	Rockingham	Yancey		

Initiative

The rest of this article describes the Child-Specific Adoption Recruitment and Family Finding approaches in more detail and explains why the legislature selected them for this initiative.

Child-Specific Adoption Recruitment Services

Child-Specific Adoption Recruitment (CSR) is an approach to finding adoptive families for children that involves just what the name suggests—developing an individualized plan for each particular child based on the child's background and needs. The goal is to identify specific parents who meet the specific needs of each child awaiting a permanent family.

The Model. Wendy's Wonderful Kids (WWK), a model developed in 2004 by the Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption, is perhaps the most widely tested CSR method and the one used by Children's Home Society of NC. Although the Dave Thomas Foundation freely shares this model, only programs funded by the foundation may call their approach WWK. Because funding for the Permanency Innovation Initiative is provided by the state of North Carolina, Children's Home Society calls its services "Child-Specific Recruitment."

Under the CSR approach, recruiters employed by CHS serve a specific area—usually 2-3 counties. These individuals spend 100 percent of their time finding permanent, loving families for children. Their caseloads are small—usually 12 to 15 children at a time. CSR recruiters focus intensely on each child's history, experiences, and needs to find an appropriate adoptive family.

Children are eligible for CSR services if they are aged 9-17 and have a permanency goal of adoption, or are free for adoption and do not have an identified adoptive family. Children served by CSR can be in any type of out-of-home placement, including family foster care, therapeutic foster care, group care, and residential settings. Children are eligible for CSR regardless of their interest in being, or desire to be, adopted. Finally, to allow for the fact that the recruitment and adoption finalization process can take two

CSR & Public-Private Partnership

Matt Anderson, Director of Planning and Sustainability at Children's Home Society, says the story of WWK/CSR in North Carolina is one of public-private partnership: "Child-specific recruitment began in NC through the efforts of private funders—the Duke Endowment and the Dave Thomas Foundation. Then the public system embraced it. When the Dave Thomas Foundation heard about the Permanency Innovation Initiative, it decided to increase investment in the model by giving CHS funding to add another child-specific recruitment position in the Onslow County area. It's a great example of how kids benefit when foundations and public and private agencies work together."

years or more from the time of referral, no time limit is set for provision of services. Recruiters rarely remove children from their caseloads (Malm, et al., 2011).

At Children's Home Society, CSR recruiters are the point of contact for the counties they serve. Their job is to build relationships with DSS staff and to work closely with them to achieve permanency for all eligible children.

In addition to the counties served through the Permanency Innovation Initiative, CHS also provides CSR services to Buncombe, Cumberland, Guilford, Mecklenburg, Onslow, and Wake counties through funding from the Dave Thomas Foundation.

Evidence of Effectiveness. What is it about the WWK/CSR model that inspires such excitement and investment? In a word, results. According to a national evaluation of WWK by Child Trends, between 2004 and 2011, approximately 2,400 children served through WWK had adoptions finalized (Malm, et al., 2011).
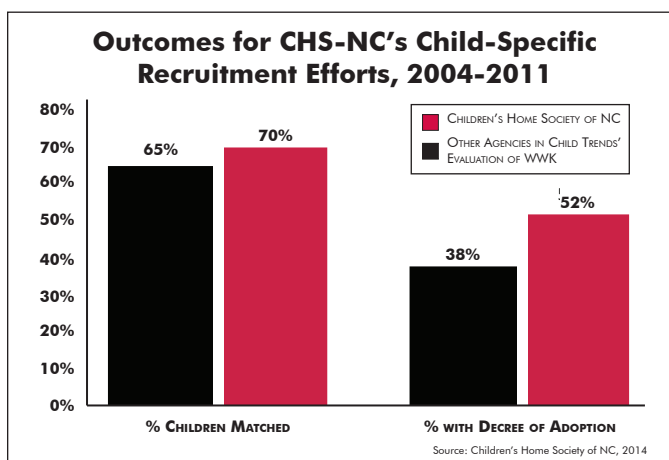
In North Carolina, Children's Home Society's results have been particularly impressive. In our state 70% (192) of the 275 children served through WWK were matched with an adoptive family and 52% (143) achieved a decree of adoption. The median age of children served by this program was 12. The median number of days it took to find an adoptive match for a child after referral to this program was 193. For those who were adopted during the period under study, the median number of days from referral to CSR to decree of adoption was 519, or just over a year and a half.

For more detail about the WWK/CSR model used by the Children's Home Society of North Carolina, read the 2011 report by Malm and her colleagues found at http://www.davethomasfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/10/Evaluation_Report_Summary.pdf.

Family Finding

Family Finding is a six-step model developed in the 1990s by youth permanency expert Kevin Campbell. The model offers methods and strategies to locate and

Outcomes for CHS-NC's Child-Specific Recruitment Efforts, 2004-2011

Legend: Children's Home Society of NC; Other Agencies in Child Trends' Evaluation of WWK

% Children Matched: 65%, 70%
% with Decree of Adoption: 38%, 52%

Source: Children's Home Society of NC, 2014

engage family members of children living in out-of-home care.

The Model. Family Finding's approach to connecting and reconnecting youth with their families includes an extensive search and discovery process to identify and engage family members. Internet-based search tools, such as US Search, are used to identify and locate family members the child welfare system may not know. Strong efforts are made to connect/reconnect youth with family members or relative resources, no matter where they live.

Kevin Campbell

The family leads the planning process to ensure they remain engaged and can potentially provide lifelong support for the young person. The goal is emotional and legal permanency. The support offered by family members may include inviting the child to spend the holidays with them or, in some cases, providing a permanent home in which the child can grow and flourish (CFFYC, 2008).

Implementation. Supported in part by the Duke Endowment, Children's Home Society has been practicing Family Finding in North Carolina since 2008. In 2013 CHS offered Family Finding in 18 counties. The Permanency Innovation Initiative has expanded this to 32 counties. (See sidebar on previous page for a list.) As the Division's Teresa Strom has indicated, it is hoped the number of counties served can be expanded next fiscal year.

Through the Permanency Innovation Initiative, Family Finding services will be delivered by specially-trained Family Finders employed by CHS. Each will serve a specific area—usually 4-5 counties. These individuals spend all of their time doing Family Finding. Like CSR recruiters, their caseloads are small.

Children in foster care are eligible for Family Finding services if they are aged 9-17 and have a permanency plan goal of adoption, guardianship or legal custody. They can be in any type of placement. Children are eligible for Family Finding services no matter how much (or how little) time they have been in foster care.

Target Outcomes. For each child referred to Family Finding services, CHS aims to discover 40+ relatives/other close connections previously unknown and/or unengaged in the child's case, who can become resource options to the DSS case worker in best serving the child's needs.

Evidence of Effectiveness. Family Finding is a promising practice when it comes to engaging family members and achieving permanence for children in foster care. Here's a quick summary of Children's Home Society's recent experience with this model:

- Between July 1, 2011 and June 30, 2013, CHS served 300 NC children through its Family Finding program.
- On average, child welfare agencies had identified eight (8) known relatives for these children at the time they were referred to Family Finding.
- Family Finding services were provided for each child, on average, for almost 5 months (141 days). At the end of this time Family Finders had discovered, on average, an additional 41 relatives for each child.

In addition, for 89% (n=268) of these children Family Finders identified five or more family members who said they were willing to commit to a lifelong *connection*. For 79% of these children (n=238), one or more relatives were committed to helping the child achieve permanence.

Conclusion

The legislature's recent investment in the Permanency Innovation Initiative illustrates our state's determination to improve outcomes for children in foster care, especially time to permanence.

If you have questions about this initiative, please contact Children's Home Society's Matt Anderson (336/369-3814; MVAnderson@chsnc.org) or the NC Division of Social Services' Teresa Strom (919/527-6344; teresa.strom@dhhs.nc.gov). ◆

The Six Steps of the Family Finding Model

Excerpted from Malm & Allen, 2011

1. Discovering at least 40 family members and important people in the child's life through an extensive review of a child's case file, through interviewing the youth (if appropriate) and family members and other supportive people, and through the use of internet search tools;

2. Engaging as many family members and supportive adults as possible through in-person interviews, phone conversations, and written letters and emails with the goal of identifying the child's extended family. The engagement phase also includes identifying a group of family members and supportive adults, as appropriate, willing to participate in a planning meeting on how to keep the child safely connected to family members;

3. Planning for the successful future of the child with the participation of family members and others important to the child by convening family meetings;

4. Making decisions during the family meeting that support the legal and emotional permanency of the child;

5. Evaluating the permanency plans developed for the child; and

6. Providing follow-up supports to ensure that the child and his/her family can access and receive informal and formal supports essential to maintaining permanency for the child.
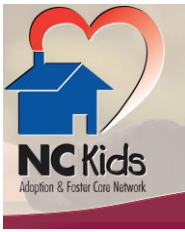
NC KIDS: A KEY PARTNER FOR ACHIEVING PERMANENCY

Social workers with public and private child-placing agencies in North Carolina should take advantage of the resource that is NC Kids Adoption and Foster Care Network (www.adoptnckids.org). Part of the NC Division of Social Services, NC Kids is accessible, effective, and free. In short, NC Kids can enhance outcomes for children and families and make your job easier.

Although NC Kids focuses on one goal—finding families for children in North Carolina—it is not a child-placing agency. It accomplishes its mission by supporting our state's foster care and adoption social workers through the following services:

REGISTRIES

Registry of waiting children. Through its website NC Kids maintains a database of North Carolina children awaiting adoption, which makes it easy for prospective adoptive parents to learn about available children.

Registry of potential families. Families who have completed a pre-adoptive assessment can participate in this registry, which child-placing agencies use to find families for children awaiting adoption. Families can contact NC Kids directly and ask to be added to this list, or they can be referred by the assessing agency.

PRELIMINARY MATCHING

At the request of child-placing agencies, NC Kids uses its registries to conduct preliminary screenings of adoption matches. For example, they might compare a child's traits against the traits of registered families and come up with 15 possible matches. They then pass information on these possible matches to the child's social worker and to each family's social worker.

Matching and referrals made possible through NC Kids registries open up physical boundaries, helping agencies learn about and consider families—even those who live in another part of the state—so they can make good matches for children.

HOTLINE

NC Kids operates a hotline (877-NCKIDS-1) from 9 A.M. to 5 P.M. Monday through Friday.

Social workers can call this number to have a child placed on the adoption registry or to obtain community outreach or technical assistance—for example, to get help responding to a large volume of calls about waiting children.

Families who call the hotline speak to NC Kids staff members who can answer their questions about foster care and adoption and connect them with child-placing agencies. NC Kids also follows up with each caller to ensure no family is lost while navigating the system.

REQUIREMENTS

All children in the custody of a North Carolina DSS must be registered with NC Kids within 30 days of becoming legally free for adoption. To register a child with NC Kids, please fax either a registration packet (DSS-1820) or an exemption form (DSS-5303) to 919/715-9286.

CONCLUSION

NC Kids is an able partner, eager to help you find families for children. Foster care and adoption workers, give them a call! ◆

Let NC Kids Help You!
• **NC Kids is a partner, not a competitor**. NC Kids is a state-sponsored organization that recruits foster and adoptive parents and supports child-placing agencies.
• **Encourage prospective adoptive parents to register with NC Kids**. By registering, families may have a better chance of adopting.
• **Plan an adoption promotion event**. NC Kids' provides consultation to help you plan and hold successful adoption promotion events, including use of the Heart Gallery, a traveling photo exhibit created to find forever families for children in foster care.
• **Call the hotline**. NC Kids' knowledgeable, responsive staff are standing by to help you. *Hablamos español*.
• **Tell them what you want!** NC Kids strives to provide individualized support to every social worker when it comes to recruitment, matching, and referrals.
• **Reach out to the media**. Do you have a good relationship with newspapers and TV stations in your area? Let NC Kids know and they will contact them to request periodic features on waiting children across NC.

NC Kids Statistics, January 2014
Families with a completed pre-placement assessment registered with NC Kids 477
NC children legally free for adoption 576
NC children for whom NC Kids is actively recruiting adoptive families.........212
NC children registered with NC Kids but on hold (*awaiting approval of the selected prospective adoptive family*)..........131
NC children classified as legal risk (*do not have TPR on all parents, or TPR has been appealed*) 46
Children exempt from listing by NC Kids (*most are in an approved adoptive placement and are awaiting final adoption decree*).......................................438

Overcoming Barriers to Timely Permanence

Most everyone agrees children benefit from having a safe, permanent family, and that the child welfare system should achieve this goal as quickly as possible for every child. Yet for anyone working in the field, it is apparent that despite our best intentions this end is not easily attained.

In reviewing research on permanency and talking with experts in North Carolina, the following common barriers emerged, along with perspectives on how to target our limited resources to overcome them.

Barrier 1: Conversations about "Permanency"

Child welfare professionals often talk about permanency. But what does this word mean to families and children served by the system? Freundlich and colleagues (2006) conducted a study to find out. Here's what they learned.

Birth parents. Birth parents reported that when they heard agencies talking about "permanency," they thought their children weren't ever coming home. As one put it:

> No one actually sat down and explained what they meant. . . The first time they said it, I was still kind of angry about the whole situation. Then, afterwards, when they threatened me, like after 12 months, then it was like, "do it or else." That's how it felt. No one ever came to me like, "listen, let me explain this to you." They never did that. It was like, "do it or you ain't getting your kids back. You ain't going to see them"(p. 753).

Another parent said her first caseworker did not talk at all with her about permanency. The parent stated that the caseworker "just wanted to make sure I was going to services that they provided" (p. 751).

Youth. Some youth Freundlich and colleagues spoke to expressed the same negative feelings. As one phrased it: "Permanent, like I was never going home. That's how I thought of it" (p. 752).

Social workers. A number of social workers in the study agreed the word "permanency" itself can be a barrier. One stated: "The language of foster care is really disempowering to parents. It just adds another layer of confusion. It's jargon and the more we use jargon the more people are alienated by it" (p. 755).

Recommendations

We asked a North Carolina expert how to overcome the concern and confusion our conversations with families about permanency can cause.

Jeff Olson, Local Child Welfare Support Team Leader for the NC Division of Social Services, agreed it's not enough to talk to families about the legal concept of a permanency plan. Olson believes one key to understanding each other's ideas about a "forever family" is to talk about relationships.

"It's really about making those family connections," Olson says. "Who can visit the young person, wash their clothes, do things—even little things—that demonstrate that they care about them as a person? That's what people can relate to: connection."

Olson also notes that we are learning more and more about how trauma affects children's ability to connect meaningfully with others, or to face the spectre of rejection that arises for them when the talk turns to permanence.

Some older youth are legally free for adoption but, Olson says, some professionals "have written them off as 'unadoptable.'" He suggests that instead, we need to help youth build trust in the connections they already have. With gradual encouragement, they may allow themselves to believe there's a permanent family out there for them.

Barrier 2: Difficulties with Concurrent Planning

Concurrent planning means actively pursuing two different permanency goals at the same time, rather than pursuing reunification first and other goals only after reunification has been ruled out (CWIG, 2012). It is one of the most widely-endorsed practices for expediting permanency for children. Largely influenced by a model developed in a small private agency setting, concurrent planning has become common among public systems seeking to meet the legal timeframes of the federal Adoption and Safe Families Act (D'Andrade, et al., 2006).

While many social workers agree concurrent planning makes sense in theory, pursuing two different plans simultaneously can create challenges, including the following.

Difficulty: Undermining our relationships with birth parents. Full disclosure to all parties is a critical element of concurrent planning. This includes respectful, candid discussion about the birth parent's rights and responsibilities, the issues that necessitated placement, the changes needed to achieve reunification, and possible consequences and alternative outcomes if the parent does not make the necessary changes (CWIG, 2012).

In some instances, discussing these matters early on empowers families to make fully-informed decisions that result in a speedier resolution for children. For example, some parents are more likely to voluntarily relinquish rights when this option is presented and explored in a non-judgmental way (CWIG, 2012).

In other cases, though, workers describe tension in their relationships with birth parents that arises in part from the fact that they are pursuing opposing plans (D'Andrade, et al., 2006). While it is easy to say that work-

ers just need to be open and honest with parents, in practice this is not always enough to reassure parents. Parents may be understandably skeptical that a worker truly wants to partner with them, if that worker is also actively recruiting an adoptive family for their child.

DIFFICULTY: Emotional toll on foster-to-adopt parents. Another key element of concurrent planning is licensing resource parents for both foster care and adoption, so they can transition from one role to the other, avoiding moves and delays for children (CWIG, 2012). While this seems like a reasonable approach, in practice it is asking a lot of resource families.

Foster-to-adopt care requires substitute caregivers to commit to two contradictory goals. We ask them to form a permanent relationship with a child before it is known whether the child will be available for adoption, while at the same time supporting reunification efforts. Most writers on concurrent planning acknowledge this task can be profoundly challenging (D'Andrade, et al., 2006).

RECOMMENDATIONS

Through the Child Welfare Information Gateway, the U.S. Children's Bureau suggests that agencies enact the following policies to support workers and help address challenges related to concurrent planning (CWIG, 2012):

- Make sure children keep the same caseworker if they move from foster to adoptive status.
- Reduce caseload size for workers involved with both reunification and permanency efforts.
- Ensure caseworkers have both enough support, supervision, and experience required to successfully implement concurrent planning.
- Assign different workers for reunification and adoption. Or, alternatively, integrate foster care and adoption teams to ensure communication and collaborative goal-setting.
- Use permanency roundtables to obtain family and stakeholder input on how best to achieve permanency for children. For more on this technique, which is being used in many states, refer to the efforts underway in Wisconsin (http://1.usa.gov/1mFG3wa) or visit the Casey Family Programs page on this topic (http://bit.ly/1ljEeDC).

BARRIER 3: Systemic Issues

Beyond the challenges facing front-line workers, there are larger interagency barriers to expediting permanency. Even the most skilled and well-supported social worker cannot control the pace or timelines of a child's legal case.

The traditionally poor collaboration between legal and child welfare systems is well-known to professionals from both backgrounds (Outley, 2006). In a review of five qual-

> **Focusing on reasonable efforts can help us overcome systemic barriers to permanency.**

itative studies from 1984 to 2007, Murphy and colleagues (2012) found that legal delays and the complexity of the court process were cited repeatedly as central factors in failing to achieve timely permanence.

Today's child welfare and legal practitioners know these issues continue to affect North Carolina's performance. In particular, the intricacies of the process of terminating parental rights can cause delays in finalizing adoptions, especially in smaller counties that may have court or DSS staff that infrequently handle such cases.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Gaps between the child welfare and legal systems can be overcome. Jeff Olson encourages child welfare professionals to think in terms of reasonable efforts: "Paying attention to reasonable efforts ensures we have our eye on the ball and are communicating clearly with the judge and others about what we are doing to help children and their families achieve permanence." Emphasizing reasonable efforts provides a common language and a common goal, allowing both systems to devote energy to tasks that will move the case forward. Focusing on the link between our efforts and the permanency plan for the child, Olson notes, "helps us hold ourselves accountable and ensures we are all doing everything we can."

In addition **Jamie Bazemore**, Adoption Program Manager for the NC Division of Social Services, suggests agencies develop an in-house adoption expert, someone who has mastered the complexities of legal clearance, TPR, and adoption. "You need someone who really knows the paperwork and the process, so they can move things along."

Bazemore admits that given the emotions surrounding TPR, conversations with youth and birth parents need time to evolve: an initial "no" from a youth on the subject of adoption should never be the end of the story. However, having an in-house adoption expert can help you ensure that the bureaucracy is not holding things up when people are ready to move forward. ◆
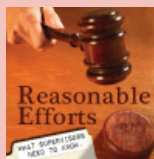
Training Resource

Reasonable Efforts: What Supervisors Need to Know is a 2-hour, self-paced online course for NC county DSS child welfare supervisors. The course includes legal and policy requirements for judicial determinations of reasonable efforts, a practice framework for providing and documenting reasonable efforts, an interactive supervision scenario, and a structured case review that hones reasonable efforts-related skills and knowledge. To learn more or take the course, log in to www.ncswLearn.org.

Achieving Legal and Relational Permanence for ALL Youth in Foster Care

Every youth in foster care deserves a permanent home. Ideally, this takes place through **legal permanence**, which is defined as the reunification, adoption, or transfer of legal guardianship of the youth. However, even if that isn't possible, achieving relational permanence is key.

Relational permanence means "lifelong connections to caring adults, including at least one adult who will provide a permanent, parent-like connection for that youth" (Louisell, 2008). Recognizing the importance of relational permanence, North Carolina has made it one of the primary outcomes focused on by NC LINKS, our state's independent living program. For each teen in foster care we seek to build "a personal support system of at least five caring adults in addition to professional relationships."

Permanence Matters

Legal and relational permanence matter so much because those who age out are at an increased risk for many negative outcomes. Consider the findings of Courtney and colleagues (2011). These researchers followed youth who aged out of foster care and are now 26 years old. Compared to a representative sample of their peers who did not spend time in foster care, these youth were:

- 10.5 times more likely to be in prison or jail.
- 3 times less likely to have completed high school.
- 9 times less likely to have completed a 4-year degree.
- Nearly twice as likely to have a health condition or disability that limits their daily activity.
- Nearly twice as likely to be unemployed.

Aging Out of Foster Care in NC

In 2012, 535 youth aged out of foster care in our state, a number that has steadily increased over the past decade (*see figure 1*). Of these youth, 62% first entered foster care when they were 13 or older (Duncan, et al., 2014).

FIGURE 1

NC Youth Aging Out of Foster Care by Year (2001-2011) Source: Duncan et al., 2014
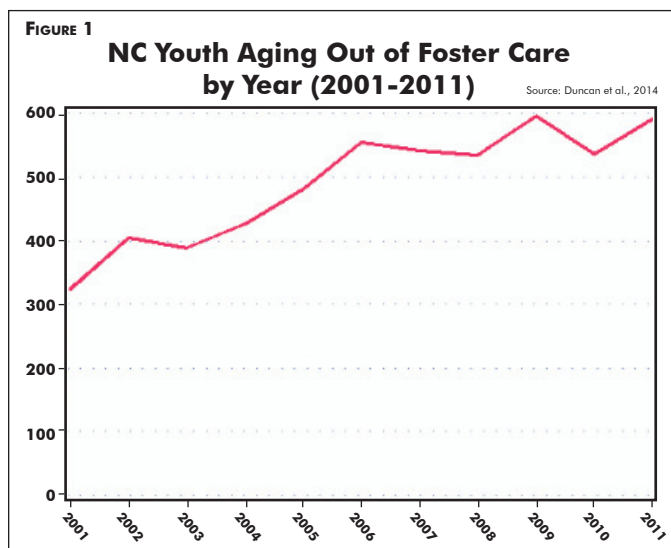
According to the US Department of Health and Human Services, Children's Bureau (2014) in North Carolina a 12-year-old in foster care is 2.5 times less likely to be adopted, and a 17-year-old 9 times less likely to be adopted, than a 2-year-old.

Although adoption is not the only path to legal permanence, many older youth are at risk of aging out without legal permanence of any kind.

Tool for Building Connection and Support

Whether or not they age out of care, all youth need emotional connection and support. The **Permanency Pact** is one approach to helping them achieve it.

This planning tool was developed by FosterClub (www.fosterclub.org) to help youth and supportive adults establish, define, and maintain a relationship that is supportive for the youth. To establish a Permanency Pact a facilitator, such as a case worker, helps the youth identify adults they would like to have in their support system.

The facilitator then guides the process of expanding the youth's support system, which involves obtaining consents to share information, helping make contact with the adult, facilitating conversations between the youth and adult, and helping establish a written pact.

FosterClub's free, brief, easy-to-use Permanency Pact toolkit includes 45 potential supports that a supportive adult could provide to a foster youth to help establish relational permanency. These include supports such as a home for the holidays, occasional family style meals, spiritual support, storage space, mentoring, and more.

To learn more, download the Permanency Pact toolkit: http://fclub.he2236.vps.webenabled.net/content/foster-clubs-permanency-pact.

3-5-7 Model

The Permanency Pact's focus on involving youth is consistent with another model's emphasis on youth engagement.

Developed by Dr. Darla Henry, the **3-5-7 Model** helps children and youth prepare for permanency by encouraging them to reflect on who they are, what has happened to them, where they are headed, how they will get there, and when they will know that they belong. The model incorporates 3 tasks, 5 conceptual questions and 7 interpersonal skill elements to support this work. These are shown in Figure 2. *continued next page*
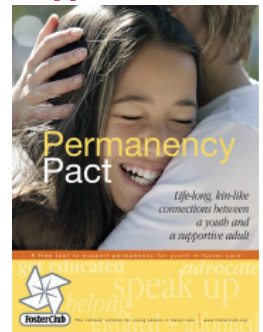
Permanence for ALL Youth

The 3-5-7 model also gives special consideration to the trauma and grief children have experienced rather than labeling a child as having a behavior disorder. The California Evidence-Based Clearinghouse finds this model highly relevant to child welfare work; however, there is not yet enough empirical evidence of its effectiveness to give it a scientific rating. This may change—3-5-7 is currently going through rigorous evaluation.

Conclusion

Youth in foster care, like everyone else, crave connection. Social work researcher Brené Brown (2010) defines connection as, "the energy that exists between people when they feel seen, heard, and valued; when they can give and receive without judgment; and when they derive sustenance and strength from the relationship" (p. 19).

Whether this connection comes through legal or relational permanence, it is vital that we ensure connection for every young person. ◆

FIGURE 2   **The 3-5-7 Model**

Three tasks to support grief work and building relationships:

1. CLARIFICATION: Explores life events providing opportunities to reconcile losses
2. INTEGRATION: Focuses activities on rebuilding relationships through the attachment process
3. ACTUALIZATION: Assists in visualizing future goals establishing permanent connections

Five questions to support the work of the three tasks:

1. Who am I? (*identity formation*)
2. What happened to me? (*separation and loss; grieving process*)
3. Where am I going? (*trust/safety in relationships; attachment*)
4. How will I get there? (*recognize those who will continue to provide support; relational permanency*)
5. When will I know I belong? (*feelings of safety, well-being and a readiness for future*)

Seven skills to support the work of children, youth and families:

1. Engaging them in work.
2. Listening to their stories.
3. Validating their feelings.
4. Assuring perceptual safety.
5. Letting them do the work.
6. Recognizing pain within expressed behaviors.
7. Bringing the feelings of the past into the present.

Sources: www.cebc4cw.org; Darla L. Henry & Associates, 2014

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