

TRANSITIONING YOUTH: BLENDING THE WORLDS OF PERMANENCY AND INDEPENDENT LIVING

PERSPECTIVES

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"I grew up in a very loving and caring foster home ... with a family that was special in ways that no one will ever know ... but no matter how happy I was, I always had in the back of my mind that my foster parents were only taking care of me ... turning 18 meant that my foster parents didn't have to be there for me if they didn't want to, and it meant that I didn't have a family anymore ... but being adopted (at age 19) changed my life ... it made it possible for me to move on with my life ... I was always part of a family, but now that family is my family ... a family that no one can ever take from me!"

— Sarah Coryell, former foster youth

The work of Casey Family Services has long been dedicated to making sure that youth in our child welfare system have safe and secure families—regardless of their age, challenging needs or complex circumstances. As the agency listens to youth in care like Sarah, it continues to push the boundaries of its own work in increasingly more comprehensive and creative ways—making sure youth who are reaching the age of “transition” have all the life skills, supports and services they need *and* the most secure, enduring and legally permanent family relationship possible.

In almost all states, child welfare systems too often compartmentalize their work with children and youth by giving them service plan goals that offer either “legal family membership” (reunification, adoption, guardianship) *or* “long-term support”



Adoption is important to youth at any age. Sarah, adopted at age 19 by her longtime Casey foster family, says she finally has a sense of true security.

(another permanent planned living arrangement, independent living). The Casey Center is committed to promising practices that blend the best of both worlds for youth—assuring them a permanent parenting relationship, permanent extended family connections and comprehensive life skills, supports and services. Although these two distinct service arms of the child welfare system—permanency and independent living—have each achieved progressive policy leaps and promising practice advances of late, from “the eyes of a youth” the compartmentalization is still there. The blending of these two worlds is imperative if our youth are ever to be adequately prepared for life, love and work in adulthood. Training and technical assistance provided by the Center related to transitioning youth are guided by the blending of these dual needs for lifelong relationships as well as life skills, supports and services.

The Center’s model of technical assistance is based on engaging Casey practitioners in peer-to-peer learning with states, counties and public agency staff that request assistance in making program, practice and policy enhancements in their respective systems.

Using this peer-to-peer learning style, the Casey Center is engaged in a yearlong technical assistance project with the Connecticut Department of Children and Families (DCF). DCF requested additional technical assistance in expanding recruitment efforts for adolescents through its Life Long Family Ties initiative, following the Connecticut Adoption Review Study completed by the Center last year.

The Casey Center is currently involved in facilitating training, mentoring and peer consultation groups with staff from private contract agencies and DCF in order to: (1) identify significant adults from within a youth’s circle of existing relationships, (2) involve the youth and the significant adults in his/her life in a team-planning and decision-making process, (3) explore and support the highest level of commitment that each adult can make as a permanent parent or extended family member, and (4) develop and implement a comprehensive case plan that addresses safety, permanency and well-being outcomes for the youth. This effort is enhanced by the collaboration between the Casey Center and Massachusetts Families for Kids (MFFK) at Children’s Services of Roxbury, Inc., with training provided by MFFK staff in their Adolescent Permanency-Family Consultation Team[®] model. Fifty practitioners are currently being trained in two groups, with follow-up peer consultation groups planned on a monthly basis for the next year.

The Casey Center also has provided technical assistance in its priority area of transitioning youth in at least three additional states over the past year.

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Casey has provided training to the Wyoming State Council on Adoption, focusing on identifying, preparing and supporting permanent family connections for the oldest youth in foster care. A group of 40 practitioners were trained in strategies and tools to recruit potential permanent families from a youth's natural networks, to engage both youth and all caring adults in a family team decision-making process and employ a "what would it take?" philosophy to support the adults in being able to make a permanent commitment.

In Texas, at last year's "It's My Life" Conference—an event designed to showcase promising practices in life skills, transitions and independent living—Casey's Lauren Frey presented a workshop entitled "A Family for Life: Achieving Permanent Families for Youth in Foster Care" in order to increase the knowledge, attitudes and skills of participants related to promising practices in permanency for this population of youth. Sarah Coryell, a young adult from Casey's Maine Division, co-presented with Frey, sharing her compelling perspective on how the resolution of the family permanency issue in her life affected her ability to more fully work on life skills and transition goals. Adopted at age 19 by a long-term Casey family with whom she had lived since age 10, Sarah says, "... I spent a lot of time trying to figure out who my family was and by being adopted I was able to turn my focus on other things..."

In California, the Casey Center is collaborating with the California Permanency for Youth Project (CPYP), a public-private effort funded by the Stuart Foundation on behalf of transitioning youth in a four-county area (Alameda, Monterey, San

Mateo, and Stanislaus). The Center has provided training and technical assistance at several key points in the project and at various project sites over the past year, offering strategies and tools aimed at increasing recruitment options for older youth through identifying safe and caring adults in a youth's natural network; and promoting a youth-centered family team-planning and decision-making process that results in integrated life planning for youth, combining lifelong relationships and life skills, supports and services.

THE BLENDING OF THE WORLDS OF PERMANENCY AND INDEPENDENT LIVING IS IMPERATIVE IF OUR YOUTH ARE EVER TO BE ADEQUATELY PREPARED FOR LIFE, LOVE AND WORK IN ADULTHOOD.

In an effort to promote a holistic model for the youth of our child welfare system, the Casey Center bases its technical assistance on best and promising practices according to an evolving framework of guiding principles. When addressing systemic change related to transitioning youth the following needs are emphasized:

The need to be guided by a sound definition of permanency. According to the publications of well-known pioneers in the field (Maluccio, Fein and Olmstead in *Permanency planning for children; concepts and methods* and Emler, Lahti, G. Downs,

"I spent a lot of time trying to figure out who my family was. By being adopted I was able to turn my focus onto other things," says Sarah.

McKay and S. Downs in *Overcoming barriers to planning for children in foster care*), the core elements of permanency include intent, commitment/continuity, sense of belonging, and legal and social status. It is imperative that the beginning of all policy, practice and program change on behalf of transitioning youth begin with clarifying the definition of permanency—with permanency being not merely a process, plan or placement, but a family relationship. It seeks family relationship that is intended to last indefinitely; that provides continuity of relationships and assumes a common future; that entitles the youth to the same rights and expects from the youth the same responsibilities equal to all other members; and offers all the benefits and rewards of social status and legal family membership (reunification, adoption or guardianship).

The need to customize permanency outcomes. Because family permanency (according to the above definition) was not pursued earlier for some youth in care due to age, special needs, perceived lack of cooperation by the youth or family, or traditional values related to systems of caregiving—the permanency picture for youth may look different now than it might have looked for them at an earlier age. And depending on the existing threads of family in their lives, their complex maze of relationships and their individual strengths and needs, the permanency picture may indeed look different for each youth. Consequently an individualized approach is needed. In the area of transitioning youth, the most promising practices define a family permanency out-

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come for each older youth based on reaching “the highest degree of physical safety, emotional security and legal permanency that can be reached within the context of a family relationship.” And that “highest degree” might be achieved through reunification with their family of origin, or through adoption or guardianship by a family known to them, or adoption or guardianship by another family not yet known to them. When the most secure degree of physical, emotional and legal family permanency seemingly cannot be reached at a given point in time, the next question should always be “Then what would it take?” And then if the most secure level can still not be reached, the youth and family are encouraged to “keep the door open” and allow their level of commitment to evolve over time.

The need to be committed to comprehensive, continuous and customized services.

The recent systemic gains at both state and federal levels in independent living and transitioning services for youth are laudable, but nonetheless still less than adequate in certain areas. In order for youth to be prepared for and supported through adulthood, they will need not only a host of ancillary supports and services that offer “real world” skills, but also a strong permanent family network. By partnering with Casey practitioners who are utilizing a range of solid life skills-related strategies, tools and services with older youth in each Casey division, the Center is well positioned to provide valuable technical assistance in this area.

The need to engage youth in Integrated Life Planning. A missing piece of the equation for older youth is the presence of a

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seamless process of case planning and decision making that addresses both the youth’s permanency needs and their independent living supports. Convinced that youth need a holistic approach to lifelong family relationships and life skills, supports and services, the Casey Center promotes the values, policies and practice models that address this systemic challenge.

The need to be youth-centered. All too often, the case planning process does not include the youth. Without the youth steering and guiding the process, follow-through on tasks and success in outcomes is likely to suffer. The most promising practices in transitioning youth put the youth “in the driver’s seat,” hold planning meetings only with the youth present, and assist youth in shaping their hopes, dreams, goals and strengths into viable transition plans.

The need to be family-focused, using an expanded definition of “family.” Optimal integrated life planning with youth is best accomplished with those safe, caring and committed adults who can be there for the youth over the long haul. Unless case planning addresses both the cutoffs and the con-

nections in a youth’s family relationships, and meaningfully engages the significant adults in a youth’s life, it will miss the mark. Promising practices in transitioning youth involve birth family members in planning and decision making and honor their role in a youth’s life, even when they are not able to parent full time. Promising practices with this population also actively seek to identify all adults in a youth’s natural network of relationships with adults (teachers, coaches, employers, former foster parents, mentors and others) interested in participating in joint planning and able to assist the youth in achieving his/her future goals – while, at the same time, exploring with each adult what it would take for them to make a commitment as this youth’s permanent parent or permanent extended family member.

The need to employ a collaborative process of family team planning and decision making.

A family team meeting model that is youth-centered and family-focused, as described above, offers the perfect opportunity for an outcome-oriented approach that leads to both lifelong family relationships as well as life skills, services and supports. Building on select components of internally developed models such as the Casey Adolescent Transition Team (CATT) from the Maine Division and the McGill Action Planning System (MAPS) developed in the Vermont Division, as well as externally tested models developed by programs such as Massachusetts Families for Kids, Families for Teens (Northeast Ohio), Permanency for Teens (Iowa) and Catholic Community Services of Western Washington, the Casey Center assists its technical assistance consumers in exploring team-planning tools that best serve youth in transition.