

**AGING OUT OF FOSTER CARE:
A REVIEW OF BEST PRACTICES TOWARDS PREVENTION AND AMELIORATION**

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Research Proposal

Children who age out of foster care face lifetime challenges including poverty, homelessness, incarceration, unemployment and underemployment, victimization, and mental health problems.

I plan to research what is being done to reduce the number of children who age out of the foster care system each year; which approaches are effective, and why; and whether changes to the foster care system might improve the outcomes.

I intend to utilize published reference materials from the Family Connections Christian Adoptions library, Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS) reports, California Permanency for Youth Project studies, and a number of reputable published journals on the subject of foster care in the United States.

Annotated Bibliography

1) McRoy, Ruth G., AdoptUSKids Research Team. *Barriers & Success Factors in Adoption From Foster Care: Perspectives of Families & Staff*. (Austin, TX. Center for Social Work Research 2007). McRoy and her research team conducted two legislatively-mandated studies as part of The Collaboration to AdoptUSKids (a non-profit group dedicated to finding permanent families for children in foster care) for the purpose of identifying what barriers and what success factors are involved in adoption from foster care. The first study regarding the barriers to foster-adoption involved the selection and interviewing of 300 prospective adoptive families, as well as 382 adoption agencies (private and public). The second study regarding success factors spanned four years and examined 161 adoptive families across the U.S. The focus of this study – how to remove barriers and increase foster-adoption successes – is highly relevant to my research paper because it provides specific data regarding the problems faced by those who want to find permanent families for foster children (before they age out of foster care), as well as data regarding successful outcomes that can be mined for information as to how best to help those children who are still waiting for families.

2) Chapin Hall. *Midwest Evaluation of the Adult Functioning of Former Foster Youth: Outcomes at ages 23 and 24*. (University of Chicago 2010). This longitudinal study is a collaborative effort involving Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago; the University of Wisconsin Survey Center; and the public child welfare agencies in Illinois, Iowa, and Wisconsin. The purpose of the study is to track the foster youth who age out of the foster care system and determine their functioning in multiple areas of life, such as employment, mental health, substance abuse, peer and family relationships, and interaction with the criminal justice system. Through the data gathered, the researchers demonstrate the significant cost to society when foster youth age out of the system without any permanent family support system. This

study is relevant to my project because it provides hard data documenting the problem that is the subject of my research.

3) Freundlich, Madelyn and Sarah Gertenzang and Emily Blair. *Lasting Impressions: A Guide for Photo Listing Children* (Baltimore, MD, 2006. Print). On behalf of AdoptUSKids (a non-profit organization dedicated to finding adoptive homes for all children in U.S. foster care), Freundlich and Gertenzang created this Guide to assist child welfare workers to find adoptive homes for these children through “photolistings,” which are usually one-page biographical listings of these children. The Guide first reviews the data as to why such listings are in the best interests of foster children waiting for permanent homes, such as the greatly increased risk of mental health problems, substance abuse, and illegal activity by children who age-out of foster care. By demonstrating the need for creative methods of attracting the attention of potential adoptive families, the Guide helps overcome the concerns about invasion of the child’s privacy, as well as dealing with unrealistic expectations of some families who don’t understand the sometimes significant special needs of foster children. After providing examples of how photolistings have worked for actual clients, the Guide lays out step-by-step instructions for creating photolistings that will recruit potential and actual adoptive families for the children. This work will be helpful to my project because it provides data about the problem being researched, as well as solutions that have been tested and proven successful for a significant number of foster children who otherwise would have aged out of the foster care system.

4) Gertenzang, Sarah and Madelyn Freundlich. *Finding a Fit that Will Last a Lifetime: A Guide to Connecting Adoptive Families with Waiting Children*. (Baltimore, MD 2006). Print. Gertenzang and Freundlich created this Guide as a resource for child welfare case workers charged with finding permanent families for the foster children. Based on available statistical and anecdotal data, the authors

outline the steps to recruiting, preparing, and matching prospective families with waiting foster children. This Guide is helpful to my project because it provides a concrete methodology for increasing adoptions and thereby reducing the number of children who age out of foster care.

5) Black, Sharri and Alicia Groh. 2011 National Adoption Month: Capacity Building Toolkit. Washington D.C.. 2011. Print. The authors of this Toolkit seek to increase awareness of the need for adoptive families for foster children, and to assist adoption professionals to recruit such families by focusing on how to support adoptive families, diligently recruit new families, work with diverse populations, be proactive about locating existing familial or familial-type relationships, and make placements across jurisdictional lines. With a solution-oriented focus, this publication is quite relevant to my project to the extent it addresses how to reduce the number of children who age out of foster care without permanent families.

6) Taussig, Heather N.; Clyman, Robert B. The Relationship between Time Spent Living with Kin and Adolescent Functioning in Youth with a History of Out-of-Home Placement. *Child Abuse & Neglect: The International Journal*, v35 n1 p78-86 Jan 2011. ERIC. Web. 16 Mar. 2012. The authors studied the correlation between length of time living with kin (kinship care) and the wellbeing of teenage foster children. The data indicates that kinship care is not necessarily a more positive solution for these children than being in non-kin care during the period of time they are removed from the custody of their biological parents. This study relates to my project because it addresses one of the potential permanency solutions suggested for children in foster care.

7) Rork, Kristine E.; McNeil, Cheryl B. Evaluation of Foster Parent Training Programs: A Critical Review. *Child & Family Behavior Therapy*, v33 n2 p139-170 2011. ERIC. Web. 16 Mar. 2012. The authors provide

a comprehensive review of seventeen studies regarding the correlation between foster parent training and foster child outcomes in the area of disruptive and maladaptive behaviors. Based on the study data, they posit that better training of foster parents in four specific areas (reducing negative behaviors in children; comprehending the educational and medical/health systems; collaborating with the legal/child welfare system; and addressing the unique demand of foster parenting) would benefit foster children by reducing maladaptive behaviors related to poor functioning as adults. This is relevant to my project because it discussed potential improvements to the foster care system that would affect children faced with aging out of the foster care system.

8) Malm, K., Vandivere, S., Allen, T., DeVoght, K., Ellis, R., McKlindon, A., Smollar, J., Williams, E. and Zinn, A. Evaluation Report Summary: The Wendy's Wonderful Kids Initiative (Child Trends, Washington, D.C. 2011). The researchers published this report to document to provide statistical evidence regarding the effect of child-based recruiting methods upon the rate of adoption of foster children. Their research demonstrates that the recruiting methods reviewed during this study increased adoption rates for foster children from 22.5% to 31.4%. This study is important to my project because it provides information about a method used to reduce the number of children who age out of foster care with no permanent family.

9) AFCARS Report #18, 17, and 16. ACFHHS.GOV/programs/cb/stats_research – These reports are promulgated by the Children's Bureau, a division of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. The Children's Bureau funds collaborative research and collects and publishes state and national data on adoption and foster care, child abuse and neglect, and child welfare. The Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS) is used to collect case level information on all children in foster care for whom state child welfare agencies have responsibility for placement, care or supervision, and

on children who are adopted under the auspices of the State's public child welfare agency. These reports are relevant to my thesis because they provide data regarding the number of children who aged out of foster care in 2008-2010.

10) Brook, J and McDonald, T. Evaluating the Effects of Comprehensive Substance Abuse Intervention on Successful Reunification. (Research on Social Work Practice 2007 17: 664 originally published online 12 June 2007 DOI: 10.1177/1049731507300148. The online version of this article can be found at: <http://rsw.sagepub.com/content/17/6/664>). The researchers in this study evaluated the effect upon family reunification of treating the biological parents for substance abuse problems. Their theory, based on the data collected, is that treating substance abuse alone does not increase family reunification rates, and that treating the underlying issues prompting the substance abuse is paramount to success in this area. This study is important to my project because it reveals an area where the current foster care system could be improved so as to increase reunification rates and thereby decrease the number of children who age out of the foster care system.

11) Steinley-Bumgarner, Michelle and Jina Jun. Characteristics Analysis of Children Who Were Registered on the AdoptUSKids Website as Preteens (2011). This report presents demographic information for over 14,000 preteen foster children who were registered on the AdoptUSKids website as being available for adoption as of July 31, 2011. The researchers believe that this information can be used to increase adoptive placements for these children before they age out of foster care. This study is relevant to my project because it provides significant statistical data, as well as information about efforts to find families for children in foster care before they become legal adults.

Outline

1) Introduction to the Problem

- a. Children who age out of foster care experience poor adult outcomes in many areas of life.
- b. The large number of such children has a tremendous cost impact on society as a whole.

2) Effective Approaches to the Problem

- a. Federal legislation has increased adoptions significantly over the past two decades.
- b. Permanency rates for foster children can be increased through the following methods:
 - i. Diligent recruitment of prospective adoptive families from diverse populations.
 - ii. Education of foster and adoptive parents to enhance likelihood of successful permanent placements.
 - iii. Provision of competent post-adoption support services
 - iv. Removal of barriers to inter-jurisdictional placements
 - v. Increase rates of successful reunification with birth family

3) Systemic Changes Recommended

- a. Make provisions for targeted recruitment as part of the overall child welfare program.
- b. Increase pre- and post-adoption services to support placements and prevent disruption
- c. Remove barriers to inter-jurisdictional placements
- d. Increase successful reunification rates by revising service delivery in substance abuse treatment programs to maximize the potential for successful recovery.
- e. Take long term view to cost-savings when allocating public funds.

Introduction

The latest data from the Children’s Bureau of the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) shows that approximately 408,000 children are in foster care in the United States. Approximately half that number are expected to reunify with their birth parents before reaching adulthood. Almost one quarter of them, or 107,000 children are available for adoption. Those who are not adopted or do not reunify with their birth family members remain in foster care until age-related emancipation¹ from foster care at the age of eighteen years².

Of course, a certain number of children also exit foster care each year. In 2010, more than a quarter of a million did so. Over 10% of the children who exited foster care did so because of age-related emancipation. This phenomena is known as “aging out” of the foster care system. In other words, 27,000 teenagers became legal adults without any permanent connection to another adult who could provide guidance and support through the vulnerable years of early adulthood.

Teenagers who age out of foster care start their adult lives significantly behind their peers in many areas. These deficits have been well documented in longitudinal studies and can be summarized as follows:

- a) Foster children and former foster children score 16-20 percentile points lower on standardized tests than children not in foster care.
- b) Half of children in foster care are in bottom quartile of basic reading skills tests.
- c) Children in foster care are twice as likely as non-foster children to be held back at least one grade.

¹ AFCARS #18

² AFCARS #18

- d) Foster children are two to three times less likely to graduate from high school or receive a GED than non-foster children.
- e) Only 1.8% of former foster children earn a Bachelor's degree by age twenty-four, compared to the 24% national average for non-foster children³.

Starting their adult lives with these deficits adversely impacts not only the individual lives of these foster children, but society as a whole. This is borne out by the following statistics for children who age out of foster care, as compared to the non-foster care population of the same age:

- a) Girls are two-and-one-half times more likely to become pregnant by age nineteen.
- b) Boys and girls are two to three times more likely to have mental health disorders.
- c) More than 25% of former foster children suffer from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder; this is six times the national average, and twice the rate of U.S. war veterans.
- d) Approximately 70% of girls receive government benefits; for those who are custodial mothers, the figure rises to 85%.
- e) By age twenty-four, former foster youth are twice as likely to have committed theft and to have used a weapon to threaten someone.
- f) Former foster youth are seven times more likely to experience homelessness.
- g) They are twice as likely to have been shot, stabbed, or robbed.
- h) They are three times as likely to have been beaten up.
- i) They are seventy times more likely to have experienced incarceration.
- j) More than 81% of former foster males will have been arrested by age 24, which is four times the national average. Girls are fifteen times more likely to have been arrested⁴.

³ Chapin Hall

⁴ Chapin Hall

In an era of shrinking budgets, staff cuts, and program closures, it is tempting to see the overall problem – children aging out of foster care – as too big or too expensive to fix. However, these staggering statistics make it clear that the societal cost of allowing children to age out of foster care is astronomical. Society cannot afford not to face the issues and commit the resources necessary to ameliorate the underlying causes of this phenomenon.

The purpose of this research paper is to determine what efforts are being made to reduce the number of children who age out of foster care; which approaches are effective; and whether changes to the foster care system might improve the outcomes for the children who do age out despite the best efforts of those who serve them. The methodology will include review of published materials relevant to the subject matter.

Given the multitude of challenges faced by children aging out of foster care, it is unlikely that a single solution will effectively address a problem of this magnitude. In fact, the research in this area does reveal several proven, effective strategies for reducing the number of children who age out of the system; it also indicates some changes to the foster care system that could also improve these outcomes.

Effective Approaches to the Problem

Legislation Has Increased Adoptions Significantly Over the Past Two Decades

Legislative efforts to reduce the rate of age-related emancipation from foster care have been underway for over two decades. In 1980, the Adoption Assistance and Child Welfare Act (AACWA) was

passed by Congress to facilitate the permanent placement of foster children, either through reunification with birth family or placement in an adoptive home⁵.

In 1997, Congress enacted the Adoption and Safe Families Act (ASFA), which focused extensively on the need for achieving timely permanent placements, especially adoption, for children in foster care who could not safely reunite with their birth parents. ASFA contained specific provisions to encourage and facilitate timely permanency for children in foster care⁶. This Act also established the Adoption Incentive Program to provide financial incentive funds to states which increase adoptions over the established baseline⁷.

In 2003, Congress reaffirmed its commitment to ensuring children in the nation's foster care system are moved as quickly as possible into permanent homes. The Keeping Children and Families Safe Act reauthorized the Adoption Opportunities Act, the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (CAPTA), and related child welfare legislation⁸. The Act included a grant program to support State and local innovations that would conduct research about and recommend improvements to interjurisdictional adoption outcomes⁹.

In 2006, the Safe and Timely Interstate Placement of Foster Children Act mandated States to consider interjurisdictional placements and remove barriers thereto, thereby widening the pool of potential adoptive parents to include those residing outside of the State with legal responsibility for the child's care¹⁰.

⁵ McRoy, p.11

⁶ McRoy, p.11

⁷ Children's Bureau, Interjurisdictional Report, p.9

⁸ McRoy, p.12

⁹ Children's Bureau, Interjurisdictional Report, p.10

¹⁰ Black, p. 75

These efforts have been successful to some extent, given that adoptions from foster care have risen from 31,000 in 1997¹¹ to 52,891 in 2010¹². However, as of September 30, 2010, over 107,000 foster children were still available and waiting to be adopted, and 27,854 foster children exited care due to age-related emancipation¹³. Given the dismal outlook for such children, additional efforts and creative approaches are indicated so as to avoid the dire outcomes predicted by the various studies on this issue¹⁴. A review of some of the methods which have been implemented and researched regarding this issue are discussed below.

Diligent Recruitment and Support of Prospective Adoptive Families From Diverse Backgrounds

Much of the research concurs that diligent recruitment is a primary factor in reducing the number of children who age out of foster care. In the Child Welfare Policy Manual, the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) summarized the following components that should make up diligent recruitment efforts:

- a) a description of the characteristics of waiting children;
- b) specific strategies to reach all parts of the community;
- c) diverse methods of disseminating both general and child-specific information;
- d) strategies for assuring that all prospective adoptive parents have access to the home study process, including location and hours of services that facilitate access by all members of the community;
- e) strategies for dealing with linguistic barriers;
- f) non-discriminatory fee structures; and

¹¹ McRoy, p. 12

¹² AFCARS #18

¹³ AFCARS #18

¹⁴ Chapin Hall, generally

- g) procedures for a timely search for prospective parents for a waiting child, including the use of exchanges and other interagency efforts, provided that such procedures must insure that placement of the child in an appropriate household is not delayed by the search for a same race or ethnic placement¹⁵.

In addition to public agency and legislatively-driven efforts to reduce the number of children who age out of foster care, the private sector has sponsored research and funding for unique programs that have achieved varying degrees of success in diligent recruitment as a way to address and reduce the aging-out phenomena. Such private sector strategies aimed at recruiting specific groups of people and finding families for specific children have had varied success rates.

One of the most effective programs to date has been Wendy's Wonderful Kids (WWK), a signature program of the Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption (DTFA). This program has been statistically proven to be substantially and significantly more effective than other services in terms of achieving adoptions for foster youth. Furthermore, its impact on adoption is strongest among older youth and those with emotional disorders, groups that have traditionally waited the longest for adoption and are the least likely to be adopted before aging out of foster care¹⁶.

The Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption was founded in 1992 for the specific purpose of increasing the number of children adopted from foster care in the United States¹⁷. With its particular focus on harder-to-place children, DTFA emphasizes the need for adequate time and resources applied to adoption recruitment efforts, as well as the need for measurable results in terms of the numbers of children matched, placed, and adopted through various methodologies.

¹⁵ Black, p. 30

¹⁶ Malm, p.3

¹⁷ Malm, p.3

To achieve these goals, DTFA launched WWK in 2004. Wendy's restaurants and their customers raise funds for DTFA in order to fund grants to local adoption organizations in the very neighborhoods where the funds were raised. The agencies hire full-time WWK adoption recruiters whose sole task is to locate permanent adoptive homes for children in the local foster care system¹⁸.

DTFA describes the WWK model of adoption recruitment as "child-focused," requiring WWK recruiters to focus exhaustively on an individual child's history, experiences, and needs in order to find an appropriate adoptive family. This approach - matching specific families to the needs of specific waiting children - is considered unusual in this respect.¹⁹

The program is designed to find adoptive homes for children who are considered challenging to place in adoptive homes due to their ages, disabilities, or membership in a sibling group.²⁰ Children served by WWK can be in any type of out-of-home care placement setting, including family foster care, group care, and residential settings. In addition, children are eligible regardless of their interest in being, or desire to be, adopted. Finally, in order to allow for the fact that the recruitment and adoption finalization process can take two years or more from the time of referral, no time limit is set for provision of services, and very rarely do recruiters remove children from their caseload.

The program model components include the initial case referral, building a relationship with the child, conducting a case record review, assessing the child, ensuring the child and prospective family are prepared for adoption, network building, developing and updating a recruitment plan, and performing a diligent search for adoptive resources. In order to determine the effectiveness of WWK, the outcomes of 517 children served by 30 recruiters in a subset of 21 WWK grantee agencies (i.e., the treatment group)

¹⁸ Malm, p.3

¹⁹ Malm, p.4

²⁰ Malm, p.4

were compared to the outcomes of 497 children receiving traditional services as a matter of course in the same localities (i.e., the control group).

As noted previously, the WWK intervention was designed specifically to increase adoptions among children typically considered harder to place.²¹ Among the children with closed WWK cases, most received services for at least one year, with six percent of cases remaining open for three years or more. Adoption is the most common reason for case closure, and almost half of children with closed cases have been adopted.

The evidence indicates that WWK does have a positive impact on rates of adoption, particularly for the very children that some agencies and caseworkers view as “unadoptable.” Among children adopted through the WWK program, the majority were adopted by someone who neither knew the child, nor was related to the child prior to adoption. These findings support DTFA’s vision that all children are adoptable and are instructive for those child welfare agencies and professionals who may be resistant to the idea of aggressive adoption recruitment for older foster children, or to those who continue to perceive that some children in foster care are “unadoptable.”

Overall, a larger share of children in the WWK group were adopted (31.4%) compared to that of the control group (22.5%). The likelihood of adoption for children served by WWK is more than one-and-one-half times greater than the likelihood for children not receiving WWK services. Detailed analyses that control for differences between the two groups support the following findings:

- a) WWK substantially and significantly increases adoptions from foster care
- b) WWK yields improved adoption outcomes for older children and those with emotional disturbances
- c) The relationship between recruiters and children matters

²¹ Malm, p.13

- d) Early and diligent search efforts contribute to more successful outcomes
- e) Designating one person as being responsible for preparing children for adoption improves outcomes
- f) Children and adults need better support before and after an adoption in order to ensure successful placements.²²

To summarize, WWK yields the largest improvement in adoption outcomes for older children and those

with mental health disorders.²³ The fact that the impact is smaller among younger children and among those not reported to have mental health disorders implies that governments and private agencies may not need to fund intensive, child-focused programs for every child needing an adoptive home, and that funding for such intensive recruitment programs may be best used exclusively for the groups of children that are harder to place.

The Evan B. Donaldson Institute is another private sector organization dedicated to improving adoption outcomes. The Institute's stated mission is to provide leadership that improves adoption laws, policies and practices – through sound education, research, and advocacy – in order to better the lives of everyone touched by adoption. To achieve these goals, the Institute conducts and synthesizes research; offers education to inform public opinion; and works to translate policy into action.²⁴

As might be expected, much of the Institute's research focuses on children in foster care who are waiting to be adopted. The Institute's research appears to support the conclusions reached in the

²² WWK, p.22-23

²³ Malm, p.15

²⁴ Evan B. Donaldson Institute Website, www.adoptioninstitute.org (Home Page)

WWK study, in that the Institute recommends improved child-family matching services to enhance the likelihood of successful placements.²⁵

In addition, the Institute's studies also suggest that efforts to recruit adoptive families should be expanded beyond traditional two-parent households and should include single, foster, older, lower-income, and less-educated parents, as well as kin, because such families have better-than-average stability rates for children adopted from foster care.²⁶

In contrast, another private study indicates that foster youth who spend more time in kinship placements are at higher risk for poorer functioning and greater involvement in delinquency, sexual-risk behaviors, substance abuse, and total risk behaviors.²⁷ The authors of this study suggest avoiding assumptions that more time spent living with kin is beneficial for foster youth, and that placing workers should examine the specific placement factors that will promote the well-being of foster children.²⁸

With the exception of the issue of kin versus non-kin placements, much of the research on the issue has reached consensus that recruitment efforts with diverse populations are crucial components in the efforts to effectively serve the waiting children.²⁹ In their 2011 National Adoption Month Capacity Building Toolkit, authors Black and Groh noted that diversity goes "far beyond race and ethnicity" and includes characteristics such as family structure and marital status; age and socio-economic status; civilian or military; sexual orientation and gender identity; type of home; owner or renter; and location.³⁰ The authors suggest that a primary way to increase the diversity of populations reached is to identify and build relationships with community organizations that serve diverse populations.³¹

²⁵ Evan B. Donaldson Institute, p. 4

²⁶ Evan B. Donaldson Institute, *What's Working for Children*, p. 3

²⁷ Taussig, pp. 78, 80

²⁸ Taussig, p. 85

²⁹ Black, p. 44

³⁰ Black, p.44

³¹ Black, p. 50

For instance, one under-recruited population of prospective adoptive parents tends to be comprised of those who are serving in active military duty. Agency workers and military personnel alike may be dissuaded from consideration adoption due to the likelihood of frequent moves, deployments, and other realities of military life that could interfere with the placement of a foster child.³²

The authors provide numerous tactics for overcoming the actual and perceived barriers to working with military families, such as holding orientations and other classes on the military base; condensing the process whenever possible to allow for completion of certain phases before a move may be required; and helping families explore the resources available to them through the military to meet the needs of a waiting child.³³

By employing these and other innovative recruitment tactics to increase the pool of prospective adoptive parents beyond those typically considered in the past, the number of children who age out of foster care can be reduced as permanent families are located for them.

Education of Foster and Adoptive Parents to Enhance Likelihood of Successful Permanent Placements

In addition to diligent recruitment efforts with diverse populations, another method for increasing adoptions of children from foster care (and thereby reducing the number of children who age out) is to provide high-quality pre-adoption education to foster and adoptive parents who are caring for foster children.

Studies confirm that children in foster care are more likely than their non-foster peers to experience mental and physical health problems; developmental delays; academic difficulties; and interactions with the juvenile justice system.³⁴ These difficulties often prevent them from being

³² McKenzie, p. 3-4

³³ McKenzie, p. 28

³⁴ Rork, p. 140

matched with adoptive families and are also cited as precipitating factors in the disruption of pre-adoptive placements and dissolution of post-adoptive placements due to the stress caused on the placement for which the adoptive parents are not prepared.³⁵

Based on the general body of research in this area, the Evan B. Donaldson Institute recommends a greater emphasis on effective parent training to reduce the risk that the foster child with significant special needs (who is also the child most likely to age out of foster care) will disrupt from an adoptive placement.

Noting that unrealistic expectations, especially among more educated parents, leads to higher disruption rates,³⁶ the Institute's research also confirms that pre-adoption training is effective for creating realistic expectations and an understanding of special needs children, while at the same time teaching the skills and providing the resources necessary to parent such children.³⁷

In "Finding a Fit to Last a Lifetime: A Guide to Connecting Adoptive Families with Waiting Children," authors Gerstenzang and Freundlich agree that family preparation plays a vital role in a successful adoption.³⁸ Rather than considering the training as a separate component from the assessment process, the authors recommend viewing family training as ongoing from the moment the family enters the adoption process.³⁹

The authors also recommend the use of panels of veteran foster/adoptive parents to provide realistic expectations to incoming families. These same veterans can also be matched as "buddy families" to the newcomers, giving them more individual time to explore the realities of adoption from

³⁵ Evan B. Donaldson Institute, p.13

³⁶ Evan B. Donaldson Institute, p.17

³⁷ Evan B. Donaldson Institute, p.37

³⁸ Gerstenzang, p.17

³⁹ Gerstenzang, p.18

foster care and thus reduce disruptions which result from unrealistic expectations on the part of the adoptive parents.⁴⁰

One study, “Evaluation of Foster Parent Training Programs: A Critical Review,” noted that while foster children have unique histories and needs, so do the people who care for them.⁴¹ The authors of this study identified four major areas in which those who parent foster children face considerable challenges that often lead to disruption of placements:

- a) comprehending the medical, educational, and health systems;
- b) collaborating with the legal and child welfare systems;
- c) managing difficult and maladaptive child behaviors; and
- d) addressing the demands and unique aspects of foster parenting.⁴²

After reviewing a number of studies in the area of foster parent training, this review’s authors concluded that effective pre-training experiences led to more positive outcomes for foster parents and foster children.⁴³ This is consistent with the findings discussed in “Barriers & Success Factors in Adoptions From Foster Care,” which found that the child’s problems were identified as the top factor in disruptions occurring before finalization, along with the lack of agency support and lack of services available.⁴⁴

Overall, these studies reveal that by providing pre-adoption training to adjust unrealistic expectations on the part of the adoptive parents, and the skills to address a child’s special needs (such as maladaptive behaviors), one can increase the rates of successful adoptions from foster care, and thereby reduce the number of children who age out of the system.

⁴⁰ Gerstenzang, p.18

⁴¹ Rork, p.140

⁴² Rork, p.140

⁴³ Rork, p.140

⁴⁴ McRoy, pp.38-39

Provision of Post-Adoption Services

A third method for increasing adoptions and thereby reducing the number of children who age out of foster care is to ensure that adoptive families receive competent post-adoption support services. Research indicates that such services are crucial to increase placement stability and prevent disruption and dissolution of adoptive placements that would otherwise leave a child without a permanent family at the age of majority.⁴⁵

As noted above, in “Barriers & Success Factors in Adoption From Foster Care,” the combination of the child’s problems and the lack of support to deal with those problems is a significant causative factor in disrupted placements. In contrast, of the families who completed successful adoptions from foster care, almost 90 percent received some post-adoption support, with an average of thirteen different post-adoption services used per family.⁴⁶

In addition, 90 percent or more of the successful adoptive families who received post-adoption services such as an adoption subsidy, or help with routine medical/dental care, found such services to be extremely helpful. Sixty-three to 79% of families found it very or extremely helpful to receive various types of counseling, training, and support group assistance. Between 69 to 76% of the successful families reported that post-adoption support in the form of counseling on parenting skills, abuse, and other adoption issues was very or extremely helpful to them.⁴⁷

This reports and statistics make plausible the theory that providing the post-adoption services reported as being most effective by families who have successfully adopted, the rate of successful adoptions from foster care can be increased, thereby decreasing the number of children who age out of foster care.

⁴⁵ Evan B. Donaldson Institute, p.37

⁴⁶ McRoy, pp.66-67

⁴⁷ McRoy, p.69

Remove and Reduce Barriers to Interjurisdictional Placements

A fourth method for preventing children from aging out of foster care is to reduce barriers to inter-jurisdictional placements. Such placements involve moving a child into an adoptive home located outside of the jurisdiction with legal responsibility. Although this could technically refer to placement across county lines, it more often refers to placement across state lines, or even outside of the United States.⁴⁸

Federal law prohibits States from using jurisdictional barriers to justify delay or denial of a permanent placement for a child.⁴⁹ However, a significant strategy in foster care and adoption has been attempting to place children as close as possible to their original home at the time of removal, thereby keeping them near familiar family, schools, and friends.⁵⁰

Coordinating these two seemingly opposite approaches can be done if approached in the same vein that concurrent planning emphasizes and embraces the need to work simultaneously towards reunification with birth family and alternative permanency options for foster children. Using this same concurrent approach towards interjurisdictional placements simply means that one need not rule out local placements options before considering more distant families.⁵¹

Of course, most of the obstacles to achieving timely permanency for children involved in interjurisdictional placements also affect the child welfare system as a whole, such as high social worker caseloads, limited access to support services, delays in the legal process, a lack of waiting and approved adoptive families, and difficulties coordinating the work between child welfare agencies and courts.⁵²

⁴⁸ Black, p.75

⁴⁹ Safe & Timely Interstate Placement of Foster Child Act, P.L. 109-239

⁵⁰ Black, p.76

⁵¹ Black, p.76

⁵² Children's Bureau, Interjurisdictional Report, p.39

Also, there is some overlap with the previous discussion regarding recruitment of military families, since the frequent moves by such families can often create interjurisdictional placements out of an initially local placement.

In addition to these challenges, interjurisdictional placements must also reconcile differing State laws, policies, and procedures, not to mention communication among staff in multiple agencies in each of the two jurisdictions. Overall, these barriers can be grouped into the following eight categories: staffing and resources, knowledge and training, staff attitudes and beliefs, education and medical expenses, criminal background checks, communication, permanency planning, and tracking and reporting.⁵³

Unfortunately, in addition to the system-wide barriers to placement, as well as those specific to interjurisdictional placements, securing out-of-state families for children in foster care simply takes longer and requires more work than securing permanent families within children's home jurisdictions.

These delaying factors often cause children placed across state lines to remain in foster care longer than their counterparts. As of FY 2004, approximately 7,700 children exited foster care into interjurisdictional placements with relatives or prospective adoptive parents.⁵⁴ Children adopted in FY 2004 by a family who lived in another State had been in foster care an average of one year longer than children adopted by a family within their State of residence (50 months compared to 38 months).⁵⁵

These delays raise concerns because lengthy stays in foster care and the multiple placements that often result during this time, have a negative impact on a children's mental health and well-being and their ability to make smooth transitions to an adoptive families.⁵⁶

⁵³ Children's Bureau, Interjurisdictional Report, p.39

⁵⁴ Children's Bureau, Interjurisdictional Report, p.5

⁵⁵ Children's Bureau, Interjurisdictional Report, p.6

⁵⁶ Children's Bureau, Interjurisdictional Report, p.6

In addition, children who were adopted by families in other States were one year older at the time of the adoption than children who were adopted by families within their State of residence (7.5 years compared to 6.6 years), although the age at which they entered foster care was about the same (3.5 years old). This is of concern because several studies have shown that the rate of adoption disruptions and dissolutions increases with the age of the child at the time of adoption.⁵⁷

These reports reveal that significant barriers still exist which can and do prevent - or at least delay - interjurisdictional placements, and thereby interfere with the goal of reducing the number of foster children who age out of the system with no permanent family. According to the Children's Bureau, the infrastructure and processes for interjurisdictional adoptions and relative placements currently do not support timely achievement of this goal.⁵⁸

In an effort to address these shortcomings, federally-funded research projects have identified four strategies for enhancing outcomes for children involved in interjurisdictional placements:

- a) Assistance to caseworkers involved in completing interjurisdictional placement tasks;
- b) The use of technology to support communication and information sharing among jurisdictions;
- c) The enhanced understanding of the roles and responsibilities of each person involved in the process of interjurisdictional placements of children; and
- d) The inclusion of stakeholders in planning and implementing interjurisdictional placement strategies.⁵⁹

⁵⁷ Children's Bureau, Interjurisdictional Report, p.6

⁵⁸ Children's Bureau, Interjurisdictional Report, p.6

⁵⁹ Children's Bureau, Interjurisdictional Report, p.38

By implementing these and other strategies to eliminate the barriers to interjurisdictional placements, the wait time between entry into care and exit from care can be reduced, along with the number of placements that occur during that wait time.

In turn, this should lower the number of disruptions and dissolutions created in part by the additional trauma caused by the longer wait times and additional moves. The net result will be a greater number of foster children who obtain permanent families and do not age out of foster care.

Increase Successful Reunification Rates

A fifth method for reducing the number of children who age out of foster care involves increasing the family reunification rate. Family reunification in child welfare refers to the process of returning children in temporary out-of-home care to their families of origin.

Reunification is both the most common goal for children in out-of-home care as well as the most common outcome.⁶⁰ According to the Department of Health and Human Services, in FY 2010, reunification with birth parents or other primary caregivers was the case plan for 51% of foster children entering the system; likewise, 51% of those who exited foster care that year did so as a result of such reunification.⁶¹

The presence of poverty is one of the most established, consistently validated predictors of placement in foster care and lack of reunification success.⁶² Furthermore, the relationship between poverty and substance abuse recovery is also well-documented; the more impoverished a woman is, the less likely she is to recover.⁶³

⁶⁰ Child Welfare Information Gateway (CWIG), p.2

⁶¹ AFCARS #18

⁶² Brook, p.665

⁶³ Brook, p.665

Thus, it is no wonder that the most commonly-cited barrier to successful family reunification is parental substance abuse.⁶⁴ It is estimated that 60% of all families within the child welfare system have substance abuse problems related to the abuse and neglect experienced by their children, and that 75% of all out-of-home placements occur at least in part due to substance abuse.⁶⁵

Studies show that successful substance abuse treatment requires more than a short-term program addressing merely the cessation of use of illegal or intoxicating substances. Recovery from substance abuse is a long-term process, and the problems of families affected thereby are multiple, intertwined, and not likely to respond to quick intervention.⁶⁶

Fortunately, research has identified promising results from three models of service delivery related to substance abuse recovery:

- a) Intensive Case Management – this includes "recovery coaches" to facilitate assessments, conduct service planning, and eliminate barriers to accessing substance abuse treatment, as well as matched services that addressed co-existing problems such as mental health issues, housing, family counseling, and parenting skills.
- b) Tailoring Programs for Women with Children – programs that allow women to retain custody of or significant visitation with their children increases the likelihood that women will remain in and successfully complete treatment. Likelihood of reunification was also enhanced when mothers received a broad range of employment, educational, and family and children's services in addition to substance abuse treatment.
- c) Strong Social Support - Because social support appears to be an important factor in the successful treatment of addiction, successful programs involve the entire family, especially

⁶⁴ CWIG, p.4

⁶⁵ Brook, p.664

⁶⁶ Brook, p.670

spouses or partners, and include consistent, ongoing support from caseworkers and treatment providers.⁶⁷

Given the documented effect of substance abuse upon child welfare, using one or more of these service models (as more specifically described in the relevant studies) to increase the successful rate of substance abuse recovery should have a direct and positive correlative impact on reunification rates, as well.

In addition, data collected by the Department of Health and Human Services indicates that reunification rates are positively affected by effective family engagement activities. These activities include involving birth families in planning and decision-making, encouraging foster parent support of the birth parents, and facilitating visits between children in foster care with their parents.⁶⁸

Other critical factors to higher reunification rates include early emphasis on reunification as the most desirable permanency goal, adequately assessing the strengths and needs of children and families, involvement of parents and children in case planning, building on family strengths and addressing specific needs, and the actual carrying out of established reunification plans.⁶⁹

By taking note of and implementing these methods and programs which tend to increase family reunification rates, greater numbers of children in foster care can achieve permanency before aging out of the system.

Systemic Changes Recommended

With the foregoing discussion in mind, systemic changes appear necessary in order to decrease the number of children who age out of foster care, as follows:

⁶⁷ CWIG, p.10

⁶⁸ CWIG, p.4

⁶⁹ CWIG, p.4

- a) Make provisions for diligent recruitment of adoptive parents from diverse populations as part of the overall child welfare program. Research shows that this particular method may be one of the most promising ways to reduce the numbers of children who age out of foster care. To the extent that county and state welfare offices are not currently implementing this strategy, they are missing out on an excellent tool for remediation of the problem.
- b) Increase pre- and post-adoption services to support adoptive placements and prevent disruption. The research shows that investing in such services prior to matching and placement, as well as after placement, greatly increases the potential for finding permanent homes even for children with significant special needs.
- c) Remove barriers to inter-jurisdictional placements. Not only is this the law; it is good practice because it effectively widens the pool of prospective families and will reduce the adverse effects suffered by foster children who spend more time waiting in the system.
- d) Increase successful reunification rates by revising service delivery in substance abuse treatment programs to maximize the potential for successful recovery. Given the prominence of substance abuse as a causative factor for children to enter and remain in foster care, improvements in this area should have a significant positive impact upon the number of children who reunify with birth families and therefore avoid aging out of the system.
- e) Take long term view to cost-savings when allocating public funds. The obvious problem with all of the foregoing recommendations is the cost involved to implement them. The not-so-obvious problem is the long-term cost of failing to implement them. The past failures to address these issues have resulted in statistically proven expenses from greater numbers of young adults with mental health and substance abuse problems; greater levels of poverty and involvement with the criminal justice system; and increased likelihood of generational

perpetuation of the underlying causative problems. The outcomes for children who are in foster care today are dependent upon society's willingness to take action and invest in funding today to ensure a more positive future for them, and for all of us.

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