

PERMANENCY SUB-COMMITTEE RECOMMENDATIONS ON IOWA YOUTH PERMANENCY (DRAFT)

April 2009

The Permanency sub-committee recommends that Iowa move forward with a Youth Permanency Initiative to develop a state organizational plan that quality improves our state's vision and creates consistent state-wide philosophy and practice to achieve permanency for all children and youth.

We propose that the Permanency Subcommittee recommend to the full Child Welfare Advisory Council that it:

- (1) Endorse and recommend to DHS that it adopt the attached permanency vision statement and guiding principles; and the DHS work with the Court to develop a shared vision and guiding principles for permanency, using the materials from the Child Welfare Advisory Council as a starting point.
- (2) Review the data and information DHS collected from recent CFSR assessments, and advise DHS regarding developing a state plan to achieve the youth permanency goals articulated in the vision statement and guiding principles document. Analysis of and recommendations for improvement will be in the following key areas:
 - a. Policy
 - b. Practice
 - c. Involvement of youth in planning their own permanence
 - d. Training
 - e. Data tracking and outcome measures
 - f. Public – private partnerships; and
 - g. Integration of permanence with other initiatives
- (3) Encourage the Department to work with the Court to take steps to build awareness of the vision statement and guiding principles within the Department/Court and with key stakeholder groups; and
- (4) Share the vision statement and guiding principles broadly and seek additional endorsements.

See the below proposed vision statement, foundational principles, and background/rationale for this proposal.

PERMANENCY VISION STATEMENT

“Every child deserves a forever family.”

The purpose of this document is to articulate our vision and principles to guide all decisions that impact every child or young person served by Iowa’s child welfare system.

We believe and value that every child and young person deserves a permanent family relationship.

A permanent family relationship offers safe, stable, and committed parenting, unconditional love and lifelong support, and legal family membership status.

Achieving permanency can be the result of preservation of the family, reunification with birth or adoptive family, or legal guardianship or adoption by kin or other caring and committed adults.

FOUNDATIONAL PRINCIPLES OF PERMANENCY

All policies, programs, practices, services and supports are developed and implemented in ways that:

- Demonstrate a commitment to the right of every child and young person to a permanent family relationship.
- Empower young people to be full partners with their family in all decision-making and planning for their future.
- Involve multiple systems and the community at large in the effort to identify and support permanent relationships.
- Acknowledge permanence includes: a stable, healthy and lasting living situation within the context of a family relationship with at least one committed adult; reliable, continuous and healthy connections with siblings, birth parents, extended family and a network of other significant adults.
- Assure planning for permanency begins before first placement! Asking families early on who they turn to for help with their child or who could care for their child if placement becomes necessary helps maintain connections before placement becomes necessary.
- Assure efforts to achieve timely permanency through reunification with the young person’s birth/adoptive family begins as soon as the young person is placed, while concurrently engaging in contingency planning with family involvement regarding the range of permanency options that can ensure stability and continuity of relationships.
- Assure frequent, meaningful, and planful family interactions when a child is placed into foster care to maintain family connections and facilitate reunification.
- Honor the cultural, racial, ethnic, linguistic, and religious/spiritual backgrounds of the child or young person and their family and respect differences in sexual orientation.
- Acknowledge and build upon the strengths and resilience of the child or young person, their parents, their families, and other significant adults.
- Ensure that services and support are provided in ways that are fair, responsive, and accountable to young people and their families, and do not stigmatize them, their families or their caregivers.
- Maintain a sense of urgency with achieving permanency as if the child were our own child or family member.

Adapted from “Permanence for Young People Framework” developed by The Casey Center for Effective Child Welfare Practice of Casey Family Services.

BACKGROUND AND RATIONALE FOR PROPOSED RECOMMENDATIONS

Iowa is proud of the permanency initiatives and outcomes achieved to date. While Iowa continues much good permanency work, there are challenges to this work. A vision and plan framework are necessary in order to meet those challenges, fully leverage the good work being done, and achieve permanency for all youth in care.

Currently Iowa has a number of initiatives focused on improving permanency for children and below are several examples (see appendix for additional examples with brief explanation):

- Elevate™
- Iowa After Care Services
- Preparation for Adult Living [PAL]
- Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative
- Family Team Meetings/Circles of Support
- Family Finding and Connections
- Family Interaction
- Child Welfare Service Contracts
- Wendy's Wonderful Kids
- Foster and Adoptive Parent Training
- Resource Family Retention and Recruitment
- Children's Justice Initiative
- "One Family, One Judge"
- DHS Minority Youth and Family Initiative sites
- Culturally Competent Family Team Meetings
- Parent Partners
- Pre-Removal Conferences

And while Iowa is progressive with initiatives and improving permanency outcomes, this permanency sub-committee suggests a state organizational plan that quality improves our state's vision and creates consistent state-wide philosophy and practice. This proposed plan sets in motion advancements to Iowa's progress to date and create strategies to impact our challenges.

What are the challenges?*

Iowa's many initiatives show our challenges with youth permanency practice are the same challenges most other states face as well:

- Lack of an agreed upon/accepted state-wide definition and vision of youth permanency
- Misperceptions such as biases against a youth's biological family with little recognition that many young people maintain connections to that family or worries that searching for a permanent home for a teenager will re-traumatize the youth
- Catalyzing youth, particularly older youth in care, as a participant or leader in permanency planning and decision-making
- Inconsistent case file structure: lack of evident documentation of available connections and contact information; potential resources buried in the file or absent; lack of evident documentation of resources contacted, outcomes, and next steps
- A philosophy that maintains all problems of a youth or family have to be resolved before a placement ends; visits with family or connections is often contingent on the youth behavior or milieu goal achievement

- Reluctance to consider non-traditional connections for youth, especially current or former staff workers
- Failure to track siblings' whereabouts
- A plethora of competing initiatives
- Lack of practice consistency within and between public and private agencies.
- Difficulty in maintaining excitement or a sense of urgency for youth permanency over the long term

PROPOSED STEPS TO DEVELOP A STATE ORGANIZATION PLAN

The Permanency sub-committee recommends the following steps, including using an outside consultant:

The implementation of any major paradigm shift or initiative works best with an outside consultant or other neutral entity such as a National Resource Center. Having someone external gives the initiative credibility.

The consultant guides the state through its anxiety in the beginning stages when things are not clear and also provides basic guidelines on how to begin the process. The consultant and/or internal champion works on establishing and maintaining a relationship with key stakeholders and balances the tension between providing support to staff and pushing the state to take further steps to implement youth permanency.

STEP 1: ESTABLISH ADMINISTRATIVE BUY-IN

Rationale

There needs to be initial exploration of administrator interest in committing to a youth permanency initiative and organization plan including an assessment of the state's readiness advance it's policy and practice. And administrators need visible and tangible buy-in from key stakeholders.

Buy-in from key DHS administrators and service areas, Judges, private provider administrators and other stakeholders is critical so that (1) staff understand the importance of youth permanency, (2) resources in staff, time, and money are allocated, (3) when implementation encounters difficulty or other agency initiatives begin to take precedence- and every project experiences this- the consultant or internal champion has access to an administrator who can intervene, and (4) outcomes and measurement for success are established at the start of the project so that success can be demonstrated.

STEP 2: ASSIGN THE INITIATIVE TO A YOUTH PERMANENCY COMMITTEE

Rationale

Iowa currently has several committees working on youth permanence. It is suggested that, if adopted, this initiative be assigned to either an existing committee or a reconfigured committee.

This group will guide the initiative, develop a plan and spread the word about the project's purpose, philosophy, and successes. As committee members take action steps they become believers in and champions of the work.

Buy-in at all staff and partner levels is critical. This working committee includes those who can function as leaders in the youth permanency effort, regardless of their job function or agency affiliation. The committee needs strong and committed public/private co-leaders with demonstrated leadership and successful committee leadership experience. Permanency is too large a job to do without help, so bring the necessary partners, including external partners, to the table immediately. *Leaders and members should have permission from their respective agencies to allocate the necessary time and commitment to fully participate as designed.*

STEP 3: STATE-ASSESSMENT ON YOUTH PERMANENCY

Rationale

This is the first opportunity for the committee to examine Iowa youth permanency successes to date including youth permanency data, and to identify existing gaps.

The following areas would be reviewed during the assessment: (1) public, private, and court permanency policy (2) public, private, and court practice, including (3) involvement of youth in planning their own permanency, (4) public, private, and court training, (5) data tracking and outcome measures, (6) active partnerships with external agencies, and (7) integration with other initiatives.

The assessment:

- Identifies gaps in youth permanency practice.
- Enlarges understanding of how to infuse youth permanency into the practice of the agency and its partners.
- Determines the agency's population of youth without permanency.
- Determines where it will be most effective to implement youth permanency strategies such as family search and engagement, working on grief issues with adolescents, or pilot projects.
- Determines where the potential supports and champions are and where a natural partnership can be formed.

STEP 4: DEVELOP A STATE YOUTH PERMANENCY PLAN

Rationale

In developing the state's youth permanency plan, refer to the self-assessment and to the original discussion with the administrators about desired changes.

It is suggested that over a one to two-year period, the following eight areas are addressed in the plan: (1) policy, (2) practice, including (3) involvement of youth in planning their own permanency, (4) training, (5) data tracking and outcome measures, (6) active partnerships with external agencies, (7) how permanency work fits with other improvement outcomes such as safety and education and (8) integration with other initiatives.

Use a project planning tool or master work plan to assure an even flow of work and achievement of goals. Use the tool to keep administrators informed about the plan's progress.

Once finalized by the committee the plan is submitted to agreed-upon administrators or administrative committee for approval and next steps.

*Adapted from the California Permanency for Youth Project: Organizational Development Guide for Youth Permanence