

California Child Welfare Council



Permanency Committee Report and Recommendations

Improving Safe Reunification of Foster Children with Their Birth Parents

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Family reunification is one of four program components of the California Child Welfare Services system, and applies to families whose children have been removed from the care of their parents due to abuse or neglect and placed in foster care under court order. Child Welfare social workers must make reasonable efforts to help the parents accomplish the goal of reunifying with their children. Most often county child welfare agencies meet their obligation to provide “reasonable efforts” by providing reunification services and support or making referrals for services and support, with the expectation that the services and support will resolve the problems that led to a child being placed in foster care. Depending on the age of the child, the parents then have six to 12 months to demonstrate to the court that the conditions that led to the removal of the child have been remedied and that the child will subsequently be safe in their care. When it can be accomplished, reunification meets federal and state requirements as the first option for securing a permanent family for children, and, more importantly, it also prevents the children from suffering the emotional trauma associated with the loss of their parents.

A broad review of the empirical literature in child welfare suggests common characteristics of services and support that are most helpful in assisting families to reunify. Key characteristics include: meaningful engagement of the parents, children and other family members in the process of planning and implementing services and support; individualized assessment and case planning that addresses both the strengths and challenges of parents; and provision of the individualized services and support agreed upon and detailed in the case plan. Systemic supports also appear to impact, directly and indirectly, the achievement of reunification goals: e.g., funding for services; support from the courts; and stable, competent staff.

According to the work of the California Child Welfare Council’s Prioritization Task Force, parents whose children have been removed and placed into foster care often need the following services and supports to sustain safe care and nurturing of their children: drug and alcohol treatment; mental health services; employment; corrections and rehabilitation; and family strengthening. Determining how parents whose children have been removed and placed in foster care can gain priority access to services and support needed to attain safe, timely family reunification was the purpose of the Task Force. Supporting goals included the implementation of policies that address systems integration and practices that provide for appropriate dose and duration of services for these parents.

This report of the California Child Welfare Council Permanency Committee is built on the following five theories of change related to reunification, and offers recommendations associated with each one:

1. To ensure that parents receive the best opportunity to reunify with children and youth in foster care, services designed to safely return the children and youth to their parents need to be evidence-informed. The Permanency Committee will:
 - Identify and engage the appropriate body to convene social science researchers and private/public funding partners to discuss the current research and identify further research needed in the area of reunification services.
 - Identify and engage the appropriate body to coordinate training in which social science researchers inform juvenile court stakeholders of current effective strategies and services that increase reunification and reduce reentry.
 - Investigate next steps to disseminate and promote implementation of these services in designated social service agencies in California.
 - Continue to monitor, support, encourage and report back to the Child Welfare Council on social science research in this area.
2. Reunification and re-entry outcomes are improved when representatives of the courts, child welfare and probation systems engage families in a meaningful way. The Permanency Committee will:
 - Promote the use of family and child engagement practices by local courts and encourage training to juvenile court stakeholders on these practices.
 - Make a presentation to the Board of Directors of CalSWEC to ensure that engagement policies and practices are integrated into the curriculum for child social workers and administrators.
3. Reunification services are most effective when they meet the specific needs of families and build upon each family's strengths.
 - California Department of Social Services in collaboration with the County Welfare Directors Association of California and the Administrative Office of the Courts review the case plan practices and policies for social workers and probation officers and create a check list for juvenile court stakeholders to review when preparing or ordering a case plan to ensure that the case plan is culturally responsive, identifies and builds on each family's unique strengths, and is targeted to meet each family's individual needs.
4. Services and support provided to the reunified family increase the likelihood that children do not reenter the foster care system. The Permanency Committee will:
 - Request that the California Evidence Based Clearinghouse develop a central online resource for research and best practice models of activities that have been successful in increasing reunification and reducing reentry

- Promote expansion and increased sustainability of Dependency Drug Treatment Courts and other collaborative courts by documenting the savings of these courts and the potential benefits than may accrue to virtuous reinvestment of county and realignment dollars.
5. Resources to support permanency are enhanced by strategic investment and reinvestment in programs that reduce costs by achieving permanency for youth in foster care and shortening time to permanency for children entering foster care. The Permanency Committee:
- Recommends that the California Department of Social Services, working with the County Welfare Directors Association of California, take the lead in providing technical assistance to all counties in order to facilitate leveraged reinvestment of savings achieved by moving youth and children with delayed permanency into safe reunification.

The Permanency Committee acknowledges, but will not duplicate the body of work compiled by the Prioritization Task Force highlighting improved outcomes for reunifying families that had timely access to quality services and support (aka, prioritization).

Foster care was never intended to be a permanent situation for children who cannot live safely with their parents. When children are removed from their parents for their safety, the state has a moral and legal obligation to do everything possible to return them safely home or, if safe reunification is not possible, find an alternative permanent home.

The Permanency Committee's focus on reunification in this report reflects our understanding that, whenever safely possible, children should be raised by their birth parents. It is our obligation to help vulnerable parents meet the challenges and overcome the obstacles that may hinder their capacity to safely care for their children. To that end, the Committee has explored and made recommendations about ways to improve reunification outcomes, lower rates of children re-entering foster care after returning to their parents, and maximize fiscal resources for effective services that create alternative families for children and youth least-likely to achieve permanence.

California has made significant strides over the last ten years in reducing the number of children in foster care, primarily by lowering the number of children who enter and then moving them out of care more quickly. By replicating successful programs, services and interventions and applying them in counties throughout the state, we have the opportunity to increase the capacity of parents to safely care for their own children and thereby further reduce the number of children in foster care.

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Permanency Committee Report and Recommendations
Improving Safe Reunification of Foster Children with Their Birth Parents

BACKGROUND

Nurturing families are the most fundamental source of support for children, the birthright of every child. Each year approximately 25,000¹ California children enter foster care. Far too many move through a cycle of frequent moves and escalation into more restrictive and more costly levels of care. Although the number of California children in foster care has fallen dramatically², the number of youth aging out without families has ranged from approximately 3400 in 1998 to a high of 5600 in 2009 to 5000 in 2010, the last year before implementation of Extended Foster Care. More than 26% of California children in care on April 1, 2013 had been in care more than three years, an eternity in the developmental clock of a child.

PERMANENCY

Foster care is by definition temporary, an impermanent living and relational situation designed to keep a child protected and nurtured until a permanent home and family is identified. Permanency is both a process and a result that involves the child or youth as an active participant in finding a permanent connection with at least one committed adult who provides:

- A safe, stable and secure parenting relationship
- Love
- Unconditional commitment
- Lifelong support in the context of (a) safe reunification with birth parents, (b) legal adoption, or (c) guardianship in which the youth has the opportunity to maintain contacts with important persons including brothers and sisters³

PERMANENCY COMMITTEE

The purpose of the Permanency Committee (Committee) of the Child Welfare Council is to: Identify and recommend best practices that can help achieve speedy permanency for all children in foster care regardless of jurisdiction or court status; Identify and recommend strategies for removing barriers that prevent children in foster care from achieving permanency.

¹ CWS/CMS 2013 Quarter 1 Extract.

² From 115,000 in 1998 to 62,000 as of April 1, 2013

³ National Institute for Permanent Family Connectedness, Seneca Family of Agencies

Recommendations presented by the Permanency Committee to the Child Welfare Council in 2011 focused on Family Finding and Engagement, identifying the structure and resources needed to ensure that: 1) children and youth in foster care are able to maintain and develop permanent connections with relatives and other important individuals in their lives; and 2) the length of time children are in foster care is reduced as a result of the identification of these permanent connections.

For the past year the Committee has been studying how to improve services to birth parents in order to allow them to safely reunify with their children who have been placed in foster care by court order. Concurrently, other committees and task forces of the Child Welfare Council have been hard at work addressing other issues with often complementary results. This report and its recommendations complement the recommendations of the Council's Prioritization Task Force and begin to address:

- Improving reunification outcomes (return of the children to safe care of the parents);
- Lowering re-entry (children re-entering to foster care after returning to their parents); and
- Maximizing fiscal resources for effective services that promote return of children to safe care by their parents.

The Prioritization Task Force (Task Force) has approached the issue of improving reunification outcomes from a macro level by looking at ways government agencies and community service providers can prioritize access to key services and support such as mental health and substance use disorder treatment, housing, workforce development and re-entry court services for parents whose court-ordered plan is safe reunification. To that end, the Task Force plans to convene leaders of agencies responsible for providing these services to develop and plan for implementing prioritization strategies.

The Permanency Committee has examined the issue of reunification outcomes using a lens more focused on the practice level. The Committee reviewed aggregate county child welfare data to determine which counties had higher reunification rates and lower re-entry rates. Three of those counties (San Diego, Fresno and Orange) were invited to inform the committee about the strengths and accomplishments of their practices that have improved outcomes at the local level. The recommendations below are formed in part from discussions with those counties.

In crafting its recommendations, the Committee considered outcomes and guiding principles from a variety of sources including the Breakthrough Series Collaborative sponsored by Casey Family Programs⁴, which offers a model for systemic change, and the work of the California

⁴ Casey Family Programs Breakthrough Series Collaborative, Timely Permanence through Reunification, 2011, series 009

Permanency for Youth Project⁵. After considering these outcomes and principles, the Committee organized the recommendations based on the following five theories of change:

1. To ensure that parents are receiving the best opportunity to reunify with children and youth in foster care, services designed to safely return the children and youth to their parents need to be evidence-informed.
2. Reunification and re-entry outcomes are improved when representatives of the courts, child welfare and probation systems engage families in a meaningful way.
3. Reunification services are most effective when they meet the specific needs of families and build upon each family's strengths.
4. Services and support provided to the reunified family increases the likelihood that children do not reenter the foster care system.
5. Resources to support permanency are enhanced by strategic investment and reinvestment in programs that reduce costs by achieving permanency for youth in foster care and shortening time to permanency for children entering foster care.

Discussions of these Theories of Change follow and include both supporting observations and recommendations. The recommendations are actionable and classified as immediate action or long term strategies.

The Committee's recommendations will be expanded in subsequent years, going deeper and wider to include recommendations regarding:

- Provision of support to foster parents of children and youth with challenging behaviors and other special needs when they have committed to being the permanent family because reunification with birth parents is not possible and need expert assistance to provide quality care;
- Addressing beliefs and biases that are barriers to and negatively impact permanency outcomes;
- Rebranding of foster parenting as a permanency-focused service in which Resource Families actively encourage the parents' successful reunification with their child at the same time that they commit to adopt the child if safe reunification with birth parents or other family members is not possible; and
- Removal of other barriers to permanency for our children.

⁵ <http://www.senecacenter.org/files/cpyp/Files/2010CPYP%20Evaluation%20Report.pdf>

REUNIFICATION: DEFINITION, THEORIES OF CHANGE, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Reunification means returning a child who has been placed in foster care to the safe care of his or her parent(s)⁶. Under federal and state statutes reunification is the most desirable form of permanency when it can be safely accomplished. Indeed, family support is an essential building block of healthy development for children of all ages.⁷ Therefore, it is important to focus on practices that help achieve successful reunification. A broad review of the empirical literature in child welfare suggests common characteristics of interventions that are most helpful in reunifying families. Key elements of direct services include:

- Meaningful family engagement;
- Assessment;
- Case planning; and
- Provision of needed services and support.

Systemic supports also appear to impact, directly and indirectly, the achievement of reunification goals.⁸ These include:

- Funding for services;
- Support from the courts; and
- Stable, competent staff

⁶ This can also mean reunification with any legal parent, including adoptive parents and guardians. However, most commonly, reunification refers to the birth parent.

⁷ Search Institute. Retrieved from: www.search-institute.org

⁸ Child Welfare Information Gateway. Family reunification: What the evidence shows. Issue Brief June 2006. Retrieved from www.childwelfare.gov

Theory of Change #1

To ensure that parents are receiving the best opportunity to reunify with children and youth in foster care, services designed to safely return the children and youth to their parents need to be evidence-informed.

Observations

Committee work was informed by several literature reviews. One review of recent studies, authored by Amy D'Andrade, is attached to these recommendations in Appendix I. Of note, the study identified an overall lack of research that either supported best practices or developed an evidence base for practices related to reunification. The California Evidence-Based Clearinghouse for Child Welfare, found at www.cebc4cw.org, lists only four reunification programs⁹.

Recommendation

Immediate Action:

- The Permanency Committee will identify and engage the appropriate body to convene social science researchers and private/public funding partners to discuss the current research and identify further research needed in the area of reunification services.
- The Permanency Committee will identify and engage the appropriate body to coordinate trainings in which social science researchers inform juvenile court stakeholders of current effective strategies and services that increase reunification and reduce reentry.
- The Permanency Committee will investigate next steps to disseminate information and promote implementation of these services in designated social service agencies in California.

Long term Strategies:

- The Permanency Committee will continue to monitor, support, encourage and report back to the Child Welfare Council on social science research in this area.

⁹ The Clearinghouse lists the following four evidence-based reunification practices: Homebuilders: <http://www.cebc4cw.org/program/homebuilders/>; Project Connect: <http://www.cebc4cw.org/program/project-connect/>; Michigan Family Reunification Program: <http://www.cebc4cw.org/program/michigan-family-reunification-program/>; Shared Family Care: <http://www.cebc4cw.org/program/shared-family-care/>

Theory of Change #2

Reunification and re-entry outcomes are improved when representatives of the courts, child welfare and probation systems engage families in a meaningful way.

Observations

The Committee reviewed the local child welfare data of reunification and reentry rates¹⁰ and asked three child welfare agencies (from San Diego, Fresno and Orange County) that had demonstrated improved outcomes in reunification to present their effective practices. The Committee also surveyed all 58 probation departments to gain information on local reunification practices¹¹. While Probation responses varied by county, an overall theme emerged showing a lack of parent participation in the probation system.

The presentations by and discussions with San Diego, Fresno, and Orange focused on their deliberate efforts to improve their reunification outcomes. Fresno implemented Family to Family¹² in 2003 to increase their reunification rates. San Diego and Orange looked at their reunification data during the development of their System Improvement Plans (SIP). Orange County was also driven by the additional incentive of a suit brought by Youth Law Center.

Counties' efforts to improve their reunification outcomes:

Some consistent themes emerged from the county conversation.

- Collaboration with local stakeholders to improve their reunification practices
 - San Diego County
 - All juvenile stakeholders were included in the discussion regarding reunification practices including tribes and the Chadwick center. Casey Family Programs is also a partner through their disproportionality program.
 - Fresno County
 - Reached out to all stakeholders.
 - Struggled with engaging mental health as a partner due to agency structure and the services that could be billed.
 - Orange County
 - Collaborated with their redesign planning counsel under AB 636, the Mexican consulate, and private foundations.

¹⁰ http://cssr.berkeley.edu/ucb_childwelfare/ReportDefault.aspx

¹¹ Appendix III contains the responses from the probation departments that responded to the survey.

¹² A family-centered and neighborhood-based model of service delivery developed by the Annie E. Casey Foundation designed to promote permanence for all children.

- Practice and Policy
 - San Diego County
 - Bundled services in one location for families.
 - Utilized Incredible Families program which offers a parenting class provides a meal and includes visitation with the child all at one location.
 - Obtained federal regional partnership grant that integrates substance abuse treatment for mothers, parenting, transportation of children to the treatment centers for visitation, trauma assessments of parents and children to give proper intervention, infant massage and developmental services.
- Incorporating families into the policy and decision making process
 - Orange County
 - Developed a system in which the foster parents and parent partners review policies and sit on all policy groups.
 - Folded the voice of the youth, parents and foster parents into trainings and policy work.
 - Emphasized the expectation that the voice of parents, youth and foster parents be present in daily practice of CWS.
 - Fresno County
 - Conducted an Institutional Analysis to learn how to improve the quality of their work. The Institutional Analysis revealed an internal structure that focused only on the child and not the family. The structure lacked a sense of urgency for reunification and other permanency options.
 - In response, Fresno streamlined work flow to reduce the number of transfers of families between social workers in order to promote more lasting relationships, assist social workers in developing increased understanding of each family's circumstances, and promote consistency within the service relationship.
 - Included voice of community in meaningful way through cultural brokers who help engage each family in the child welfare services process

Courts' efforts to improve reunification outcomes:

The Committee extended an invitation to Riverside, Santa Cruz and Humboldt County Courts to discuss the innovative practices they had installed which positively contributed to increased reunification rates.

The use of Specialty Courts:

- Superior Court of Riverside County - Dependency Drug Court (DDC)
 - DDCs are collaborative courts that have been found to increase the rate of reunification. Since most are started with grant funding, sustainability is perceived as an issue.
 - Riverside County DDC was a strategy identified in the county system improvement plan.
 - The DDC started with SAMHSA grant. The grant was projected to serve 40 parents per year for four years.
- Superior Court of Santa Cruz County - Family Preservation Court (FPC)
 - Model FPC started in 2008.
 - FPC is funded through two federal grants.
 - FPC services up to 60 parents per year
 - Uses a combination of services provided through Dominican Hospital, First 5 and Children's Mental Health.
 - Parents in FPC are assigned a social worker and social work supervisor who have specialized training working with clients challenged by substance use disorders.
- Superior Court of Humboldt County:
 - The California Partners for Permanency (CAPP) project in Humboldt County is focusing on Native American families.
 - Through the CAPP process, the Judge has learned more about the necessity of culturally relevant preventive and support services to establish sound reunification plans and efforts.
 - The Court stated that the CAPP project changed the Court's level of engagement. The court now holds interim hearings to more closely monitor progress and not miss any opportunities to help families.

Family Engagement:

All counties presenting found that judges have taken an active role in policy changes regarding family engagement.

Recommendations

Immediate Action:

- The Child Welfare Council will endorse the use of the use of family and child engagement practices by local courts and encourage training to juvenile court stakeholders on these practices.
- The Permanency Committee will make a presentation to the Board of Directors of CalSWEC to ensure that engagement policies and practices are integrated into the curriculum.

Theory of Change #3

Reunification services are most effective when they meet the specific needs of families and build upon each family's strengths.

Observations

The Committee reviewed the research reported in Reunification in CA: Case Plans, Services and Delivery Models, funded by a CalSWEC research grant

- Random sample of 200 children entering care in 2004.
- Looked at the specific services that are ordered for a majority of parents including: visitation, individual counseling, basic parenting, 12-step program, substance abuse testing, and substance abuse assessment.
- On average, each parent was ordered to attend 7-9 services sessions per week. Of the types of services ordered:
 - 100 percent of families utilized family counseling,
 - About 85 percent of parents utilized psychological evaluations and advanced parenting classes
 - About 75 percent of parents utilized substance abuse assessments.
 - Only about 40 percent of parents utilized substance abuse testing.
 - If batterer's intervention was ordered for a parent, only about 20 percent of parents utilized that service.
- This study showed:
 - Parents with substance abuse or domestic violence problems who do not use services are less likely to reunify than those without substance abuse or domestic violence problems.
 - Parents with substance abuse or domestic violence problems and do make use of services are no less likely to reunify than those without problems.
 - Parents who make full use of parenting classes are no more likely to reunify than those not using parenting classes.
 - Parents who use counseling services are more likely to reunify when parents do not have substance abuse problems.
 - Parents who use counseling services are not more likely to reunify when the parent also has a substance abuse problem.

Lessons from this study:

- Parents' ability to complete case plans may be compromised by the requirements of the case plans themselves.
 - Being required to participate in up to 10 service sessions a week can interfere with parents' efforts to find employment or housing.

- Parents sometimes arrive at service locations late and are not allowed to participate in that service that day due to the late arrival. Their tardiness however may be caused by problems related to public transportation which they must utilize in order to get to the service location.
- Many social workers questioned if they themselves would be able to complete all the services that are asked of parents in the dependency system.
- Use of targeted, family-specific treatment services increased the likelihood of reunification.
- Because not all services proved effective for all parents;
 - Emphasis should be placed on engagement with services and service providers.
 - More services are not always better.
 - Parenting classes and counseling services may not be appropriate or necessary for all parents.

Case law considering tailored case plans in the context of reasonable services was reviewed and discussed by the Committee. In *Tracy J. v. San Diego County*, (2012) 202 Cal.App.4th 1415, the appellate court concluded that the parents, who were developmentally disabled, did not receive reasonable family reunification services. Despite positive reports from professionals about the parents' devotion to the child and to his safety, the department unreasonably limited visitation. The court stated “harm to a child cannot be presumed from the mere fact a parent is developmentally disabled. The Agency may not limit a developmentally disabled parent’s visitation in the absence of evidence showing the parent’s behavior has jeopardized or will jeopardize the child’s safety, and it cannot impede the progression of visitation services to a parent solely out of concerns about the parent’s mental health status.”

The appellate court in *In re Precious J.*, (1996) 42 Cal.App.4th 1463 held that reunification services were inadequate because they did not address the main problem that led to the dependency, namely mother's pattern of engaging in petty thefts. The case plan should have included counseling, vocational training, and other services to help mother overcome this problem. Reunification services were also inadequate in that the agency failed to arrange visits. County agencies must provide reasonable visitation even if parent’s incarceration makes visitation difficult.

Recommendations

- California Department of Social Services in collaboration with the County Welfare Directors Association of California and the Administrative Office of the Courts review the case plan practices and policies for social workers and probation officers and create a check list for juvenile court stakeholders to review when preparing or ordering a case plan to ensure that the case plan is culturally responsive, identifies and builds on each family’s unique strengths, and is targeted to meet each family’s individual needs.

Theory of Change #4

Services and support provided to the reunified family increase the likelihood that children do not reenter the foster care system.

Observations

The Committee received a brief report on the *Models of Reunification Service Delivery* study (hereafter: Study) performed through San Jose State University and funded by CalSWEC.

The Study was a follow up to earlier research that examined the number of services a parent must complete for reunification. On average, a parent with a substance abuse problem is required to participate in about 7-9 services per week, and many of these services require attendance at meetings more than one time per week. For parents who do not have substance abuse problems, they are, on average, required to participate in 4 services per week.

The follow-up Study was designed to determine if the number and types of services increased the frequency of reunification and reduced reentry. For the Study:

- 58 counties were surveyed regarding reunification interventions and strategies.
- Surveys were completed by the child welfare manager or appropriate staff.
- Qualitative interviews were conducted with stakeholders in four counties.
- Four service approaches were identified: Supportive, Assessing, Linking and Access-Easing.
 - Supportive approach included:
 - Additional aftercare services beyond Family Maintenance provided,
 - Parents Anonymous® available¹³,
 - Parent partner or parent mentor programs available¹⁴,
 - WrapAround services provided,
 - Additional case manager through drug court,
 - Family Team Meetings and Ice Breaker Meetings.
 - Assessing
 - Formal needs assessment done
 - Formal reunification assessment done

¹³ Please see Appendix I for more information on Parents Anonymous® (www.parentsanonymous.org) and the new National Certification of Parent Leaders and scientific rating of their Parent Partner Program in Child Welfare: <http://www.cebc4cw.org/program/parents-anonymous/>.

¹⁴ Parent Advocacy statewide: <http://parentsanonymous.org/assets/Parent-Partners-in-Child-Welfare-2009.pdf> and https://strengthening-families.org/parentadvocacy/padocs/CPEC_Data_Summary_Report.pdf

- Visitation used as an assessment opportunity (therapeutic visitation)
- Children assessed for the likelihood of reunification at entry to care
- Linking
 - County has LINKAGES program
 - Service providers attend DDC hearings
 - Service providers coordinate efforts via DDC
 - Service liaisons provided
- “Access-Easing” services included:
 - Counties using intensive family reunification services,
 - Services available at Dependency Drug Court
 - CPS clients have priority status.

Researchers found that while none of the Supportive approaches improved reunification rates within 18 months; they did have a positive impact on rates of reentry into care. Indeed, utilization of 4 or more of the Supportive Interventions in each case was associated with reduced reentry rates.

Additionally, utilization of any one of the Access-Easing approaches was associated with reduced reentry rates, while services that required more contacts with the court (e.g., Dependency Drug Court) and with service providers (e.g., intensive family reunification services) also led to reduced rates of reentry.

Researchers did not comment on any findings regarding the linkage or assessing strategies.

Recommendations

- The Committee will request that the California Evidence Based Clearinghouse develop a central online resource for research and best practice models of activities that have been successful in increasing reunification and reducing reentry.
- The Committee will seek endorsement by the Child Welfare Council for additional Dependency Drug Treatment Courts and for the increase, expansion and sustainability of collaborative courts by documenting the savings of these courts and the reinvestment of county and realignment dollars.

Theory of Change #5

Resources to support permanency are enhanced by strategic investment and reinvestment in programs that reduce costs by achieving permanency for youth in foster care and shortening time to permanency for children entering foster care.

Observations:

Best practice specialty courts and youth permanency services improve reunification outcomes. By improving reunification outcomes in a timely manner, children and youth spend less time in foster care and, as a result, the county saves resources. The bottom line is simple: Specialty courts and specialized youth permanency services are good for families and fiscally prudent. It can be argued that we have a moral and fiscal imperative to provide these services to youth who we have removed from their birth families.

Although the number of California children in foster care has fallen dramatically,¹⁵ the number of youth aging out without families has ranged from approximately 3400 in 1998 to a high of 5600 in 2009 to 5000 in 2010, the last year before implementation of Extended Foster Care.

Studies have shown that youth who emancipate from the foster care system without families are at high risk for poor outcomes:

- 25% of former foster youth will be incarcerated within the first 2 years of emancipation.¹⁶
- Within 18 months of emancipation 40-50% of foster youth become homeless.¹⁷
- In 2006, “[m]ore than one in three (37.7%) [of a sample of former foster youth aged 19-25] were living below the household poverty line.”¹⁸

*Documenting Savings:*¹⁹

Specialized youth permanency projects in seven counties received federal Adoption Opportunities 5-year grants and/or state-funded Older Child Adoption Contracts bringing in

¹⁵ From 108,000 in 1998 to 55,000 as of Oct 1, 2013

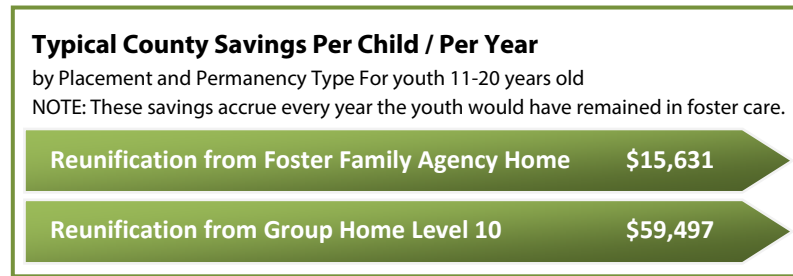
¹⁶ *Foster Youth Transitions to Adulthood: Outcomes 12 to 18 Months after Leaving Out-of-Home Care*, University of Wisconsin Courtney, Mark, Chapin, Hall Center for Children at the University of Chicago (2004).

¹⁷ The League of Women Voters of California Education Fund, *Juvenile Justice in California Part II: Dependency Systems* (July 1998) Chapter VI: Life After Foster Care.

¹⁸ Anne Havalchak, et al., *Casey Family Programs Young Adult Survey 2006: Examining Outcomes for Young Adults Served in Out-of-Home Care* (Casey Family Programs 2007).

¹⁹ Please see Appendix II for more information on savings reinvestment for other placement types.

\$30,000,000 in start-up funding to California. Five²⁰ of these counties used collaborations with direct service providers to achieve significant cost-savings and permanency outcomes.



The proposal for the federally-funded Destination Family Youth Permanency Project in Sacramento and Nevada Counties addressed the issue of future funding by the counties committing to reinvest savings achieved by moving youth from foster care placements – with their attendant care, supervision, court and casework expenses – to legally permanent families. Per child savings were meticulously tracked. Nevada County began reinvesting prior to the sunset of federal funding. Sacramento began reinvesting later. Both counties have been able to sustain their programs at no net cost to the counties. Sacramento County is now exploring a plan to expand the services with reinvested funds with strong support from the Board of Supervisors.

Leveraging savings:

Since many of the permanency practices are clinical in nature, they are Medi-Cal reimbursable for youth who meet medical necessity criteria. All California children in foster care are statutorily eligible for full scope Medi-Cal benefits, including EPSDT, with federal financial participation covering 50% of the cost. Treatment services that effectively address mental health conditions that stand in the way of a youth achieving permanence can significantly reduce foster care costs for counties and free up re-investment dollars.

Recommendations:

- The California Department of Social Services, working with the County Welfare Directors Association of California, take the lead in providing technical assistance to all counties in order to facilitate leveraged reinvestment of savings achieved by moving youth and children with delayed permanency into safe reunification.

²⁰ Sacramento & Nevada Counties partnered with Sierra Forever Families, San Francisco County partnered with Familybuilders, and counties served by the CDSS partnered with the CDSS Sacramento District Office

CONCLUSION

Foster care was never intended to be a permanent condition of childhood. When we remove children from their parents for their safety, we have a moral and legal obligation to do everything possible to return them safely home or, barring that, find an alternative permanent home.

The Permanency Committee's focus on reunification in this report reflects our understanding that whenever possible children should be raised by their birth parents and we are obliged to help those parents meet the challenges and overcome the obstacles that may hinder their capacity to safely care for their children. To that end, the Committee has explored a number of successful practices in California and developed recommendations about ways to improve reunification outcomes, lower rates of children re-entering foster care after returning to their parents, and maximize fiscal resources for effective services that create alternative families for children and youth least-likely to achieve permanence.

California has made significant strides over the last ten years in reducing the number of children in foster care, primarily by lowering the number of children who enter then moving them out of care more quickly. By replicating successful programs, services and interventions and applying them in counties throughout the state, we have the opportunity to further reduce the number of children in foster care by increasing the capacity of parents to safely care for their own children.