

***Lifelong Connections:* Every Youth Deserves a Family**

JAMES D. DYER

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The child welfare system does a good job overall at providing protection, safety, housing, nourishment, training and therapy for youth. Even though youth are provided essential resources—such as shelter, life skills training and counseling—child welfare services do not systematically link youth to family members or significant lifelong connections that will become their support system after emancipation from foster care. Once youth emancipate from the system they are essentially set adrift, some losing everything they have ever known, and are expected to participate and function in mainstream society, even if they do not have the emotional well-being and skills necessary to cope with everyday requirements and challenges.

In 2006 Sonoma County began implementing its *Lifelong Connections* program in effort to strengthen youth's support systems as they approach emancipation from and aging out of the child welfare system. The core strategies of this program are derived from Catholic Charities of Washington Family Finding model, which directly addresses the critical need of achieving lifelong permanent adult connections for youth in foster care.

Findings

Sonoma County fashioned a multi-phase implementation plan which included a six-step family finding process, intersecting with a whole host of programs and agencies. The Lifelong Connection program was initially funded by a small grant through the Child Welfare Services Program Improvement Fund. To more fully integrate the Lifelong Connections practices into department policy and procedures, a permanent full-time employee was eventually factored into the local budget. Travel allowances for youth to go and meet family members to potentially develop connections are drawn from Dependent of the Court funds. Sonoma County has been successful using its Lifelong Connections program to connect fifty youth with family or significant individuals that would not have occurred otherwise.

Recommendations

Santa Cruz County's Roots and Wings initiative offers an opportunity to integrate some of Lifelong Connections' program elements into local practices. Suggested elements for incorporation include:

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- Integrate Lifelong Connections into the Roots and Wings initiative to expand permanency outcomes, including building relationships and connections with family/significant adults if placement does not take place
- Implement Lifelong Connections techniques and practices into the contracted service position roles, *Permanency Partners*, to enhance possibilities of adoption.
- Establish youth focus groups to include perspective of current youth in foster care.
- Promote integration of contracted positions by assuring all staff fully understands what the contracted roles are set up to accomplish, how it will be carried out and how staff directly impact the initiative.
- Clearly establish collaborative partnership through inclusion of contracted positions to strategic, formal and informal meetings at all levels.
- Disseminate to appropriate players progress of the initiative on a monthly basis to vanguard the initiative.
- Investigate all social media networks such as Twitter, YouTube, LinkedIn, Facebook, etc., as viable tools to make use of greater networkability.

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Background

As a result of the Adoptions and Safe Family Act of 1997 that requires states to develop and implement outcome measures, in recent years more studies are taking a closer look at the emotional well-being of youth in foster care. Sonoma County, like most other counties around the nation, is concerned with the emotional well-being of children within its foster care system.

In 2006, Sonoma County began implementing its *Lifelong Connections* program in effort to strengthen youth's support systems as they approach emancipation from, and aging out, of the child welfare system. Although permanency, reunification, a legal adoption, or guardianship may be a possibility, Lifelong Connections' primary focus is more on permanent adult connections than it is on placement. The core of these strategies are derived from the Catholic Charities of Washington Family Finding model and are promoted by the California Permanency for Youth Project (CPYP), which directly addresses the critical need of achieving lifelong, permanent adult connections for youth in foster care. The purpose of this case study was to visit Sonoma County and learn from its Lifelong Connections model and identify through records review and interviews any practices that may be utilized in Santa Cruz County's effort to improve placement outcomes for children in the child welfare system who experience negative permanency outcomes.

Family Finding and California Permanency for Youth Project (CPYP)

The Family Finding model is a systematic framework for tracking down and connecting children in foster care with their family members. In 2006, Fam-

ily Finding was featured on a *60 Minutes* segment titled "The Loneliest People." The segment featured family members, sometimes living in the same community, who were completely unaware a child in the family had even entered foster care. The objective of the Family Finding model is to link each child with "life long connections that only a family can offer." The process begins with identifying and locating family members through techniques such as searching through paper and electronic case files, internet searches and engaging youth themselves in providing family information.

The Family Finding model has been tried and proved successful many times over and is currently being practiced by numerous organizations throughout the United States and Canada. One organization in particular, The California Permanency for Youth Project—which began as a grant project out of the Public Health Institute and is currently funded by the Stuart Foundation—supports the Family Finding model by solely focusing on supporting participating counties in California through providing training along with technical guidance and resources to implement the model's practices. On its website, CPYP defines permanency as:

- A safe, stable and secure parenting relationship
- Love
- Unconditional commitment
- Lifelong support in the context of reunification, a legal adoption, or guardianship, where possible, and in which the youth has the opportunity to maintain contacts with important persons including brothers and sisters

Both Family Finding and CPYP operate on the same inherent principals in that (1) every child has a family, (2) loneliness can be devastating and par-

ticularly felt by foster children, (3) meaningful connections to family help a child develop a sense of belonging, and (4) the single most frequently identified factor contributing to positive outcomes for children involves meaningful connections and lifelong relationships with family.

A Look at Implementation and Challenges

Sonoma County began developing its Lifelong Connections program in 2005 out of an interest in creating a process that focused on systematically searching for permanent lifelong connections as part of general caseload practice. In meeting with Mignon Evans, the analyst working on the program development plan at the time, he explained that the “program plan was laid out in to two phases.” Phase-One contained six development and implementation steps including:

Step 1 Identifying the program target youth population and program key players, celebrating successes and providing program data reports.

Step 2 Implementing the Lifelong Connections program into all aspects foster care case management.

Step 3 Developing and implementing administrative policies and procedures to embed the program as department practice and policy.

Step 4 Training of staff and all collaborators (i.e., foster parents, group homes, adoption agencies, foster care agencies, court associated personnel, etc.), on the program and desired outcomes.

Step 5 Integrating with other initiatives to support cross-initiative outcomes.

Step 6 Identifying a collaborative community partner which will partner directly with county agencies to achieve the desired outcomes.

During Phase-One, the program’s vision and mission statements were established along with an overall project plan description categorizing current placement demographics and identifying desired program development by December 2006. A full internal audit of their foster care practices was conducted, identifying program demographics to gain a clear picture of their foster care population.

The September 2005 audit indicated that Sonoma County overall had 530 children in substitute care, of which 354 were in permanent placement. 160 children were already in Non-Related Extended Family Member (NREFM) or relative homes, 281 were in foster homes or foster family agencies, and 89 were in group homes. The average age of children in group homes was 12.5 years. Furthermore, for the first six months of 2005 the number of youth 15½ years of age or older who were in foster care remained steady at between 111 and 119. The then-current practices included three scheduled planning meetings each year with each youth, along with an annual review by the California State Adoptions Bureau. Independent Living Program (ILP) activities were offered to all eligible youth. Youth in permanent placement were consulted regularly regarding their desired plans for the future and were encouraged to utilize any programs that would teach them skills for living independently upon emancipation.

Phase-Two, the assessment phase, began in 2007 when the program looked at its overall policies, procedures, and outcomes. The process identified successes, challenges and even surprises. Some successes to note: community partners were quickly engaged; ILP social workers were fully engaged and attendance rates were high at meetings—all indicating an overall strong sense of commitment. Nick Honey, Family Youth and Children’s Division Director, asserts that much of the program successes “have been attributed to the absolute commitment by staff and management at all levels in the division and department to fully support and integrate the program.” Further, Fredrick Jones, the supervisor responsible for managing the program, attributes much of their successes on the frontline to “educating staff, community partners, families, and the youth of what Lifelong Connections is all about and why it is important to the community and most importantly, to youth.”

Successes do not come without challenges. Phase-Two unearthed challenges such as territorial issues sometimes arising with staff and community partners as Lifelong Connections intersects with a whole host of programs and agencies. Karen McClure, a

social worker solely assigned to Lifelong Connections, said that fear is a real factor when working with both staff and community partners. Staff were slow to embrace the systematic approach to locating family members of youth out of fear that it would increase their already heavy workload. Ms. McClure was quick to point out that it is something they had already been attempting but without a structured approach. Slowly, case-carrying social workers began taking on more functions of the structured approach as they began seeing the results realized for youth in cultivating these connections. An additional aid to acceptance was the unanticipated discovery that some youth already had informal connections that were not explicitly known.

Territorial issues also arose as some community partners did not fully understand the Lifelong Connections program and feared that children would be getting hurt through disappointment or that they would experience disruption to their emotional stability by creating false hopes. Ms. McClure noted that relationships with community partners have been strengthened by focusing on collaboration and by reaffirming the importance in life of forming vital adult lifelong connections as the focused outcome.

Program Highlights

Sonoma County's Lifelong Connections program is youth-centered in that it involves the youth in decisions which may lead to connections. The program focuses on children 13 years of age and older who have few or no connections. The desired target for the "connection" is that of relative or non-relative family members and/or significant individuals who may offer youth permanent connections. The Sonoma County permanency process, modeled after the CPYP model, initiates the following extensive six-step process as soon as a referral has been received from a case carrying social worker:

- 1 **Setting the Stage** prepares the youth for participating in the permanency journey, which often times may take years to accomplish. Conversations are facilitated with all professional and agency staff to discuss permanency goals and safety and to educate the team on the significant need for lifelong connections.
- 2 **Discovery** engages the process of conversations with the youth and searching through the case files, mining cases and searching the internet to begin building a list of people who are important to them.
- 3 **Engagement** starts off a review and evaluation process of all possible adult connections where the team assesses what type relationship the youth and adult are willing to have with each other and if it is realistic.
- 4 **Exploration and Planning** prepares the youth and family/significant adult connections for future visits to hopefully begin building a relationship. This step is critical in that it establishes 'real life' expectations. In addition to planning for engaging with the family member, this step also provides the youth the opportunity to meet with a therapist after the meeting to process his/her feelings. This step is repeated before and after each visit.
- 5 **Decision Making and Evaluation** provides the family/significant member support in making decisions about his/her future commitment. At this stage the connection between youth and family/significant adult begins to strengthen with less assistance from the agency.
- 6 **Sustaining the Relationship** develops a plan to support the youth and adult's connection commitment and begin to organize the necessary resources to maintain permanency.

At the time of referral, the Lifelong Connections social worker also begins to put together a "where you've been" binder for the youth. The binder consists of a family tree, photos, report cards, special notes or cards or anything that begins to build a background and a sense of belonging for the youth. Some youth, for a variety of reasons, simply do not know their family history or background and struggle with a sense of purpose or belonging in life. In some cases this binder has really motivated the youth to vigorously participate in establishing permanent lifelong connections for themselves.

Program Funding

The Lifelong Connection Pilot Program, which included hiring a part-time extra-help Permanency Specialist, was funded by a small grant through the Child Welfare Services Program Improvement Fund. To more fully integrate the Lifelong Connections practices into department policy and procedures, a permanent full-time employee position with full benefits was eventually created and factored into the department budget.

Travel expenses to enable youth to travel to meet family members/significant adults are another large draw on budget resources. These include airfare, hotel, meals and transportation and are drawn from Dependent of the Court funds.

Conclusion

The child welfare system overall does a good job at providing protection, safety, housing, nourishment, training and therapy for youth. Even though youth are provided essential resources, child welfare services do not systematically link youth to family members or significant lifelong connections that will become their support system after emancipation from the system. Once youth emancipate from the system, they are essentially set adrift and expected to participate and function in mainstream society, even if they do not have the emotional well-being and skills necessary to cope with everyday requirements and challenges. Emotional skills are not just learned but require practice. Programs that connect youth to permanent adult relationships allow for this emotional practice and lead participating youth to have a much higher chance of succeeding in everyday life. It is important to our communities, and more importantly to our youth, that programs such as Lifelong Connections practiced in Sonoma County be looked at to help youth learn emotional skills.

Since 2006, three hundred connections have been identified for the targeted youth in Sonoma County. Of these, fifty have established permanent connections that likely would not otherwise have taken place. Undeniably, these are real successes for real people. These are successes that not only posi-

tively impact the youth but positively impact our communities as a whole.

Recommendations

The case study of Sonoma County's Lifelong Connections provided numerous insights to practices and policies that can potentially be implemented in Santa Cruz to achieve desired outcomes. In October 2008, the County of Santa Cruz was awarded a five-year grant from the Administration for Children and Families (AFC) entitled *Roots & Wings: Finding Permanent Homes for Foster Youth*. This project has four key initiatives: (1) Building Community Partners (2) Resource Development & Support (3) Evaluation of Implementation, and (4) Team Decision-Making.

As part of the *Roots & Wings* Initiative, four contracted Permanency Partners service positions will be created and will be given the responsibility of conducting outreach, recruitment and permanency activities. By implementing Lifelong Connections practices into these roles, Santa Cruz County's *Roots & Wings* initiative will be enhanced by directly addressing youth's emotional well-being and better preparing them for adult life after emancipation from the foster care system. Recommendations include:

- Integrate program practices like Lifelong Connections to expand potential permanency outcomes to include building relationships with family/significant adults if placement does not take place.
- Implement Lifelong Connections techniques and practices into the *Permanency Partner* role to enhance possibilities of adoption.
- Establish one or more youth focus groups to include perspective of youth who are currently within the system.
- Promote integration of contracted positions by assuring all staff fully understand what the contracted roles are set up to accomplish, how it will be carried out and how staff directly impact the initiative.
- Clearly establish collaborative partnership through inclusion of contracted positions to strategic, formal and informal meetings at all levels.

- Disseminate to appropriate players progress of the initiative on a monthly basis to vanguard the initiative.
- Investigate all the social media networks, such as Twitter, YouTube, LinkedIn, Facebook, etc., as viable tools to make use of greater networkability.

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