

Stanislaus County's Connected for Life Project: Forging Lifelong Connections

FREDERICK JONES

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Introduction

"Foster-ness

The feeling of not quite being in solid.

The sense of noncommitment.

The state of temporary."

—Charlotte Ayanna, author, former Miss Teen USA,
actress, former foster youth. From her book
"Lost in the System."

The California Permanency for Youth Project (C.P.Y.P.), using intense family searching techniques created by Kevin Campbell, is creating a positive groundswell in the practice of child welfare. Through a series of search strategies, such as case mining, internet searches, and interviewing youth, it has been found that youth who formerly thought that they had no connections often discovered that they had many relatives they did not know existed.

There are many stories now that tell of the hope that has been brought into the lives of youth because of the ability to find relatives and make permanent lifelong connections for youth. One such story: A 17 year old girl (I will call Mary) had been in foster care for 12 years. She knew of no relatives. She was close to "aging out of the system" and was feeling scared. Her social worker referred her for a Lifelong Connections Search. Kevin Campbell was providing training in Mary's county. Mary remembered her grandmother's name and thought she lived in Oklahoma. Campbell did an internet search and located a person with the right name in the right location. He then phoned the number and an astonished and tearful grandmother said she had not known where her granddaughter had been for all those years. Four hours later Mary was on the phone with her "Nana."

Mary now lives with her grandmother, attends junior college, and has a job.

Stanislaus County has been involved in the "Connected for Life Project" since 2003. My county, Sonoma County, started planning in July 2005 and began the practice phase in January 2006. Stanislaus County graciously allowed me to study its implementation.

Findings

- This is a "youth driven" project.
- The project is about "connection" not "placement."
- It needs a clear sense of "mission."
- It takes community partnership.
- Data tracking is important.
- There is enormous importance in knowing how to talk with youth about permanency.
- Talk about successes helps.
- Ongoing trainings are important.

Recommendations

- Form a Youth Advisory Group
- Form a team and build champions
- Whenever permanency is a subject in a meeting, discuss connections for life
- Commit to tracking data
- Consider a teen unit
- Add a Lifelong Connections Court Report Section
- Commit to continued training
- Commit to a vision statement

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Introduction

Stanislaus County has been on the cutting edge of implementing innovative and promising child welfare practices for a long time. One such innovation is the Connected for Life Permanency Project. Stanislaus County was one of four California counties that started working with the California Permanency for Youth Project (C.P.Y.P.) in 2003. Sonoma County started working with the C.P.Y.P. in July 2005 and began the active practice phase in January 2006. It is the purpose of this case study to look at how Stanislaus County has implemented its Connected for Life Permanency Project and to learn from their experience.

The California Permanency for Youth Project

The California Permanency For Youth Project (C.P.Y.P.) has the goal of achieving life-long permanent adult connections for youth in foster care. There is also an objective to make child welfare workers, administrators, other professionals in the field, lawmakers and the courts aware of the huge impact that permanent lifelong connections can have on the life of a foster youth. A third objective is to involve the foster youth in all choices that are made regarding placement options and potential permanent connections. A fourth objective is to foster an atmosphere in which both public and private sector partners develop a sense of urgency regarding permanence for older youth.

C.P.Y.P. provides technical assistance and training to counties which are participating in the project. A key component of the training is learning the concept of "Family Finding." Kevin Campbell, the

creator of the "Family Finding" program, offers intense training in the techniques he has developed.

Family Finding is a set of "people-discovering" strategies with great potential to help connect foster youth with relatives and other significant adults who can offer them, in some cases, permanent homes, or at least make them aware that there is an adult willing to commit to being a lifelong connection.

Techniques used in family finding include database searches, "case mining," searching old files for names of potential connections, and focused discussions with youth about what persons they know in their lives who they would like to keep as connections.

A History of Stanislaus County's Implementation

Stanislaus County started the project with this clear goal: "All youth will leave foster care with a lifelong family connection they have participated in identifying and/or developing."

The target population they chose was youth 14 and older who had been in long-term foster care.

- The county identified three key system changes:
- It placed a strong value on supporting youth's relationships with significant adults. It viewed this as a way of broadening their perspective beyond the usual placement resources, bringing a wider supportive network into a child's life.
 - It established a Youth Advisory Council and invited the youth to give their perspectives about how the agency might change permanency practices.
 - It strongly emphasized the importance of having youth involved in their own permanency planning.

A Chronology

June 2003: The Department's Children's System of Care Coordinator agreed to be a project lead. A group of 17 Mental Health staff were already co-located in the Child Welfare Service (CWS) office. They worked with youth to help delve into their permanency needs.

July 2003: They developed a "Permanency Specialist" position. This is a non-case carrying social worker who talks with youth, mines files and searches for connections.

August 2003: There was a project kick-off retreat for 15 youth and staff. The youth named the project "Connected for Life" and continued to meet monthly as the Youth Advisory Board.

September 2003: A unit of Permanency Planning workers was given the charge to "eat, sleep and breathe" new permanency practices. The Independent Living Program staff were attached to this unit. They were viewed as key members of the Connected for Life Team.

November 2003: All youth 14 or older in long-term care were placed on several dedicated case-loads.

December 2003: CWS staff, parents, caregivers and other partners spent a day with Pat O'Brien, a nationally known speaker, who is powerfully motivational on the subject of permanency.

February 2004: The Youth Advisory Group addressed ways to have Connected for Life meetings in which "Agreements to Maintain Contact" with important connections could be formalized.

April 2004: The mental health group decided it was time to expand its horizons. Members widened their vision to include all current and recently emancipated foster youth. They began to identify, document and maintain youth connections from the inception of each case.

May 2004: They visited Foster Family Agencies (FFA's) to communicate about permanency "values and vision" and explore outcomes for the youth placed with FFA's. This effort was seen as valuable but proved to be a strain on resources.

June 2004: A Permanency Specialist was assigned to work with Emergency Response staff to identify relatives and other important connections and to do search work before, during and after removal Team Decision Making meetings.

July 2004: They started getting CMS/CWS special projects indicators to help them keep track of connections: The two indicators are:

- 1 "Connected for Life- Informal" (which means a verbal commitment has been made to a social worker or youth).
- 2 "Connected for Life—Placement" (when the placement is the child's lifelong connection).

The indicators also let project managers know when there is a youth who does not have a connection.

September 2004: One of the Department's Information Technology Analysts was so moved by the "Connected for Life Project" that she volunteered to become involved by sharing her internet search expertise. She now works with the Permanency Specialist. They have been designated the "Youth Connections Search Team."

The analyst has subsequently developed a database which is used for tracking and storing connections.

January to May 2005: Kevin Campbell visited six times to train, give technical assistance, and to inspire. Kevin is relentless in a very positive way about finding lifelong connections.

Program Components

EMERGENCY CONNECTED FOR LIFE

PERMANENCY TEAM MEETINGS:

When a youth cannot reunify, be adopted or enter a guardianship, or when an adoption or guardianship has been disrupted, emergency permanency planning efforts are initiated. An Emergency Connected for Life Permanency Team meeting will be scheduled. The meetings are as youth driven as possible.

During the meetings, it is the intent to engage the youth in their own permanency planning and to provide a coordinated team effort towards permanency. Attendees include:

- 1 The youth (if willing)
- 2 Participants identified by the youth (may be birth parents, lifelong connections, supporters or advocates)
- 3 Case managing social worker
- 4 Social worker's supervisor or manager
- 5 A permanency specialist
- 6 A social worker or manager from the adoptions unit
- 7 The youth's therapist
- 8 An Independent Living Program (ILP) representative if the youth is over 16

JOINT ASSESSMENT MEETINGS (JAM):

JAM meets weekly to search for concurrent homes, for children in foster care. If there are no relatives or prospective adoptive homes, the placement worker will initiate discussions with relatives or non-related extended family members. If those persons indicate that they are not interested in placement, the placement worker will open a dialogue with them to see if they are interested in maintaining contact with the child or in making a commitment to becoming a lifelong connection. JAM oversees this process to ensure that it is happening for every child.

CONNECTED FOR LIFE MEETINGS:

Lifelong connections are discussed during the first Transitional Independent Living Program meeting and annually thereafter with all youth 15½ to 18. This is an effort to ensure that youth have a lifelong connection and that their connection is aware of and assisting the youth with transition issues.

INTERAGENCY PLACEMENT COMMITTEE:

The Interagency Placement Committee is a collaborative consisting of Child Welfare, Mental Health, Probation, and Education representatives. They meet bi-weekly to review high level placements of youth in Intensive Treatment Foster Care or Group Homes. When the Connected for Life Permanency Project was initiated a permanency worker started attending the meetings to address permanency and lifelong connections for high level youth.

FUNDING:

There was no new funding for the project. The positions were created as part of the overall Child Welfare Redesign process.

YOUTH CONNECTIONS SEARCH STATISTICS:

February 2005–February 2006

- Number of Cases with Search Conducted—194
- Number of Foster Youth Represented—317
- Number of Connections Identified—3,879
- Average Connections per Case—20 (in addition to previously known relatives)

DATA AND OUTCOMES:

In September 2005 the Department's target population was 89 youth, age 14 and older, in Long-Term Foster Care (12 were in group home care).

They included:

- 79 youth (88%) have established connections (12 in group home care)
- Only 30 of these 79 youth required a search to identify their connections (38%).
- 53 (67%) have informal "Connected for Life" commitments.
- 26 (32%) have formal "Connected for Life" placements.

Lessons Learned

This is a "youth driven" project. In Stanislaus County one of the first steps was to form a Youth Advisory Group. The advisory group named the project, "Connected for Life Project." The group meets without adults. It was felt that youth feel less autonomous and are less likely to talk openly among adults. ILP staff are available to consult with the group as needed. Youth are well-positioned to talk to their peers about permanency and connection. Youth are very much in the forefront of their own planning for permanence, and they are responsible for doing their part in maintaining the connections.

It is not about placement. It is the philosophy in Stanislaus County that permanency begins with the relationship not placement and that having a sense of "emotional permanency" is a basic need. The sys-

tem's focus on "legal permanency" and placement is strengthened by a practice focus on "permanent relationships." The county views finding a lifelong connection just as much of a "win" as finding a placement.

The team approach is important. It has been a key belief in implementation that all the significant "players" in a youth's permanency need to be involved. This includes CWS staff, Mental Health, F.F.A. and Group Home Staff, attorneys and the court, Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA), education staff, ILP staff and other professionals. This approach enables CWS staff to give information about the projects and to get invaluable suggestions and input.

The importance of widening the discussion should be recognized. Stanislaus County has made a commitment to discussing Lifelong Connections in all meetings where permanency is a topic and in annual Adoptability Assessments. The department has written policies and procedures to formalize this process.

It is not always about searching. In the Data and Outcomes section above it was indicated that only 38% of youth who had connections found them through searching. The rest were able to identify relatives and other important people in conversations with social workers, caregivers and others.

Data are valuable. Stanislaus County has recognized the importance of keeping track of who does and who does not have a connection. They have done this through CWS/CMS. The Department's Information Technology Analyst has developed a database that enables the department to keep track of each youth's prospective connections.

There is a need for "champions." This is an extremely exciting and important concept. However, there is some resistance on the part of social workers because of the added work it can entail. Having "champions" at all levels and in the community has been an important part of "getting the word out" and "keeping the flame burning." The enthusiasm and commitment of the "champions" fan the interest of other social workers and community partners

and make it part of the culture. In Stanislaus County, the social workers and managers that I interviewed acknowledged that facilitating Lifelong Connections is added work. However, those who had experience working with Lifelong Connections viewed the project very positively. I would attribute that positive attitude to three factors:

- 1 This is a "best practice" that can have a huge positive impact on outcomes for our youth.
- 2 When they have a success, it is not kept a secret.
- 3 The department continues to have trainings, review data, and supervise staff regarding their Lifelong Connections work, progress and outcomes over time.

Implications for Sonoma County

Sonoma County is a "second cohort" county in the California Permanency for Project. It receives technical assistance from C.P.Y.P. which includes six monthly trainings with Kevin Campbell. Additionally, the county receives a State Child Welfare Services Improvement Outcome Program Grant which enabled it to hire a half-time social worker and a half-time senior office assistant to work on the project. The grant is funding Lifelong Connections from January through June of 2006. The county will be applying for additional grant monies to allow continuation of these two positions. If grant monies are not continued beyond June 2006, it will be in a difficult position and I would then advocate that the county explore the reorganization of some other positions, so that it will be able to move ahead with Lifelong Connections for Sonoma County's youth and children.

Lean budget times will make full implementation somewhat challenging. However, I feel that this is such an important opportunity to improve the county's youth's outcomes that it must make every effort to find the resources needed to move ahead. This is a commitment to the county's children and youth that is an opportunity to align "best practice" with both federal and state outcome goals, as well as its Systems Improvement Plan.

Recommendations/Progress

Since Sonoma County has already begun working on the Lifelong Connections Project, some of my recommendations are already being implemented.

They include:

- 1 Forming a Youth Advisory Group. We have started meeting with ILP and Santa Rosa Junior College staff to plan a “kick off event.” From this event we hope to form a Youth Advisory Group.
- 2 Forming a team and building champions. We started a Steering Committee in January with two supervisors, two social workers, a planner analyst, a manager and our consultant from C.P.Y.P. There are now F.F.A. and Group Home Directors, our Educational Liaison, ILP staff, CASA's, Children's Home and Mental Health staff, Children's Attorney and California State Adoptions staff.
- 3 Making a commitment to making Lifelong Connections part of the discussion whenever meetings involve permanency. This would include Concurrent Planning and Adoptions reviews as well as unit meetings and supervision conferences.
- 4 Adding a Lifelong Connections section to Permanency Planning Court Reports.
- 5 Committing to tracking our data. Currently C.P.Y.P. is tracking data on 12 youth, for C.P.Y.P. evaluation purposes. As the project expands it will be important for us to know and understand our data. This will be especially vital to showing positive outcomes when we are seeking continuing or new sources of funding.
- 6 Considering the formation of a Permanency Planning Teen Unit that would include Connected for Life workers and the ILP staff.
- 7 Committing to continue training on Connections for Life. It will be important to keep a focus on the importance of finding permanent lifelong connections and to keep the excitement going.
- 8 Committing to our Vision Statement: Every child in permanent placement in Sonoma County will leave foster care with a lifelong connection.

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