

EVAN B. DONALDSON

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***NEVER TOO OLD:
ACHIEVING PERMANENCY AND SUSTAINING
CONNECTIONS FOR OLDER YOUTH IN FOSTER CARE***

Policy and Practice Perspective

July 2011

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Executive Summary

Just a few weeks ago, on July 4, America again celebrated its independence. The very word “independence” evokes almost exclusively positive images and sentiments worthy of celebration: the freedom to be who one chooses, the ability to carve one’s own path, the right to determine one’s own destiny. For one group of people in our country, however, independence seldom affords any of those opportunities. Indeed, the youth who “age out” of foster care – legally emancipated to make it on their own, but usually without enduring families to sustain or support them – frequently find the road they’re traveling leads to nowhere. In disproportionate numbers, they wind up pregnant, on the street, out of school, or in jail.

State governments typically take custody of these boys and girls as children because they were being abused or neglected, with the implicit promise that they will be given safer and better lives. But too many wind up being moved from home to home, from school to school. Too many are never returned to their original families or adopted into new ones, are never connected with adults who stick with them and guide them, and are never provided with the developmental, emotional and social benefits that are best achieved through permanency. And then, when they reach the age of 18 or 21, they are granted their independence.

A growing number of innovative efforts have been made to assist these youth over recent years through programs launched in various states, including by Casey Family Programs, Casey Family Services, the Annie E. Casey Foundation, the Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative, Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption, Freddie Mac Foundation and others, and through grants funded by the U.S. Children’s Bureau. Indeed, thanks to the leadership and commitment of many child welfare organizations and researchers, inroads have been made in some locales and broad policy reforms have been instituted, notably including the landmark Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008.

While many individuals and families have been helped by such efforts, however, they have not generated sufficient public, private or media attention to elevate “aging out” into a national priority. The bottom line is that the child welfare system is still not adequately, systemically meeting the needs of older youth, as evidenced by the increasing proportion of them who emancipate each year without permanency.

The Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute, starting with the publication of “Never Too Old” and with next steps with partner organizations, seeks to help reshape that reality. This report is the result of over a year of research and analysis, and it constitutes the most up-to-date compilation of knowledge on the numerous facets of this important issue. It builds on the body of work of other researchers, policy-makers and organizations; it synthesizes the current state of knowledge on achieving permanency for older youth in care; it highlights best practices that exist around the country; and it identifies future directions for better serving these young people.

In keeping with the Institute’s focus on permanency for all children, this report looks not just at adoption, but at all the effective approaches being considered today for achieving lasting connections. Our near-term objective is to broaden understanding of this critical issue by the public, professionals and policymakers and to provide an up-to-date, evidence-based perspective on how we, as a society, can do a better job of serving older youth in foster care who need enduring families to sustain and support them. Our ultimate goal, of course, is more ambitious: It is to raise the profile of and knowledge about this issue to a new level and, in so

doing, improve the lives of tens of thousands of young people every year. Not acting on their behalf will mean huge, ongoing, negative financial and social consequences for our country, and an incalculable toll on the youth themselves.

Major Observations and Conclusions

- On average, just under 28,000 youth were emancipated from foster care in each of the last six years, peaking at 29,730 in FY2007. The percentage of youth who leave care through emancipation has grown steadily, from 7% in FY1998 to 11% in FY 2010.
- Multiple studies show that a high percentage of these youth will face difficulties in early adulthood as they struggle with poor educational attainment, insufficient employment and low income, inadequate housing, early parenthood, involvement with the criminal justice system, substance abuse, and physical and mental health problems.
- Research and experience teach us that permanent, emotionally sustaining and committed relationships are imperative for youth to reach self-sufficiency and to thrive in early adulthood, yet many young people leave care without any such relationships.
- Current federal and state programs to assist older youth to independence are well-intended, but have not proven as beneficial as anticipated. Providing services without achieving ongoing, supportive relationships is insufficient to meet the long-term needs of youth emancipating from care.
- A range of creative methods exists to provide stable, dependable family support – and they must be used to help older youth achieve permanency and long-term connections.
- The vast majority of adoptive placements of older youth are successful; although the disruption rate for youth placed as teens is somewhat higher than for younger children, a recent study of close to 16,000 adoptive placements in one state found that disruption rates varied from 8-14% across all age groups (Smith, Howard, Garnier & Ryan, 2006).

Policy and Practice Recommendations

The conclusions of this review point to the necessity for a renewed, dynamic effort to establish permanency for older youth in the foster care system. Toward this goal, the Adoption Institute makes the following recommendations:

Recommendation 1. Increase rates of youth permanency by implementing policy and practice that reflect the knowledge we already have and by testing recent innovations for achieving permanency, including:

- **Increase adoptions using techniques shown to be effective in existing programs.** In particular, the field must determine how best to find permanent homes for those youth at greatest risk for aging out – those with significant behavioral or emotional problems, in residential or group care, or who come into care relatively late in their lives.
- **Increase the use of subsidized guardianship for youth**, particularly those whose biological parents' rights have not been terminated. Pilot projects should be undertaken, too, to assess this option with a broader group of youth who currently lack permanency.
- **Assess the impact of state statutes that permit parents who have lost their parental rights to have them reinstated.** Parents who are unfit at one stage of their

lives may become appropriate parents at another. If such practices prove promising, the field should work to expand parental reinstatement when appropriate.

- **Better train, supervise and support child welfare workers to achieve permanency.** Studies suggest that some attitudes – based on skepticism about achieving permanency for older youth – continue to undermine progress. Workers should be educated about the importance of permanency, successful strategies to achieve it, and the impact of youths' trauma experiences and developmental needs on these efforts.

Recommendation 2. Relatives are a proven source of permanency for many youth, so efforts should be increased to recruit, support and utilize them in the following ways:

- **Promote kinship adoption and subsidized guardianship.** Kin adopters and guardians are important resources for older youth in care, and permanent homes with kin demonstrate benefits for these youth; yet states vary widely in their use of relatives for permanency. While relatives are often familiar with the needs of the youth they are parenting, we must continue to prepare and support these adoptive parents/guardians and provide tailored versions of the supports we give to non-kin adoptive parents.
- **Explore long-term foster care with relatives as a possible permanency option.** Kin foster care, like subsidized guardianship and adoption, has been shown to reduce the risk of negative outcomes for many youth. For economic and other reasons, however, some kin prefer not to adopt or become guardians but are firmly committed to providing a permanent home. In these situations, long-term foster care may be in the best interest of some older youth and can offer them stability and permanent family connections.
- **Investigate the need for enhanced supports for relatives who foster or adopt.** Many studies find kin caregivers have far lower incomes than other adoptive or foster parents. Further, kin receive less in financial supports, preparation and services in some states than is offered to unrelated foster or adoptive parents or subsidized guardians. The protective aspects of kin care should not be offset by economic disadvantages, so we should examine how to better meet the needs of low-income kin caregivers.

Recommendation 3: Further develop and assess practices that reduce the time children remain in care without permanence. Federal policy (through the Adoption and Safe Families Act) encourages concurrent planning and other practices that aim to reduce the time children linger in care without permanency. Such practices need to be carefully assessed and, if demonstrated to be effective, should become standard practice for youth and their families. Efforts to secure permanency, should reunification not occur, must begin early in placement. They should include, at minimum, diligent search for kin, including fathers and paternal kin.

Recommendation 4: Establish a true permanency goal for every youth, whether that is reunification, adoption, subsidized guardianship or formal long-term placement with relatives.

- **Emancipation, independent living or “another planned living arrangement,” unless it is a vetted and supported one with committed kin, should not be permanency goals** for youth. Independent living training should be recognized as services, not permanency outcomes. Life skills training, housing support, and the full range of services in preparation for young adulthood should be provided to all youth in care, as well as offered to the families of older youth who achieve adoption, guardianship or long-term foster care with kin (should families need such support).

- **When all other options have been exhausted or ruled out, at the very least every youth should be connected with a committed, supportive adult.**

Recommendation 5: Research must be significantly expanded to better understand policies and practices that promote youth permanence and well-being. There has been little recent research on what works best for youth, either in finding families or supporting permanency after placement. Further study also is needed to enhance our understanding of this population's experiences and their readiness for adulthood.

Conclusion

The explicit purpose of moving children into foster care is to provide them with safety and nurture on a temporary basis. As a field, we then work with their families to rectify their problems and, usually, they are reunified. When that goal cannot be reached in a timely fashion, society's responsibility is to find enduring, successful families for these children. It is a disturbing trend that more and more young people are aging out of care without any permanent connections. Every youth who emancipates without reunification or permanency is a youth society has failed.

We have made important strides in achieving permanency for younger children in care; now we must develop and disseminate greater knowledge about effective strategies that lead to the same progress for older youth – and we must implement a range of innovative strategies to promote their well-being. The personal consequences for these young people, who are at high risk for poor outcomes after emancipation – and the economic and social consequences for our country – are simply too great to accept the status quo.