

NATIONAL CONVENING ON YOUTH PERMANENCE TO SHOW THE POWER OF FAMILIES FOR LIFE



Nearly a decade after the federal Adoption and Safe Families Act strengthened the focus of public child welfare on safety and family permanence, leaders from across the country will join together in September, in Washington, D.C., to advance the practice of helping older children and youth in foster care have families for life.

The 2006 National Convening on Youth Permanence will take place from September 12 to 15, at the Renaissance Washington, D.C. Hotel, in the nation's capital.

Sponsored by the Annie E. Casey Foundation and its direct service agency, Casey Family Services, the convening will promote research, policy, and practice strategies for increasing the number of older children (ages 11 to 12) and youth (ages 13 to 18) who leave foster care with the enduring family relationships they need to be successful and fulfilled in adulthood. Thirty-seven other organizations have signed on as supporting organizations.

Convening cosponsors include Casey Family Programs, the Dave Thomas

Foundation for Adoption, the Freddie Mac Foundation, the Hite Foundation, the Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative, and the Stuart Foundation.

Invited child welfare leaders, including commissioners and directors, attorneys, judges, and youth from nearly every state, as well as representatives from tribal and national organizations, are expected to number more than 400. Scheduled for the convening are a research roundtable, a policy briefing, and a learning opportunity for practitioners.

Permanence is both a value and a practice goal. Proponents believe that for youth in state care to be successful and emotionally healthy in adulthood, they need to leave the system in a planned manner that connects them to a lifelong family, according to Sarah Greenblatt, director of the Casey Center for Effective Child Welfare Practice and a convening organizer. "When professionals understand the benefits of a permanent family connection for a youth, then the real work of making these types of relationships possible begins," she says.

Permanence for children and youth can be achieved in several ways, with legal family relationships being the most secure outcome, Greenblatt says. Legal permanency options include reunification with birth and extended family, placement with relatives, guardianship, and adoption.

Yet, according to Greenblatt, as many as 20,000 teenagers annually "age out" of foster care. Exiting the system as an older adolescent without a permanent family relationship is correlated with a range of adverse outcomes for young adults. Having a family relationship for a youth is a key success variable.

Making Youth Permanence a National Priority

"The need to pursue family relationships for older children and youth has been abandoned for many in foster care," Greenblatt says. "The convening is an opportunity to help develop strategies and interventions that build family relationships for these youth—families they can count on now and in the future."

Greenblatt offers the following example: In many states, a 12 year old can consent to his or her own adoption. If that child says no to a particular adoption option, the permanency plan changes from adoption to an alternative planned living arrangement. Rather than continuing the family work, the focus shifts to preparation for independent living. "It's easier to meet a youth's basic needs, helping him or her get ready for adulthood, rather than engaging in the more complex work of building family relationships. An integrated approach is needed," Greenblatt says.

Meeting Our Policy Obligations to Youth

The convening also will examine the public policies that present disincentives to permanence for older youth. The convening's policy briefing on September 13, "Achieving Family Permanence: Unfinished Business for Youth in Foster Care," will examine policy solutions aimed at removing barriers that prevent or delay family permanence for older youth in foster care. It also will highlight the implementation of current and innovative state and local policy reforms. U.S. Representative Danny K. Davis (D-IL) will be the guest speaker. Panelists include MaryLee Allen from the Children's Defense Fund; Judge Patricia Macias of the 388th Family District and Associate Court; John Mattingly, commissioner of New York City's Administration for Children and Families; and others.



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“This is a unique opportunity to reach out to both practitioners who are attending the convening, and to elected officials and Congressional staffers involved in developing legislation and regulations that can support older youth in securing permanence,” says Sania Metzger, Casey Family Services’ policy director.

Practices that Show the Possibility

Helping youth in foster care form permanent connections with family and other networks of caring adults is a key theme of the Casey Foundation’s work. Casey has been working toward the goal of permanence for foster youth not only through Casey Family Services, but also through the Family to Family initiative, which helps states and communities develop a network of neighborhood-based family foster care; the Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative, which helps connect young adults leaving foster care to jobs, services, and caring adults; and other efforts to help reform public systems and child welfare services across the country.

From this work and that of grantees and partners nationwide, the Casey Foundation has compiled significant evidence showing that greater permanence—and other improved outcomes—are available in child welfare, according to Foundation Senior Associate Wanda Mial, adding that the following strategies can be invaluable:

- Expand and improve services and engage community partners to prevent children from entering the foster care system whenever possible.
- Conduct greater outreach to relatives and make subsidies more available for kin willing to care for foster children.



- Strengthen efforts to recruit and support foster and adoptive families for older youth.
- Examine state and local child welfare systems for racial bias, and develop new strategies to eliminate disparate treatment of children and families of color.
- Undertake intensive, creative team planning for permanence that is individualized to the circumstance of each youth and grants young people a central role in planning their own futures.
- Make extensive use of subsidized guardianship as a permanency option for older children.
- Eliminate the use of “long-term foster care” or “emancipation” as case goals for adolescents in the foster care system.

The convening will offer an opportunity for participants to learn from one another as peers. A host of plenaries, learning sessions, and planning meetings are on the agenda, with topics that include: youth involvement, the California experience of implementing youth permanence, team planning

and decision making, effective court and legal partnerships that benefit foster youth, and ways to develop mutually beneficial relationships with journalists.

Advancing the Promise: From California to the Nation’s Capital

The convening was first presented in 2002 by the California Permanency for Youth Project (CPYP) with primary funding from the Stuart Foundation. Its purpose was to assemble practitioners and officials from other states in order to improve practices in California. Since its start, the convening has grown steadily, becoming a larger national event.

“We’re excited by the opportunity to carry this vision forward with our cosponsors. We intend to keep the momentum of permanence for older children going for many years,” declares Greenblatt.

“It’s our hope that participants will walk away from the convening with a belief that permanence is possible and a plan to make it a priority in every state,” Greenblatt says.