

## 2008 National Convening on Youth Permanence Recommendations of Youth & Young Adults

### PURPOSE

Does EVERYONE deserve a forever family??? Do teens and young adults desire a forever family??? Which permanency option is best for youth??? How do young people define permanence??? These were some of the questions asked by over 30 youth and young adults that attended the 2008 National Convening on Youth Permanence, all with a desire to share their experiences about the foster care system. An impromptu session was convened by the Annie E. Casey Foundation's Family to Family Youth Engagement Team at the request of the young people to allow these experts to meet and discuss their ideas and experiences around permanency. Their life experiences can help reshape, redefine and renew efforts to achieve permanency for youth.

This summary shares their messages and encourages participants from the Convening to feel their experiences, hear their recommendations and make permanency a reality for all youth and young adults.

### EXPERIENCES

Youth and young adult participants reported that while the states are different, the rules are different, and the details are different, many of their experiences remain the same: a majority of the youth in attendance reported negative experiences in efforts to achieve permanence. While their stories are all different, their outcomes appeared to be similar: child welfare agencies had not assisted them in achieving permanence.

While the initial thought among participants was permanency does NOT work, with further discussion, they agreed it can and does work. Yet the child welfare system did not make it work for them. The group then discovered a more accurate statement: "*we do not trust permanency*".

*Dre (AK) mentioned he had tried reunification, guardianship and adoption...all of them failed.*

The young people discussed how their negative experiences with permanency led to their inability to trust both the concept and the process of permanency planning. One consistent theme was the

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majority of the youth and alumni were not engaged in the process of identifying viable permanent connections. As they engaged in an opportunity to self-select which permanency option is best for them, they considered the benefits and challenges of reunification, guardianship, adoption and other. The vast majority selected reunification, guardianship or adoption. Only a few felt none of these options were good for them. While debriefing the activity, even the individuals who chose “other” were willing to select another option if they were integrally involved in the process.

All agreed that it is important to learn from youth who have both achieved and not achieved lasting permanency outcomes. These valuable experiences led to four simple and doable recommendations. They are as follows.

## RECOMMENDATIONS OF YOUTH AND YOUNG ADULTS

### □ Redefine Permanency to Include Emotional Connections

*When asked to define and describe permanency in one word, youth shared incredible responses from consistency to covenant, normalcy to never alone, intentional to unconditional.*

Conversations with the youth who attended the Convening revealed that there is a lack of clarity and inconsistent messages around the true definition of permanency. This confusion seems to be further fueled by misinformation received from agency staff, upon which youth must rely for information. This may be due partly to the fact that staff are unclear about how to define permanency, both for themselves and especially for the youth.

Youth recommended that each agency closely examine their current definition of permanency, priorities around meeting its goals, and work in partnership with youth and staff to develop a clear working definition that not only encompasses the legal but the emotional aspects of permanence. Agencies may choose to do so, by looking at current popular definitions for inspiration and as a guide.

*Adam (KS) was very poetic when he reminded us that we were at a permanency conference and virtually none of the young adults had achieved permanency and none either really understood or agreed with the definition of permanency.*

### □ Involve Youth in Convening Planning

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*Blake (HI)* suggested having a *Permanency Convening* that was planned and implemented by youth and alumni for youth and alumni.

To ensure the needs of youth and alumni are met during the Convening, it is imperative that an organization, which values youth input and supports youth development, engages young people not only in the Convening, but also in the planning of the Convening. Therefore, steps should be taken to diversify the planning team to include a substantial amount of youth input so that the conference agenda and programming will more accurately reflect the organization's resolve to support youth engagement. One alumnus mentioned how important it was to allow young adults to get together and share their experiences around the culture of foster care.

*Julie (WA)* "A youth track would be so important for this conference, it would be a great way to promote permanency to older youth who may feel like it's too late for them."

- **Address the Disparities in Permanency Outcomes for Both Older Youth & Youth of Color.**

*Kwanmay (MD)* "I play football and I'm going to college, why wasn't adoption and option for me?"

Youth participants reflected on the impact of racial disproportionality as seen most vividly in its direct influence on disparities in positive permanency outcomes for youth of color; and reflected as well on disparities in permanency outcomes for older youth and young adults. They discussed the experiences shared by the Convening's young adult plenary session and concluded that, while it was clear through their testimonies that each young adult was able to secure some sense of permanence, they did so primarily on their own. It was particularly moving that one participant, a 15-year-old African-American young lady, was forced to choose between permanence with a relative and remaining in her current school. Youth commented that this panel - whether intentional or not - bore testimony to what has been happening on a national scale: too many older youth and youth of color are allowed to languish in long term foster care without ever being connected to a forever family.

Youth and young adult participants recommended that as states/jurisdictions embark on their work around racial disparity, they pay close attention to the specific implications it bears on

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permanency outcomes and take deliberate steps to resolve existing disparities in positive permanency outcomes for both young adults and youth of color.

*Young lady (CA) "When I was younger I saw a lot of the white kids around me being adopted. No one ever adopted me. It made me feel bad about my color."*

### □ Continue Permanency Search Beyond Emancipation

*Young lady (OH) said it best, "you're never too old for a family."*

While this recommendation may seem an unconventional concept to the child welfare field, it was a core point for the young adults at the Convening. Their desire to be connected and supported by individuals and communities resounded loud and clear, especially as the young people transitioned out of foster care. Independent living services are no substitute for permanence and the young people were adamant about their need to feel supported and loved as they embark on their adult lives. This group of young adults shared their struggles to develop and maintain positive and permanent connections while in care - struggles which only amplified at age 18 when the services and supports provided by the child welfare system cease. They recommended that agencies become deliberate about expanding family finding, reunification, adoption and other permanency efforts beyond the time a youth formally exits our system.

*Young man (CT) "I never realized how much I needed a father until I became a dad, by that time I was 19 and nobody cared anymore."*

## SUMMARY

Youth and young adults addressed the participants at Convening's closing session. They challenged each individual as they move forward in their respective roles and agencies to not only consider the recommendations shared above but to elicit even more feedback from the young adults in their care who possess just as much knowledge, passion and expertise as those who attended the Convening.

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And finally, they reminded Convening participants that we are all working with a unified goal: to ensure the safety, well-being and permanence of the children and youth we serve. It was their hope that by listening to them, the real experts on foster care, child welfare systems can only increase their chances of getting it right!

*Merli, (NYC) "It fueled the fire in my heart to know that one day, finding a forever family who can provide unconditional love, a sense of normalcy and happiness to your life will no longer be just luck, it will become the standard of foster care."*

*Summarized by The Annie E. Casey Foundation's Youth Engagement Team: Brandy Hudson; Giselle John; Captain Young; Maurice Webb; Lindsay Mason; and Michael Sanders.*