

Achieving Permanency: Guidelines for Expectations of County Child Welfare Staff



Prepared by Mardith L. Louisell

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This guide serves as a model for agencies in finding family permanency for children and youth. It suggests that child welfare tasks focus on safety and on helping young people leave foster care for permanent homes.

The guide can be used to:

- clarify expectations with agency staff regarding permanency
- evaluate staff performance
- prioritize permanency tasks so that permanency becomes as intuitive as safety and well-being in the agency

Each county can adapt these expectations to its needs, asking, first, what the county is already doing, then analyzing what the county can do, year by year, to achieve the expectations. To achieve these expectations, agencies may need to implement:

- structural changes
- supportive services to social workers (including support staff resources)
- additional training

The assignments of tasks to social worker, program manager, and director are suggestions, not directives; small, medium, and large counties will naturally assign responsibilities differently to the various staff.

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Permanency Philosophy and Values

Child welfare's mission is to keep children safe AND to insure they are part of a permanent family. Finding permanency for each youth is a process and requires ongoing, in-depth practice. This guide espouses the following values:

- Every youth deserves, and can have, a permanent family.
- With support, most youth can have permanent parents and lifelong family relationships rather than live in foster care or institutions.
- Permanency is achieved through reunification, guardianship, adoption, or another form of permanent commitment – long-term placement in foster care is not a permanent plan.
- Youth have the right to know about family members; family members have the right to know about their youth.
- Siblings are critical to a youth's sense of permanency. Social worker places siblings together, arranges visits, and explores older siblings as permanent connections.
- Finding permanency is youth-centered: youth are involved and updated at every step.
- Relationships with adults prior to foster care are maintained and developed.
- Youth remain connected with biological family, regardless of whether they live with them. Even if a youth's family has grave problems, the youth decides whether to have contact and agencies support the youth through that process.
- The youth's permanency team is key in planning the youth's permanent family; it may include the youth, birth parents and extended family, siblings, foster parents, previous caregivers, important others identified by the youth, key professionals, etc.
- Finding family permanency involves in-depth work with the youth on what he or she wants. It includes race, culture, sexual orientation, gender identity, and other areas important to a youth. It involves assessment of the permanent family's ability to keep the child connected to heritage and to involve the youth in important family relationships.
- Staff engage in a number of simultaneous activities until a permanent family is identified.
- All staff and agency partners focus on finding permanency, e.g., ILP (Independent Living Program) staff (contracted or in-house), adoptions, ER (emergency response), public health nurses, mental health providers and contract personnel, group home staff, FFAs (foster family agencies), attorneys and court staff, CASAs (court appointed special advocates), school personnel, transitional housing staff, etc.
- Agencies deliver services with an eye to permanency evident from the first contact with a child or family.
- Agencies dedicate support staff resources to assist social workers.

Summary of Expectations

COUNTY DIRECTORS

Director conveys permanency values and mission to staff. Through policy, procedure, data collection, contracts, training, and funding, director sets priorities and holds agency and its partners accountable for achieving family permanency for all children.

COUNTY PROGRAM MANAGERS

Preparation of Supervisors and Social Workers: Program manager ensures that supervisors have the training, resources, and motivation to help staff achieve family permanency for children and youth.

Staff and Agency Accountability: Program manager addresses family permanency issues regularly with supervisors and managers and reviews outcome measures. Serves as a liaison between supervisors and managers on permanency implementation, challenges, and resource development.

Policy and Procedure: Program manager facilitates incorporation of family permanency values and procedures into the agency's and partners' everyday policy and practice.

Program Development: Program manager develops programs, procedures, and resources that ensure the agency achieves permanency for all youth in care.

COUNTY SUPERVISORS

Preparation and Support of Social Workers for Permanency Work: Supervisor has obtained the requisite knowledge and skill to train and support staff on permanency planning practice and does so.

Staff Accountability: Supervisor holds staff accountable for following the agency's process and procedure on achieving family permanency.

Supervisor as Manager: Supervisor ensures that family permanency values and permanency planning practices are incorporated into everyday practice, both within the agency and with partners.

COUNTY TRAINING STAFF

Incorporates family permanency into all aspects of training and serves as a staff resource for permanency knowledge and skill.

COUNTY SOCIAL WORKERS

A social worker will share tasks with the youth's permanence team, contracted agencies, or group homes. The social worker understands tasks so he or she can ensure the designated team member completes them. (In this document, the term "social worker" refers to the child welfare social worker.)

Permanency and Family Finding Tasks: Social worker knows and follows agency protocols on finding permanency for all children and youth in foster care. This includes:

- ongoing searches for siblings, committed adults, and permanent families
- documentation of results
- education of partners about permanency
- updating the youths' photos and materials

Child/Youth Support: Social worker involves youth in ongoing permanency discussions and solicits youth input at every juncture. Discussion about permanency with a youth is an ongoing process that continues as long as the youth is in care.

Team: Social worker forms a team to support the youth in achieving family permanency. This task begins when the case is assigned. The team includes:

- persons identified by the youth, as well as
- stakeholder-professionals, such as CASA, attorney, therapist, PHN (public health nurse), etc.

Planning for Post Permanency: Finding a permanent family is the beginning. The social worker, together with the youth's team, also develops a viable plan for sustaining permanency.

County Directors Expectations and Tasks

Director conveys permanency values and mission to staff. Through policy, procedure, data collection, contracts, training, and funding, director sets priorities and holds agency and its partners accountable for achieving family permanency for all children. This includes the following tasks:

Advocacy

- Conveys to staff agency's commitment to family permanency and what that means in practical terms, including a clear definition of permanency and importance of siblings.
- Includes family permanency in annual MAP goals.
- Communicates the importance of family permanency and lifelong connections work at county and state levels and advocates for the allocation of more resources.

Partners

Establishes regular communication on family permanency issues among public child welfare agency and mental health, public health, community resource centers, CASAs, FFAs, group homes, and courts to generate ideas and to resolve barriers and disagreements.

Courts

Conducts ongoing dialogue with the court about the agency's permanency efforts so that social worker can:

- obtain court orders for the youth's phone calls and visits with potential permanent connections
- obtain participation in Heart Gallery
- progress toward a permanent connection

Recruitment

Supports recruitment efforts and community awareness on family permanency. Ensures that the designated agency recruitment section uses available tools (professional photos, vignettes, etc.) and processes (Heart Gallery, etc.) for youth.

Resources

- Advocates for flexible funding for comprehensive services that address a youth's needs in achieving family permanency.
- Works to reallocate staff resources to focus on permanency.
- Tracks cost of doing permanency work and any savings accrued. Advocates that reinvestment of

savings from permanency work be allocated to family permanency.

- Establishes ongoing budget items that provide funding.
- Ensures funding streams are accessed to support ongoing resource development.

APPLA (Another Planned Permanent Living Arrangement) Procedure:

- Establishes agency procedure that APPLA with a goal of emancipation is made only under tightly monitored circumstances requiring the signature of program manager or higher.
- Establishes an agency value and expectation that, even when the youth says he or she doesn't want adoption, social workers continue to discuss family permanency options.

Dual Relationships

Leads formulation of policy about dual relationships that permits an adult who has a professional relationship with the youth to pursue a permanent connection when that adult is a family permanency option.

Outcomes

Ensures that the data system captures permanency outcomes. Ensures outcomes are monitored regularly.

Post-Permanency Support

Analyzes the need for, develops a plan, and obtains resources for post-permanency supports. Advocates for older youth and their families to have access to the same or equivalent services as would have been provided in care.

Reinforcement

Provides reinforcement to staff and partners for implementing plans for children and adolescents that result in permanent family relationships.

Hiring and training

Includes permanency skills in the hiring process and in training.

County Program Managers Expectations and Tasks

Preparation of Supervisors and Social Workers

Program manager ensures that supervisors have the training, resources, and motivation to help staff achieve family permanency for children and youth. This includes the following tasks:

Training

Ensures that supervisors are provided with regular opportunities for professional development, peer support, and supervision on family permanency.

Skill

Ensures that supervisors are knowledgeable about and skilled in teaching and monitoring tasks related to finding permanency, and that they use such skills to help staff achieve family permanency for youth.

Evaluation

Reviews family permanency planning skills, knowledge, and follow-through on annual evaluations.

Hiring/Transfer

Includes questions about permanency skill and knowledge in interviews.

Staff and Agency Accountability

Program manager addresses family permanency issues regularly with supervisors and managers and reviews outcome measures. Serves as a liaison between supervisors and managers on permanency implementation, challenges, and resource development.

Supervision

Holds supervisors accountable for addressing progress towards permanency in individual and unit supervision for each youth.

Family & Sibling

- Holds supervisors accountable for youth's frequency of visitation with biological siblings, family, and important others (federal and state measures).
- Establishes agency policy that supports connection with siblings, including placement together, visits, and exploration of older siblings as permanent connections.

- Advocates for policy to maintain and develop the youth's relationships with adults prior to foster care.

Case Review

Routinely reviews the numbers of youth in program who don't have a viable plan for guardianship or adoption. Expects that supervisors have a plan to address each case with social workers and routinely follows up with supervisors.

Other Reviews

Reviews group home referrals and court reports to assure that permanency goals are addressed as part of the process.

Policy and Procedure

Program manager facilitates incorporation of family permanency values and procedures into the agency's and partners' everyday policy and practice.

Procedure for APPLA/LTFC (Long-Term Foster Care) Approval

With director, establishes procedure that requires that all cases with this goal are approved in writing by a program manager or higher. (See New York City and Los Angeles County procedures.)

Advocacy

Has sufficient knowledge to advocate for family permanency with management.

Prioritizing

Assesses job requirements with the goal of making family permanency a priority among the multiple demands on social workers' time.

Concurrent Planning

Ensures that FR (Family Reunification) supervisor uses concurrent planning for all children and teens in foster care so that if reunification is unsuccessful, a specific backup plan that is *not* APPLA is in place.

Permanency Review Process

- Develops process including:
 - how to prioritize cases for review
 - frequency of review
 - type of placements reviewed
 - who reviewers will be
- With supervisors, periodically conducts a random review of cases (administrative case review or other agency vehicle) to ensure there is:
 - a viable family permanency plan
 - steps listed to achieve the plan
 - documentation that, even when a youth rejects adoption, staff continue to discuss family permanency options with the youth
- Prioritize cases for permanency work: On a quarterly basis reviews the number of children who have been freed for adoption but who are not yet in an adoptive home, in order to prioritize which cases should receive immediate attention.

Outcomes

- Develops case monitoring system that identifies youth for whom the agency has not found permanency. Monitors regularly.
- Establishes benchmarks for permanency. Establishes a realistic, but specific, percentage of cases that achieve family permanency every year.
- Analyzes data to learn where children entering the system find family permanency (e.g., with birth parents, siblings, kin, resource/foster/adopt family, or other permanent adult connections) and how long it takes (federal and state outcomes).

With Partners

- Clarifies family permanency values, practice, and goals with partners; clarifies agency's expectations of partners and contracted vendors regarding permanency. Actions partners might take include:
 - Participating as an active member of the youth's permanency team
 - Supporting the youth through the family finding and engagement process
 - Assuring that youth therapy addresses grief and loss issues and that permanency preparation work takes place
 - Advocating on the youth's behalf for family permanence
 - Sharing information with the county on potential family and adult connections
 - Preparing the placement for potential destabilization during permanency work
 - Guiding youth in developing relationships
 - Facilitating ongoing connections between the youth and identified persons through the life of the case
 - Helping connections and potential family understand the youth's past and present situations and how they are reflected in current behavior

- Forms specific strategies with partners on achieving permanency for youth in care.
- Establishes process for resolution of disagreements between partners and public child welfare agency staff regarding achieving family permanency.

Information Sharing

In consultation with county counsel, establishes a procedure between public child welfare and partners on sharing information, and develops an MOU (memorandum of understanding) with state adoptions, if applicable.

Program Development

Program manager develops programs, procedures, and resources that ensure the agency achieves permanency for all youth in care. This includes the following tasks:

Family Search

Leads development of policy and procedure on searching for family and kin, including:

- identification of persons for whom searches will be conducted
- referral process
- who will search
- how results will be documented
- how partners will be involved in the search process
- instituting the addition of a permanency section into case file and court report

Recruitment of Permanent Families

Leads development of both child-specific and general recruitment resources, e.g. exchanges, adoption events, media recruitment. Helps agency develop regular opportunities for older youth to meet and interact with prospective adoptive families (e.g., picnics, agency mentoring program, etc).

Youth Opportunities

Establishes a program where youth are provided with opportunities for contact with other youth or young adults who have achieved family permanence.

Preparation for and Sustainability of Permanency

- Analyzes the county's ability to prepare family and youth for permanency; establishes and implements a plan where needed.
- Develops a program to teach youth interpersonal and family living skills and to address emotional/

behavioral issues that impact relationships. An example would be the development of an ILP curriculum that includes permanency.

- Analyzes county's ability to provide post-permanency support services and develops a program to address needs.

Young People as Resources

Assesses the feasibility of a program in which young people, adopted as adolescents, are trained and paid to serve as peer mentors or case consultants on adolescent permanency.

Fiscal

Establishes a relationship with fiscal personnel so that requests for money for visits and other permanency supports are understood.

Training

Ensures that training on permanency is offered to all foster parents, as well as group homes, FFAs, mental health, attorneys and the court, etc.

Staff Resources

With director, evaluates reallocation of staff resources and tasks to focus on achieving the highest degree of family permanency possible for all youth in care.

Agency Projects and Initiatives

Integrates permanency into other agency initiatives and projects, such as ILP, WRAP, etc.

County Supervisors Expectations and Tasks

Preparation and Support of Social Workers for Permanency Work

Supervisor has obtained the requisite knowledge and skill to train and support staff on permanency planning practice and does so. This includes the following tasks:

Supervision to Best Permanency Practice

Has obtained permanency training (family finding and engagement, engaging the youth, grief and loss, teaming) and applies concepts to cases in individual and unit supervision.

Staff Training

- Clarification of agency permanency definitions, values and methods.
- Social Worker Training: Ensures social worker has participated in all facets of permanency training. Follows up with discussion in individual and unit supervision on transfer of learning.
- Discussion: Provides a forum for discussion of family permanency issues at unit and individual meetings at least once a month. Provides other consultation as needed.

- Modeling: Models (or co-facilitates) how to hold a difficult family conversation or team meeting, giving social worker opportunity to watch and learn.

Support

Provides support to staff by clarifying family permanency values and practice with providers on specific cases. When conflicts arise among stakeholders, facilitates discussions, keeping family permanency in the forefront.

Prioritizing Permanency

Helps set family permanency as a priority among multiple demands on social workers' time.

Resources

Has resources readily available for staff to increase knowledge and skills (videos, digital stories, paper resources).

Staff Accountability

Supervisor holds staff accountable for following the agency's process and procedure on achieving family permanency. This includes the following tasks:

Incorporation of Permanency into Practice

Conveys to staff the expectations for achieving family permanency, including that social workers incorporate permanency into casework interventions, staffings, narratives, conferences, treatment teams, and court reports.

Specific Targets

Sets targets and timelines for staff permanency tasks (record reviews, relative searches, finding siblings and sibling visits, specific recruitment activities, etc.). On a monthly basis, ensures that social worker/youth permanency team has identified "Next Steps."

Statistics

Maintains logs to identify outcomes of case activities on permanency.

Concurrent Planning

Ensures that staff use concurrent planning for all children and teens in foster care so that if reunification is unsuccessful, a *specific* family permanency plan exists that is *not* APPLA/LTFC and that includes permanent connections with significant adults.

Discussion of Permanency

Conducts random case reviews to ensure that, when a youth is ambivalent about one form of permanency, staff continue to discuss permanency options with him or her.

Siblings

Ensures staff arrange regular visits with siblings and nuclear/extended family.

Relationships

Ensures youth's relationships before foster care are maintained and developed.

Evaluation

Reviews social worker permanency knowledge, skills, activities, and outcomes on annual evaluations.

Supervisor as Manager

Supervisor ensures that family permanency values and permanency planning practices are incorporated into everyday practice, both within the agency and with partners. This includes the following tasks:

Liaison

Serves as a permanency liaison and advocate among social workers, program managers, and providers; helps each formulate strategies for achieving permanency.

Post-Permanency

Serves as a liaison between social worker and management on what post-permanency supports agency needs to develop.

Court

Ensures family permanency is addressed in court reports in a substantive way.

Prioritizing

Advocates for family permanency planning as a priority in the demands on social workers' time.

Partners

Includes agency permanency goals in discussions with partners, staff, court, etc. Includes youth's permanency goals in case-specific discussions with partners. Considers all partners who could collaborate on permanency, such as public health nurses, independent living social workers, mental health providers, etc.

County Training Staff Expectations and Tasks

Incorporates family permanency into all aspects of training and serves as a staff resource for permanency knowledge and skill. This includes the following tasks:

New Staff

Ensures that new staff learn about family permanency practice.

Trainers

- Ensures that each employed or contracted trainer understands family permanency concepts, the relationship between permanency and well-being, and integrates this into each training presentation.
- Contracts with former foster youth, both those who found family permanency and those who did not, to provide permanency training.

Providing Training

- In-depth permanency training: Ensures that management, supervisors, and staff have the opportunity to receive in-depth permanency training, including concurrent planning training.
- Ensures that training on permanency is offered to all foster parents (including those who will not provide the child a permanent home), as well as group homes, FFAs, mental health, attorneys, the court, public health, etc.

Resources

Provides staff and partners with access to DVDs, booklets, curricula, on-line training options, consultants, etc.

County Social Workers Expectations and Tasks

A social worker will share tasks with the youth's permanence team, contracted agencies, or group homes. The social worker understands tasks so he or she can ensure the designated team member completes them. (In this document, the term "social worker" refers to the child welfare social worker.)

Permanency and Family Finding

Social worker knows and follows agency protocols on finding permanency for all children and youth in foster care. This includes:

- ongoing searches for siblings, committed adults, and permanent families
- documentation of results
- education of partners about permanency
- updating the youths' photos and materials

This also includes the following tasks:

Search for family

Upon removal of child and regularly throughout the life of a case, social worker searches for:

- a relative placement
- paternal and maternal family, then other important adults
- biological siblings
- adults who may not be placements but are committed to the youth
 - Initial Search: To find family, social worker or a designated team member does the following in order:
 - Asks the youth
 - Asks the family
 - Asks other connections
 - Conducts case mining and Internet searches

Potential connections are contacted promptly

- Ongoing Searches: Social worker and/or team:
 - Every six months, revisits and updates past searches.
 - Every twelve months, contacts birth parents and other family to reconsider their status for a relationship or family permanency.
 - Continues to search for biological siblings if not already found. Siblings may be an excellent connection for youth once they become adults.

Documentation

Enters queries and results on form according to agency guidelines. Develops the youth's family tree or a connectedness map.

Concurrent Planning

Practices concurrent planning, even if youth has goal of independent living.

- If birth family is not available as a permanent plan for the youth, social worker discusses other connections with the youth, then other forms of family permanency, including adoption and guardianship.
- If a youth rejects adoption, social worker keeps the conversation going regarding the youth's objections, assumptions, etc.

Strength-Based

Provides balanced full disclosure to prospective permanent family regarding a youth's strengths as well as a youth's special needs.

Partner Objections

If a partner believes that a child isn't adoptable, social worker reframes issue by discussing how the youth, partners, and team can help child prepare for and find permanency.

Photos, etc.

Updates materials yearly to reflect the child's growth and development.

Siblings

Continuously seeks connections with siblings and supports such connections with visits, phone calls, and letters. Searches for permanency for siblings.

Child/Youth Support

Social worker involves youth in ongoing permanency discussions and solicits youth input at every juncture. Discussion about permanency with a youth is an ongoing process that continues as long as the youth is in care. This includes the following tasks:

Youth Input

Social workers regularly solicits input from youth and considers it in planning.

Youth Participation

Encourages youth to identify important relatives and other persons, making a video, writing a vignette, etc.

Grief and Loss

Ensures that a youth's loss issues are addressed so that he or she is prepared for permanent family relationships. Completing a life book is helpful.

Permanent Family

Helps the permanent family understand that the youth's behavior in the new home may be affected by grief and loss. Explains youth may have ongoing contact with biological family.

Nuclear/Extended Family

Regularly schedules visits with nuclear and extended family, including siblings.

Important Relationships

Helps the youth maintain and develop important relationships formed with adults prior to and during foster care.

Team

When the case is assigned, social worker forms a team to support the youth in achieving family permanency. The team includes:

- persons identified by the youth, as well as
- stakeholder-professionals, such as CASA, attorney, therapist, public health nurse, etc.

Contact and Preparation of Team Members

- Contacts and prepares caregivers and adult connections to help plan for the youth's permanency
- Educates caregivers about youth's needs and their roles as members of the youth's permanency team.
- Educates professionals, including therapists, independent living staff, public health nurses, CASAs, and attorneys about family permanency and involves them as team partners.
- Invites new persons, as they are identified, to join the team.

Team Meeting

- Convenes a team meeting at the start of permanency work.
- Clarifies the team's purpose as the primary vehicle for decision-making throughout the permanency planning process and explains the method by which the team will achieve this (time frames, goals, etc.).
- Utilizes agency decision-making models (team decision-making meeting, family group conferencing, emancipation meetings) for permanency teaming.
- Supports youth as an active participant in the team in the ways the youth chooses.

Planning for Post Permanency

Finding a permanent family is the beginning. The social worker, together with the youth's team, also develops a viable plan for sustaining permanency. This includes the following tasks:

Safety Plans

As part of permanency planning, the team develops safety plans and provides individualized attention to prepare the permanency family and others for future challenges.

Supports

Once the permanent plan has been decided upon, helps family members identify financial, legal, community, and personal support for themselves and the youth.