

LA COUNTY DEPARTMENT OF CHILDREN AND FAMILY SERVICES

SPA IV - METRO NORTH OFFICE PERMANENCY PROJECT

ACCOMPLISHMENTS AND LESSONS LEARNED

The following provides a general overview of what was accomplished and the lessons learned at Metro North after 1 ½ years since implementation of the Permanency Project.

ACCOMPLISHMENTS

Permanency Unit

Unit Description - The Permanency Unit was implemented in October 2005 and consists of 5 Children's Social Workers (CSWs), 1 Supervising Children's Social Worker (SCSW), and 1 Unit Assistant. Additionally, the unit has 2 full-time CSWs who are not currently carrying a caseload, but who are assigned to the unit to assist with search efforts, administrative needs, and resolving emergencies. Each case-carrying CSW in the unit has a caseload of approximately 30 - 35 youth (yardstick for a Generic CSW), who are primarily age 12 and older and without a realizable permanent plan (at the time of assignment)

Case Log - A log was created to track the youth being served by the unit, the placement type, the number of connections for the youth, and the permanent plan. A total of 80 children/youth were targeted and, with their siblings, assigned to a CSW in this unit.

Family Finding Training - The unit received Family Finding training from Kevin Campbell, national Family Finding leader, consultant and trainer. The training was provided for one full day, every month, for six months. This hands-on training reviewed social work methods and available technology developed to find and engage relatives and significant others to provide youth in care with durable connections and a permanent plan. Essentially, the training's foundation was that youth placed in "stranger" care feel very lonely and unloved resulting in severe psychological, emotional and behavioral problems. Mr. Campbell's premise is that youth will not stabilize until we begin to help fill an unmet need of feeling connected to their "roots."

Connections Tree - The supervisor from the Permanency Partners Program (P3) (described in detail below) created a quilt depicting a tree to represent the increased connectedness established for youth in the Permanency Unit. The quilt is striking in its symbolism for the life and beauty that can be achieved through finding permanent connections for children and youth.

Office-Wide Planning Activities

Permanency Collaborative - In April 2006, the Metro North office held its first annual permanency collaborative. The event was held for DCFS staff and community providers to review the work in the permanency unit and further develop our partnerships to achieve increased permanency for youth.

Countywide Steering Committee - In June 2006, Metro North partnered with P3 and the training section to advocate for a Family Finding steering committee to develop and implement Family Finding policy and procedures department-wide. The committee formed several workgroups, one of which is to improve the due diligence search process (efforts to locate absent parents) department-wide and has provided analysis and recommendations to the executive team for consideration on its plan to implement Family Finding strategies through the Title IV-E Waiver.

Metro North and Agency Training - From July 2006 - November 2006, Metro North and CPYP partnered to provide 20 community agency staff and 40 additional Metro North line staff with Family Finding training to focus on increased connectedness and permanency for 27 youth outside of the permanency unit. This training was very unique in its design as it focused on enhancing partnerships with outside agency staff to include them in the DCFS permanency work. In attendance were staff from foster family agencies, group homes, residential treatment centers, the Children's Law Center, and court appointed special advocates (CASA).

Metro North Staff Training - At the October 2006 Metro North General Staff Meeting, Assistant Regional Administrator Adrienne Olson provided staff with a detailed presentation on the importance of youth permanency. The presentation included youth permanency digital stories produced by CPYP and honored the successful Family Finding work performed by Hollygrove's Family Finding Specialist, Linda Librizzi, CASA, Judy Smith; and DCFS CSW, Elizabeth Nava.

U. S. Search - In November 2006, Metro North partnered with the P3 program to permit Metro North staff unlimited use of its contract with US Search, an advanced public records search engine. Metro North implemented procedures to ensure a US Search is run in conjunction with every due diligence report. Due diligence clerks are automatically sending letters to all parents, relatives and neighbors identified via the search requesting them to contact the case-carrying CSW.

Expansion Involving Adoptions, FGDM, Interns - Metro North Regional and Adoption administrators partnered to allow Adoption staff to conduct the Family Finding and connection work for approximately 28 "unattached" youth in the placement and recruitment unit (PRU). Additionally, the Metro North Family Group Decision-Making (FGDM) facilitator began to provide "Emancipation

Conferences with Life-Long Connections" for older youth exiting DCFS supervision. For youth without adequate permanent plan in place, the FGDM facilitator is completing the Family Finding and connection work on behalf of the youth. The FGDM facilitator is also acting as a liaison or consultant to staff needing to travel out of state to conduct family meetings. The Metro North office also arranged for its five undergraduate and sixteen graduate social work interns to assist line-staff with completing its Family Finding and connection work.

Permanency Planning Task Force - On November 21, 2006, the Metro North Permanency Planning Task Force was formed, and meetings held monthly through March 2006. The Task Force was comprised of staff from CPYP, Metro North Region, Metro North Adoption and Permanency Resources Division (APRD), MSW Intern Section, Metro North Clerical Section, Family Group Decision Making (FGDM), Emancipation Services Division, P3, Five Acres, Hollygrove, Star View, and Vista Del Mar. The Task Force reviewed the permanency work completed thus far and determined its next steps and strategies to move forward. The Task Force furthered our understanding of the importance of collaboration and coordination of permanency efforts/programs. The Permanency Unit log was expanded to include youth in the office served by the various Secondary Permanency Coordinators, and centralized identifying youth in need of connection and assign our Secondary Permanency Coordinators.

U.S. Search Training - On November 29, 2006 all Metro North supervisors, adoptions staff, interns, and others significantly involved with Family Finding were provided with US Search training.

Permanency Unit Feedback - In March 2007, the Permanency Unit provided anecdotal evidence of improved casework practice and outcomes for older youth assigned to the social workers in the Permanency Unit. Staff estimated that they had helped identify and forge connections on at least 30-50% of their caseload. This is significant because many of the Permanency Unit CSWs were concerned whether this result could be achieved through their efforts. Additionally, the unit identified many other improved practices and successes since being in the Permanency Unit. For example, CSWs feel they have a much better understanding and ability to tap into the tools and/or resources available to assist older youth in maintaining connections (i.e., search tools and methods, Emancipation and ILP Services such as transitional housing, mental health services, placement resources, etc.). Despite some initial implementation difficulties (discussed below), all unit members feel that being in the Permanency Unit has helped them refine their skills and improved their practice in working with older youth.

Permanency Leadership Team - On March 14, 2007 the Metro North Permanency Leadership Team (Leadership Team) was formed as a result of the Task Force's need for a smaller, more decisive group. The members were

identified by their involvement in the permanency project and/or their position of influence within the office. The group was formed to provide input on this Project Plan and to help coordinate/carry out the tasks identified in the plan.

Outcomes

At the end of March 2007, Metro North compiled the outcome data for the High-Need Youth assigned to the Permanency Unit. A High-Need Youth is defined as a youth placed in "stranger" care, receiving Permanent Placement Services, and who suffers from one or more of the following:

- ❖ no or limited connections
- ❖ multiple recent replacements
- ❖ heavy substance abuse
- ❖ recent psychiatric hospitalization
- ❖ repeat AWOL

The following outcomes were achieved for the eighty High-Need Youth served by the Metro North Permanency Unit from October 2005 to March 2007.

- ❖ 62 youth have increased connectedness
 - 8 youth are now placed with siblings who were previously not placed together
 - 6 youth are now visiting with siblings who they did not previously visit
 - 8 youth are now visiting or having contact with parents with whom they previously had no contact
 - 40 youth are now having contact with other relatives and non-relative extended family members with whom they previously had no contact.
- ❖ 20 youth have returned to the home of a parent or are in the process of reunification
 - 16 youth have been returned to the home of a parent and exited the Child Welfare System.
 - 4 youth are moving towards reunification with a parent.
- ❖ 2 youth have been adoptively placed
- ❖ 17 youth have been appointed a legal guardian or are close to having a legal guardian appointed
 - 5 youth have had legal guardianship granted to a relative and exited the child welfare system through Kin-Gap.
 - 9 youth have had legal guardianship granted and continue to receive services within the child welfare system.
 - 3 youth have a plan of legal guardianship identified and are proceeding through the court process.

- ❖ 9 youth are residing in a reduced level of care
 - 3 youth (age 16) are currently placed in a D-rate level foster home from a Level 12 Group Home
 - 2 youth (age 16) are currently placed in a D-rate level relative home from a Level 12 Group Home
 - 2 youth exited to THPP from a Level 12 Group Home
 - 2 youth exited to THP from a Level 12 Group Home

CHALLENGES/SURPRISES/LESSONS LEARNED

The introduction of any new program involving a mass implementation effort, problems and struggles arise throughout the process. Outlined, below, are some of the implementation challenges faced by the Metro North office:

- ❖ The transfer of cases into the unit was premature and the assignment of cases was likely one of the biggest challenges to the initial success of the unit. The cases were transferred and assigned to the CSWs all at one time, preventing them from being able to do any thing else but determine the most basic information about the youth, let alone take on the additional task of having to learn and implement new permanency strategies.
- ❖ A good screening process for selection of the cases transferred to the unit was not put in place and the cases transferred were considered by the unit to be the "worst cases in the office." Subsequently, the unit became demoralized as they felt "dumped on" from the rest of the office.
- ❖ Program development and training should have been provided to all staff long before a unit was formed and/or any cases were moved. Training for all supervisors and the creation of common expectations for the work and the supervision of the work should have been laid out better in the beginning. Simply put, everyone was unprepared for how challenging the cases would be to handle.
- ❖ A team should have been formed, like the Leadership Team, from the start to move the project forward so that the workload related to the implementation of the various strategies was shared. There should be a project leader to oversee the number of people required not only to complete all of the logistical tasks related to implementation, but also to convey the vision and achieve necessary buy-in by the rest of the office.
- ❖ Maintaining staff and achieving stability within the unit was a challenge initially, although in the last several months, there has been a significant improvement. Only two of the five original CSWs remain in the unit. There has been significant turnover in the P3 staff, and due to mandates from the Board of Supervisors, they have been pulled to focus solely on AWOL youth throughout the office. The BASW interns were not a significant support to the

unit and were not utilized as was hoped. Due to time and program constraints, the interns were not able to accomplish substantial permanency tasks. The Department of Mental Health (DMH) Liaison assigned to the unit is no longer assigned to the office. The FGDM facilitator was pulled to fill in as a TDM facilitator for the entire office.

- ❖ Whenever Secondary Permanency Coordinators (such as P3 workers) could be maintained, the lack of clarity as to their role and responsibilities continued to be a source of confusion and conflict.
- ❖ With the high turnover, maintaining cases in the unit was difficult. Further, transfer of cases to another office also delayed the process for engagement of family members.
- ❖ Measuring outcomes and success for the youth served was time-consuming and the method of outcome measurement was unclear. The log to track the cases, what was important to track, and how to define success was not well developed until recently.
- ❖ The Permanency Unit CSWs felt they were always in crisis mode due to the high numbers of placement disruptions, AWOLs, hospitalizations, etc. As a result, Permanency Unit members stated they were often unable to make the phone calls or in-person contact necessary to follow-up on prospective connections for youth.
- ❖ The Permanency Unit CSWs felt unsupported by therapists, placement agencies, Juvenile Court staff and other service providers regarding the focus of treatment and/or the case plan for youth. For example, many service providers argued to keep youth in higher level placements and/or residential treatment to "stabilize" youth despite the fact that most youth deteriorate further in higher level placements. Further, service providers fought CSWs about maintaining connection with family members or passively resisted such efforts.
- ❖ Secondary Permanency Coordinators, such as P3, Agency Family Finding Specialists, or FGDM staff also faced frustration in not being able to complete work they felt was important to youth permanency. They noted challenges that included a lack of understanding and appreciation for Family Finding and engagement from either CSWs or agency providers who feared that renewed or newly acquired contact with family members was not in the child's best interest (although these CSWs were mostly those outside of the Permanency Unit). Lack of returned phone calls and quick responsiveness to family members by DCFS staff was also noted as a problem by the Secondary Permanency Coordinators.

- ❖ The lack of a formal process to address obstacles encountered by the various Secondary Permanency Coordinators (i.e., lack of information for searches, discussion of next step in the process) was another hindrance. Although there was a formal monthly meeting during the Family Finding training, in retrospect, there should have been a mid-month follow-up to address any problems and obstacles. Unfortunately, time was lost during this process.
- ❖ We have recently noted that as CSWs and community agency partners are trained and experiencing success in this work, they are more responsive to the process. Often a partnership between the social worker and the Permanency Coordinator has been effective in engaging others in the process. Social workers need to feel empowered to engage the various providers in permanency work and to hold them accountable.
- ❖ The selection, training and coordination of Secondary Permanency Coordinators is another very crucial aspect affecting success of this project. It is clear that the primary CSW, no matter how low the caseload, should not be the only service provider working to ensure permanency. It takes a team and if the team is not well staffed, trained, or coordinated, then permanency is that much less likely to be achieved. For example, the original Permanency Unit was not well supported by the secondary Permanency Coordinators, primarily two P3 workers and 4 BASW interns, assigned to help complete Family Finding, engagement and training. As discussed above, the P3 staff suffered high turnover and were pulled in many directions. Moreover, the BASW interns were neither consistently available nor adequately trained to provide the support needed.
- ❖ The DMH Liaison originally assigned to the unit was noted as being extremely helpful to the CSWs in carrying out their mission. The DMH Liaison was an individual trained by Kevin Campbell at an earlier time, and helped to find permanency for youth placed at MacLaren Hall and Hollygrove Residential Treatment Center after their closures. The Permanency Unit CSWs noted that the DMH Liaison thoroughly reviewed their cases and helped them advocate for the most appropriate services for their youth. The lesson learned here is that DMH can and should play a significant role in helping DCFS staff achieve permanency for older, high-risk youth.
- ❖ Finally, the creation of a single unit to implement Family Finding created an unintended separation between the work of the Permanency Unit and the work of the rest of the backend staff (i.e., "the permanency unit does Family Finding"). Thus, a second Kevin Campbell training was needed to help get all staff on board, which should have been done before any staff or cases were moved. Metro North recommends all staff be trained to address the issues of the older youth on current caseloads and that the formation of a permanency unit be completed after line, support, and agency partner staff are sufficiently trained and know what to expect.