

The following document was prepared by the Family to Family Youth Engagement TA team. The team attended the 2008 National Youth Permanency Convening and was asked to facilitate an impromptu session with the youth and young adults in attendance. Based on the session, the following document was developed to reflect the team's experiences.

## OUR 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??? Over 30 youth and alumni attended the 2008 Youth Permanency Convening, all with a desire to share their experiences. An impromptu session was convened to allow these experts to meet and discuss their ideas and experiences around permanency. We believe their life can help us to reshape, redefine and renew our efforts to achieve permanency for youth. This article will encourage you to feel their experiences, hear their recommendations and make permanency a reality for all youth and young adults.

## OUR EXPERIENCES

The states are different, the rules are different, the details are different; but their experiences remain the same...despite our best efforts, permanency did not work for many of the young people who attended the 2008 Convening. While their stories are all different, their outcomes appear to be similar, we did not assist them in achieving permanency. The initial thought among participants was permanency does NOT work, but with further discussion, they agreed it can and does work; we 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's negative experiences with permanency led to their inability to trust both the concept and the process of permanence. One consistent theme was the majority of the youth and alumni were not engaged in the process of identifying viable permanent connections. We gave them the opportunity to self-select which permanency option is best for them. The choices were reunification, guardianship, adoption and other. The vast majority selected reunification,

guardianship or adoption. Only a few felt neither of those 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.

These valuable experiences led to four simple and doable recommendations. They are as follows...

## OUR RECOMMENDATIONS

### □ **Redefine Permanency**

*Our first task was to engage them in defining permanence. When asked to describe permanence in one word, we heard incredible responses from consistency to covenant, normalcy to never alone, intentional to unconditional.*

Our conversations with the youth who attended the Permanency Convening revealed that there is a lack of clarity and inconsistent messages around the true definition of permanence. This confusion seems to be further fueled by misinformation received from agency staff, upon whom many of our youth rely for information. This may be due partly to the fact that staff is unclear about how to define permanence, both for themselves and especially for the youth. It is our recommendation that each agency closely examine their current definition of permanence and 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 permanence conference and virtually none of the young adults had achieved permanence and none either really understood or agreed with the definition of permanence.*

### □ **Involve youth in conference planning**

*Blake (HI) suggested having a permanence conference 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 conference, but in the planning of the conference. 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 youth of color.**

The impact of racial disparity can be seen most vividly in its direct influence on positive permanency outcomes for young adults of color. A potent illustration could be derived from examining the experiences shared by the convening's young adult plenary session. It was clear through their testimonies that each young adult was able to secure some sense of permanency, with the exception of the 15 year old African-American young lady who is struggling even to gain some stability in school. This panel whether intentional or not, bore testimony to what has been happening on a national scale, too many youth of color are allowed to languish in long term foster care without ever being connected to a forever family. It is therefore our recommendation that as states/jurisdictions embark on their work around racial disparity, they pay close attention to the specific implications it bears on permanency outcomes and take deliberate steps to resolve existing disparities for 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."

□ **Permanency search should continue 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 conference. 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. It was clear that this group of young adults struggled to develop and maintain positive and permanent connections while in care. This struggle only amplifies at age 18 when the services and supports provided by the child welfare system cease. It is our recommendation 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.”*

Finally, as we all move forward in our respective roles and agencies we would like to challenge each individual to not only consider the recommendations shared above but to elicit even more feedback from the young adults in your care who possess just as much knowledge, passion and expertise. In closing, remember that we are all working with a unified goal, to ensure the safety, well-being and permanence of the children and youth we serve. By listening to them, the real experts on foster care, we can only increase our 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.”*

Submitted by The Annie E. Casey Foundation’s Youth Engagement Team

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