

# THE Porch Light Project

*Forever Family For Every Child*



## *Growing Up and Aging Out*

**Y**outh in foster care need safe, stable and permanent families. Children don't just need their families when they are young. Family plays a critical role throughout childhood but that support continues into adulthood. For most children, their parents teach them right from wrong, help them in school, support them as they learn how to make friends and manage relationships. In most families, when a child turns 18, he or she goes off to college, trade school, work or the military. But amidst holiday breaks and summer vacations, most youth have a home to return to and parents to support and guide them for a lifetime – parents who will be there to cheer them on at their college graduation, co-sign a loan to help them buy a car or a house, walk them down the aisle, and celebrate the birth of grandchildren.

But that's not the case for some 1,100 Pennsylvania youth who age out of foster care each year into uncertain circumstances, without a permanent family or home. Nationally, some 25,000 youth age out of the foster care system each year before they can be reunited with their parents, adopted or placed permanently with relatives.<sup>1</sup> Sadly, some end up homeless and others, in jail. Most can't afford to go to college, and never will. When youth languish in foster care and are not part of permanent families, their long-term safety and well-being is threatened.

In September 2008, 8,500 youth 13 and older lived in the foster care system in Pennsylvania. Many youth in foster care have long histories of abuse and neglect.

Some are in placement due to behavioral issues. The median length of stay for a Pennsylvania youth 13 and older is 17 months and it is very likely that the young person has lived in three or more settings. Nearly half of our youth are placed in group homes and institutions, rather than foster care homes. While many youth return home with the hopes of successful reunification with his or her birth family, about one-third of youth will re-enter the system within 12 months.

### Negative Outcomes for Youth Without a Permanent Family

- Nearly half of youth who age out will not complete high school and are twice as likely to drop out as other students.<sup>2</sup>
- Nearly half of youth in foster care haven't found a job four years after leaving the system and struggle to pay their bills.<sup>3</sup>
- One in four youth who age out experiences homelessness for at least one night.<sup>4</sup>
- Nearly a third of youth who age out struggled with mental health challenges such as depression, substance abuse, and anxiety disorders.<sup>5</sup>
- Nearly one in four youth have been arrested since leaving care.<sup>6</sup>
- Young women in foster care are two-and-a-half times more likely to become pregnant by age 19 than young women who were not in foster care.<sup>7</sup>

## Growing Up and Aging Out *cont.*

Far too many youth never end up with a stable, permanent family situation, and leave the system at 18 or older or age out. When youth age out they are sometimes left on their own, with few, if any, financial resources; limited education, training and employment options; no place to live; and, little or no support from family, friends and community. African-American children and youth are disproportionately represented in the child welfare system and are especially at-risk for being removed from their families and placed in foster care. In Pennsylvania, an African-American youth is eight times more likely to be in foster care than a white youth, and a Latino youth is more than three times likely to be in foster care than a white youth.<sup>8</sup>

### A Permanent Family

Pennsylvania faces many challenges to assure that every youth has a loving, stable and permanent family and that must be the goal. When a child is placed in foster care, the goal traditionally is to reunify with the birth family. Critical to the success of this effort is engaging the birth family along with other key parties in decision making for the child. In the case of youth, the young person must also be central in the decision making process.

**Family Group Decision Making** – which engages the youth as well as all adults who have an interest in his or her life as a team to join the county child and youth agency and the court in determining what’s in the best interest of the young person.

“I entered foster care in Snyder County when I was 14 years old,” said Doug, 19. “My father had a drinking problem and struggled with the death of my mother and uncle. I lived in a group home for a year and then went back to my dad but nothing really changed and I ended up back in a foster care home. I later found out that I had other family – an aunt and a grandmother on my mother’s side that no one ever found. I wonder what my life would have been like if someone found them and I got to live there. Now I live in Centre County and am working and hoping to go back to school someday. If I had had a stable family, a lot of the other stuff wouldn’t have happened to me,” Doug said. “I spent so much time scared, angry and confused.”

Pennsylvania’s child welfare system fails to adequately address all the possible permanency options for youth in placement: reunification with the birth family; another permanent family through adoption or guardianship should reunification fail; and, extension of care and supports for adulthood as a last resort. In order to achieve permanency, **concurrent planning** helps move children toward legal permanency through reunification, adoption or guardianship. The concept of concurrent planning is to make every reasonable effort to provide services to aid reunification with birth families while simultaneously preparing for other permanency outcomes including adoption and/or guardianship with a relative. Engaging youth in concurrent planning and involving them in all aspects of their own case planning is critical to achieving permanency.

All youth should receive timely **permanency services** that include identifying and recruiting potential adoptive families and/or guardians and preparing youth to be part of these families, even if a youth’s current permanency goal is reunification. Youth with the goal of reunification also need special supports such as counseling to help successfully transition back home. Appropriate supports and services must also be provided to birth and adoptive parents and legal guardians to assure permanency is achieved.

Unfortunately, far too many youth currently have a permanency goal of Another Planned Permanent Living Arrangement (APPLA) and this often hinders them from receiving services that promote permanency. Youth with the permanency goal of APPLA are those that the system has determined will not exit with a legal, permanent family. Rather, they will leave the system as a young adult (age out) and are too often left to fend for themselves with limited financial assistance, including housing or education support. More than 24 percent of the youth currently in foster care in Pennsylvania have a goal of APPLA. Pennsylvania needs to **dramatically reduce the number of youth with a goal of APPLA** by implementing practices that make it difficult to assign APPLA as a goal such as limitations based on the age of the child or a process to require a higher level of recommendation than that of a caseworker.



## When Youth Enter Foster Care

Placement in a family setting is a key strategy to help youth achieve permanency and develop the life skills necessary for healthy adulthood. But, this is not the case for most youth in foster care in Pennsylvania. Nearly half of Pennsylvania youth in foster care 13 and older are placed in group homes or institutions. While 45 percent of youth live in foster family homes, only 14 percent of youth live with kin.

**Every youth should be placed in the least restrictive and most family-like setting available**, and for the shortest possible time to achieve permanency. A 2008 study found that dependent youth placed in residential facilities have a two-and-a-half times greater risk of becoming delinquent than their peers in foster home placements.<sup>9</sup> Compared to their peers housed in congregate settings, youth placed with foster families experience higher levels of education, fewer alcohol or other drug abuse problems, more positive relationships with biological siblings, greater housing stability and higher levels of optimism about their economic future.<sup>10</sup>

“I lived in five different foster family homes and two residential treatment facilities. Twice, when I was in a foster home, I was moved into these institutions which felt like boot camp to me. Why? Because, I was hard-headed and not following the rules at school. I was skipping classes and coming in late. I never broke the law or got into drugs. But, this is where I ended up – a place that I could hang out with kids who were there because they had been drug dealers,” said Jacquan, 19, of Lancaster County. “I was not a bad kid, just a kid who maybe needed someone to sit me down and talk to me. These places take away your childhood and you never get it back.”

**Family finding**, the diligent effort to search and recruit relatives and extended kin, should be routinely used for all youth entering the system. When efforts to find extended family fail, the system must rely on **foster family recruitment** rather than place high percentages of youth in congregate settings. Youth in foster care are best served when they are placed in their home communities and with siblings so family and community connections are maintained. Without permanent family connections, youth face adulthood without the emotional, social and financial support system of a forever family.

### Promoting Reunification

When a youth is removed from a home, it is critical that families receive in-home and community-based services and supports that promote reunification. The preferable outcome is for youth to achieve permanency through **reunification** with his or her birth

family. When reunification occurs, it is critical that supports and services such as ongoing substance abuse treatment are made available to assure that families remain strong to reduce the youth's risk of re-entering the system. Youth achieving permanency through reunification is not often enough. More than one-third of all Pennsylvania youth who are reunified with their birth families will re-enter the system within 12 months.

Some youth have been removed from parents who could have continued to care for them if they had been provided basic supports such as housing assistance from the onset. Pennsylvania must make every effort to reduce the number of youth coming into foster care through **effective and timely services to strengthen families**.

### Moving Toward Adoption

In September 2008, there were only 526 of 8,500 Pennsylvania youth 13 and older in foster care with a goal of adoption. In FFY 2008, fewer than 175 were adopted. It takes 42 months on average to adopt a youth in Pennsylvania.<sup>11</sup>

Youth can achieve **legal permanence through adoption** when efforts to reunify them with their birth families have failed, regardless of their age. Too often adoption is not considered for youth simply due to their age. Some youth are reluctant to consider adoption because of their relationships – and feelings of loyalty - with parents, siblings and extended family. Oftentimes, professionals take the young person's ambivalence at face value but need to take steps to further explore the youth's resistance. Child welfare professionals should provide counseling and supports to allow youth to address his or her concerns and potentially be open to the idea of a new permanent family. The courts must also appropriately consult with youth on this important decision.

In 23 other states formal processes for post-adoption contact with extended family are in place. If Pennsylvania were to develop a similar process for **post-adoption contact** for children in foster care, more youth may be apt to consider adoption while their birth parents might be more willing to voluntarily relinquish their parental rights.





## When Youth Enter Foster Care *cont.*

“I was very happy to be adopted. The woman who became my mom was very nice, easy-going and supportive,” said Jamie, 20. “When children can’t be reunified with their birth parents, adoption is a wonderful alternative to help kids connect with a family. I found a woman to call my mom and I know she will love me forever. I hope other children in foster care have the same chance.”

### Encouraging Guardianship

When reunification fails, another option is to consider guardianship - or permanent legal custodianship - with a relative or extended kin. **Guardianship** does not require termination of parental rights. Youth who achieve legal guardianship are able to maintain connections with their birth families.

Currently, 14 percent of youth in foster care are living in a kinship foster care home. These placements provide an excellent opportunity to achieve permanency and steps should be taken to make this relative or kin a permanent, legal guardian. Pennsylvania has been financing this legal permanency option with state and local funds but can now draw down federal funds under the recently enacted Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act.

### Integrating Well-Being

When youth enter the foster care system, Pennsylvania makes a commitment to attend to all of their needs. But, too often the system segregates the needs of youth into those who will likely be reunified, adopted or achieve permanency through legal guardianship, and youth who will likely age out. All youth need services that not only focus on permanency options but also prepare them for adulthood.

The child welfare system must do a better job of integrating child and family serving systems. When **systems of care** are in place there is a commitment to meet the holistic needs of youth and families such as education, health care, counseling, etc. To assure that youth get the services they need from all systems, their caseworkers must serve as a strong advocate with other child serving systems.

The courts are fundamental in assuring that needs of youth are met – and the judicial process is most successful when a judge partners with effective legal representation for the young person. Too often youth are unaware of their rights, and how to make their needs known to the court. **Effective legal representation**

and a **process to guarantee the rights of youth** and their meaningful participation must be in place. The courts play a critical role in the regular review of cases, at least every three months. Frequent court reviews reduce the likelihood that youth will spend long periods of time in care. Pennsylvania has taken important steps in advancing **court improvement strategies** and needs to continue this effort.

When timely permanence for youth is not achieved, youth languish in foster care – and their well-being outcomes on a host of indicators suffer. The instability that youth face growing up in foster care can negatively impact his or her educational, physical, and behavioral health. The Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act requires Pennsylvania to address **education stability and achievement** as well as meeting the **comprehensive health care needs** of youth in care. We should take this strategic opportunity to address what has been a gap in key supports for many youth.

When all permanency efforts fail and youth age out of the system the family relationships, financial support and

guidance that other young adults rely on to support them in adulthood are not present. For some youth in foster care this happens as early as age 18. Pennsylvania needs to give youth the option to **extend foster care until age 21**, and provide them additional support for education, health insurance and housing as well as ongoing efforts to promote permanency and meaningful connections to caring adults. Some youth will decide to leave at age 18. But if they find they are not prepared for life on their own, they should be allowed the **right to re-enter** care until age 21.

A youth’s needs for permanency, safety and well-being are best met as part of a family. Every youth deserves a legal and permanent family – and Pennsylvania must do more to assure it. By establishing effective policies that promote permanence and enacting **financing policies** which incentivize effective practice, we can achieve better outcomes for youth and realize a “forever family for every child.”

Please visit <http://www.porchlightproject.org/youth09/> for a list of citations.



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This report was made possible in collaboration with Casey Family Programs, whose mission is to provide and improve—and ultimately prevent the need for—foster care. To learn more, visit [www.casey.org](http://www.casey.org). The findings and conclusions presented in this report are those of Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children and do not necessarily reflect the views of Casey Family Programs.