



Because Relationships Matter: Improving Opportunities and Outcomes for Youth in Foster Care Executive Summary

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Developing healthy and lasting relationships is essential for young people to become successful and productive adults. The development of secure and permanent relationships, or “permanency,” is of paramount importance and is essential to the future well-being of maltreated children. Without secure and stable relationships, youth who grow up in foster care have greater difficulty achieving positive life outcomes – in fact, youth who “age out” of foster care after reaching the legal age of majority without permanent relationships face a greater risk of homelessness, unemployment, poverty, and dependence on public assistance. This paper examines best practices to facilitate the development of permanent relationships for children placed in foster care, and assesses Connecticut’s Department of Children and Families’ degree of adherence to these practices.

While our State engages in many best practices that facilitate the development of permanent relationships for children, **Connecticut can and should do more to help children in foster care forge permanent relationships.** Furthermore, DCF is hamstrung in its efforts to foster permanent relationships because of persistent cuts to the agency’s budget. **Both policy and practice improvements and increased investment are needed to help all Connecticut children in foster care achieve permanence.**

I. Recommendations to Achieve Relationships with the Potential for Permanency

Adult family, siblings, and mentors all can potentially be permanent relationships for children in foster care.

Adult Families

In order to thrive, young people need strong relationships with families who are committed to them and can help them effectively prepare for adulthood. To cultivate permanent connections with family, DCF should:

- Ensure that congregate care reduction is accompanied by a robust array of supports and services to help youth succeed in families and communities, including adequate training, recruitment, and retention for foster and adoptive families.
- Continue to implement and monitor the progress of reforms like Family Assessment Response, Permanency Teaming, and increased reliance on kinship care.
- Include permanent adult relationships in “Another Planned Permanent Living Arrangement” (APPLA) planning, and limit APPLA designation to those over 16.

Siblings

For children in foster care, relationships with brothers and sisters can be some of the most important and longest-lasting relationships in their lives. To ensure that young people can develop and sustain meaningful relationships with their siblings, Connecticut should:

- Ensure full compliance with legislation requiring sibling visitation.

- Ensure full implementation of the Sibling Bill of Rights.
- Collect and monitor data on total number of out-of-home adolescents who have siblings.

Mentors

Research shows that mentoring relationships with well-prepared adults can positively influence the lives of young people in care. To help youth develop relationships with supportive adults, the state should:

- Ensure that all DCF youth who request a mentor receive one, and track data on average wait time for youth-mentor matching.
- Ensure that mentoring programs meet the unique needs of young adults in care, and ensure that all mentors are well-trained, well-supervised, and can commit to long-term participation.
- Develop incentives and opportunities to recruit high-qualified mentors.

II. Recommendations for Temporary Relationships that Help Facilitate Permanency

Attorneys and social workers can play an essential role providing specific services that help young people in foster care eventually achieve permanency.

Attorneys

Attorneys can play a critical role in the lives of youth in foster care by helping young people engage in their own case planning process and achieve permanency. To ensure that all children in foster care have high-quality legal representation, Connecticut should:

- Require appointed counsel to regularly meet with and consult their youth clients and, in an age-appropriate manner, include them in all meetings and court proceedings pertaining to their futures.
- Provide attorneys for youth at risk of being discharged from DCF care, to help achieve better outcomes for the state’s most vulnerable young people.
- Develop and monitor measures to ensure high-quality legal representation, including appropriate caseloads, standards of practice, training, ongoing monitoring and evaluation, and quality assessment.

Social Workers

A healthy and trusting relationship with a social worker is an important precursor to forming other lasting relationships and achieving permanency. Important reforms impacting social workers must be implemented, including:

- Conduct a workload and caseload study to determine appropriate and maximally effective standards.
- Lower caseloads through administrative or legislative changes, thereby limiting staff turnover to help meet children’s needs and increase permanency.
- Facilitate positive relationships between youth and social workers.

III. Recommendations to Address Systemic Barriers to Successful Relationships and Outcomes

While Connecticut is in many ways moving in the right direction, there are several structural barriers hindering further progress in creating successful relationships and outcomes for youth in state care.

Cuts to DCF’s Budget and the Need to Re-Invest Saved Funds

In order to ensure the safety, health, and well-being of children who remain in the care of child welfare agencies, it is important that state savings due to decreased numbers of children entering foster care, congregate care reduction, and other cost-effective reforms are “re-invested,” or put back, into the child welfare agencies to help provide needed supports and services. **In contrast, DCF’s budget has been reduced by 20% over the past five fiscal years**, and re-investment has not occurred. To ensure the state is able to meet children’s needs now and in the future, Connecticut must:

- Protect DCF’s budget from additional cuts.

- Reinvest current and any future savings back into the DCF budget, to invest in lower caseloads for social workers; enhanced community services; increased support for kinship families; increased support for foster families; and increased programming in newly identified areas of need.
- Consider legislation creating a “re-investment fund” to ensure that state savings from child welfare reforms are put back into the DCF budget.

Discharge of Vulnerable Youth in Foster Care at 18

Youth who can remain in foster care until age 21 have greater educational attainment, higher lifetime earnings, and reduced involvement with the law. But in Connecticut, youth who turn 18 in foster care are permitted to remain in DCF care only if they are finishing high school, enrolled in a college or vocational program, or enrolled in an approved job training program. Those youth who are least ready to be on their own are the ones who are forced to “age out” at 18. To fulfill its responsibility to the most vulnerable young adults it has raised, Connecticut should:

- Allow all eligible youth to remain in DCF care until 21, capturing additional federal funds and saving the state money while helping the state’s most vulnerable youth.
- Build and support innovative programs designed to help 18 to 21 year olds develop relationships.

Youth Empowerment and Engagement

Authentic engagement of young people in DCF care is critical to both appropriate young adult development *and* to the formulation of strong DCF policy and practice. To ensure that the needs and voices of young people are heard, the state should:

- Ensure the continuation of the Youth Advisory Board program and provide opportunities for further youth engagement with DCF policy.
- Encourage all youth to attend their administrative case reviews (ACR) and mandate that ACRs not be held during school hours.
- Require the identification of important adults in each child’s case plan, and track data on whether this is fulfilled in order to measure progress.
- Begin Adolescent Transition plan well before 90 days in advance of a child’s 18th birthday, and provide additional tools and resources to help social workers and young people create a comprehensive and ultimately successful transition plan.

Because the State has removed children in foster care from their homes to protect their safety, the State has assumed responsibility for facilitating the development and maintenance of permanent relationships for these children. While there have been a number of significant and encouraging improvements in Connecticut’s child welfare system, Connecticut can still do more to cultivate permanency for young people in its care. The recommendations in this paper can provide a crucial place to start.