An examination of theory and promising practice for achieving permanency for teens before they age out of foster care

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A R T I C L E   I N F O

Article history:
Received 29 July 2009
Received in revised form 18 October 2009
Accepted 20 October 2009
Available online 28 October 2009

Keywords:
Permanency
Teens
Foster care
Independent living
Promising practice

A B S T R A C T

In this paper research is presented that examines the efficacy of Independent Living (IL) services in preparing foster youth to live “independently”, and calls into question the appropriateness of an “independence” goal for youth aging out of foster care. The paper then reviews the emerging conceptualization of youth permanency in child welfare practice that focuses on lifelong connections to kin and fictive kin as requirements for permanency. The paper then reports on the success of a federally-funded demonstration project that served youth in residential treatment facilities and group homes in New York City aging out of care. It examines elements of the project model that were highly successful in achieving family-based permanency for a significant proportion of youth referred to the program and concludes that it is a promising practice model for the profession.

1. Introduction

The majority of youth who age out of foster care face enormous challenges. Many leave care disconnected from supportive adults, services, and socioeconomic supports that would significantly increase their chances of becoming productive, self-sustaining adults (Metzger, 2006). Research indicates that youth who age out of foster care to “independent living” are more likely to experience homelessness, unemployment, unplanned pregnancy, legal system involvement, substance abuse, and lack even the basic health care services. They also are less likely to have a high school diploma, earn enough to support themselves, or participate in post-secondary education or training (Courtney, Dwoorky, Ruth, Havlick & Bost, 2005). Foster care support, which provides housing, financial support, and a range of health, education and other needed services, typically ends when youth are developmentally unprepared to assume full adult roles and responsibilities. Furthermore, Independent Living (IL) programs have proven inadequate to prepare youth for “independence” in any meaningful way. Too many youth leave care unconnected to committed adults in their lives who could buffer the challenges they face and serve as safe havens in times of need.

Increasing policy, program, and practice attention are being devoted to developing new strategies to enhance the capacities of youth emancipating from foster care to achieve better outcomes. The Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997 and, most recently, the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008 have strengthened the mandate that each youth leave foster care with a permanent family through safe reunification with their parents, adoption, guardianship, or that they have “another planned permanent living arrangement” (Center for the Study of Law and Social Policy, 2008). The Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008 provides several tools for prioritizing family connections. The bill gives states the option of extending financial supports to kin providers and older youth. It includes new mandates for notifying kin, analyzing the use of kin foster care, and explaining foster care benefits and requirements to kin (Kerman & Glasheen, 2009).

Until recently, however, the issue of permanence for youth has lacked sufficient attention in the child welfare community and misconceptions about the issue abound, including that people do not want to adopt teens, teens do not want to be adopted, and that there are not enough families willing to adopt teens. Moreover, despite the rapidly burgeoning research literature on youth leaving care, there has been surprisingly little attention paid to the reconnection of former foster youth with birth families and other kin in the post care period. The empirical findings are scattered and often hidden in studies examining outcomes for former foster youth and the evaluation of IL programs (Collins, Paris, & Ward, 2008). Moreover, there has been little or no attention paid to well-established theories of child development that shed serious doubt on the assumption of age 18 as the appropriate life-marker transition age for “adulthood” and launching foster youth into independence. There is an abundance of research indicating that successful youth development is inextricably linked to relationships with the family of origin and other fictive kin that influence developmental trajectories and life changes in adulthood (Arnett & Tanner, 2006; Cooney & Kurz,
Adolescents on the path to adulthood rely upon their families for myriad forms of support, support that is critically important to their development and future life outcomes. Reestablishing these family connection for teens before they exit out of foster care, no matter what age they are, is the strongest and most positive youth development program the child welfare system can offer, and it is imperative that child welfare professionals identify ‘promising practice’ service models that are effective at achieving this outcome for teens if the goals of the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008 are to be met.

In this paper research from developmental and socio-psychology on the transition into adulthood for the general U.S. population is examined. This research will indicate that the transition to adulthood is a gradual process for most adolescents, unrelated to a specific nominal age, and that true “adult” functioning in terms of cognitive, behavioral, and social maturity is not achieved for the majority of emerging adults until the third decade of life. Next research is examined from the child development literature on the critical role of social capital (parents, kin, social supports) in guiding and supporting youth during this transition to adulthood and the deleterious consequences for them when this support is absent. Then, turning the attention to the child welfare system, research is presented that examines the efficacy and adequacy of IL services in preparing youth to live “independently”, and calls into question the appropriateness of an “independence” goal for any youth in care. The paper then reviews a new conceptualization of youth permanency that appears to be gaining greater currency within the profession, one that is reframing the concept of “permanency” for youth in care in terms of lifelong connections to kin and fictive kin. But, while this new philosophy is emerging, the paper notes that effective practice models for finding permanent parents for teens before they age out of care still lag behind changing conceptualizations. The Children’s Bureau (Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS)) views the development of these effective service models as critical to practice change within the profession and has made it a priority funding area for demonstration projects. This paper reports on the success of one such federally-funded demonstration project that serviced youth in residential treatment facilities and group homes in New York City. It examines elements of the project model that were highly successful in achieving family-based permanency for a significant proportion of youth referred to the program and concludes that it is a “promising practice” model for the profession.

2. Emerging adulthood and home leaving

During the latter half of the 20th century and into the first decade of the 21st century, the transition to adulthood for U.S. teens has become longer, more complex, uncertain, and diverse (Arnett, 2007). The median age for completing school, marrying, and becoming a parent has steadily risen, and young adults well into their 20s continue to juggle work and school, live at home longer, and delay marriage and their own nuclear family formation. Although the median age at which adolescents first leave home is about 19 years, 40% of those who leave home for the first time between the ages of 18 and 24 report to live in their parental household at some time thereafter, although usually for only a temporary period. About 25% of children do not leave home for the first time until age 22 or later (Aquilino, 1996). Furthermore, the economic demands for, and returns to, education have increased relentlessly during the past four decades. In response, young people have delayed the assumption of adult roles until their education has been completed, and the data indicate a shrinking fraction of young people entering full-time work before their early twenties, and a growing number doing so only toward the end of their twenties (Furstenberg, Rumbaut, & Settersten, 2005).

Arnett (2007) conceptualizes the transition from adolescence into adulthood as “emerging adulthood”. He describes the period from (roughly) 18 to 25 as a period in the life course with certain common features, different in important ways from adolescence that precedes it and young adulthood that follows it. He describes this period as one in which progress toward independence is made rather than achieved. Arnett and Taber (1994) identify three developmental domains in which these transitions to adulthood take place: the cognitive domain, which is characterized by the development of adult reasoning that includes not only logical reasoning but also subjective feelings and personal experiences, a sense of responsibility to others, and interdependence within a larger society; the emotional domain, which is characterized by the development of autonomy from one’s parents (not complete separation but mutuality and reciprocity as equal adults) and the ability to establish intimacy in adult relationships; and the behavioral domain, which is characterized by the establishment of firm impulse control and complying with social conventions.

Arnett and Tanner’s (2006) conceptualization of emerging adulthood is backed up by empirical research. Work by Cohen, Kasen, Chen, Hartmark, and Gordon (2003) highlights the gradual nature of the transition to adulthood. They found linear increases over time in the dimensions of independence in residential, financial, romantic, and parenting domains for both males and females, and the consolidation of adult status closer to the end of the third decade of life (late 20s) rather than the second (late teens). Other research has found that cognitive–emotional–behavioral development often continues in important ways during emerging adulthood, and that the period is one of especially heightened vulnerability resulting from disjunctions between the developing brain and behavioral/cognitive systems that mature along different timetables under the control of both common and independent biological processes (Steinberg, 2005).

Further research has found that even though adolescents may be able to show the same level of cognitive ability as adults in making decisions, they may make different decisions because they are more likely than adults to be affected by psychological factors, such as emotions of the moment and the desire to be accepted by peers. The evidence suggests that emerging adults experience difficulty maintaining balanced cognitive–emotional representations, especially if emotions are strongly activated, as when issues of security and survival are threatened (Arnett & Tanner, 2006). Findings from studies by Greenberg, Schimel, Martens, Solomon, and Pyszczynski (2001), and Pyszczynski, Greenberg, and Solomon (1999) suggest that emerging adults continue to be easily swayed by their emotions, which distort thinking in self-serving and self-protective ways.

In terms of the ability to maintain healthy and balanced interpersonal relationships, research has found that higher levels of ego development (usually achieved during the later stages of emerging adulthood) are related to greater skill in negotiating needs for autonomy/relatedness and in balancing relationship dimensions in close peer and intimate relationships (Schultz & Selman, 1998). A study by Scharf, Maysseless, and Rivenson-Baron (2004) examined the association between attachment representations and successful coping with developmental tasks of emerging adulthood. These tasks included coping effectively with the home-leaving transition, advancing in the development of the capacity for mature intimacy in friendships and romantic relationships while maintaining close and autonomous relationships with parents, and developing a sense of efficacy and individuation. They found that although these developmental tasks begin to evolve before late adolescence, they are a more central and salient part of emerging adulthood functioning during the third decade of life (late 20s).

This evidence from developmental research cited above on young teen’s transitions to adulthood, including their living arrangements, educational patterns, and entry into the work force indicates that few
young people in the U.S. are ready to assume adult roles and live “independently” before their mid-twenties. Despite these findings which support a phased and delayed transition to adulthood for young people extending well into the third decade of life, child welfare policy in the U.S. continues to convey the expectation that youth in foster care should assume the responsibilities of adulthood at the early age of 18 when they are expected to “age out” of foster care to “independent living”. These expectations are inconsistent with the practical reality of young people’s lives in the 21st century, and it is essential we hold the same high hopes for youth in foster care as we do for our own children in terms of connections, living situations, and expectations for their future (Louisell, 2009).

3. The importance of social capital in emerging adulthood

Successful youth development is inextricably linked to relationships with the family of origin that influence developmental trajectories and life changes in adulthood (Arnett & Tanner, 2006; Cooney & Kurz, 1996). The family of origin functions as a base of operations for the explorations that occur prior to adulthood, both literally (through co-residence in a parental household, parental financial subsidies, and other material support) and figuratively (through the availability of parents and kin as sources of wisdom and guidance). Adolescents on the path to early adulthood rely upon their families for myriad forms of support. This support is critically important in the process of identity development, and may be manifest in multiple forms, such as instrumental, emotional, or informational support (Collins, Paris & Ward, 2008). For example, family relationships guide a young person’s expectations, feelings, information processing, as well as emotion regulation in situations that are attachment related (Aquilino, 2006; Scharf, Mayseless, & Kivenson-Baron, 2004).

Coleman (1990) uses the concept of “social capital” to designate this complex social support system that parents (or significant other adults in the child’s life) garner to advance their children’s chances of success in life. Social Capital Theory (Coleman, 1990) refers to these relational networks, social trust, and norms as fundamental forms of social capital. Social capital describes an interpersonal resource upon which individuals can draw to enhance their opportunities in life (Putnam, 1995, 2000). It includes obligations, expectations, and trustworthiness embodied in social structures, the potential for information in social relations, and norms and effective sanctions. It is formed as a result of relationships between parents and children, and is enhanced when the family is embedded in social relationships with other families and community institutions. Social capital conveys benefits to individuals within this social network through the provision of information, influence and control, and social solidarity (Sandefur & Lauman, 1998). Social capital theory emphasizes the importance of social patterns of acceptable behavior that support desirable social outcomes in that they provide for the exchange of information that facilitates outcomes desirable to group. Without social networks there is no possibility for the exchange of information or the enforcement of norms that facilitate collective goals (Goddard, 2003). According to social capital theory individuals engaging in relationships characterized by high levels of social trust are more likely to openly exchange information and to act with caring and benevolence toward one another than those in relationships lacking in trust.

High levels of social capital in a child’s life have been linked to more positive life outcomes and productive personal outcomes such as occupational viability, individual health and psychological well being (for a review, see Baker, 2000). Furstenberg and Hughes (1995) showed that social capital, measured as parents’ social investments in their children and the community, increases children’s odds of graduating from high school and attending college. Findings from longitudinal studies of the associations between parents’ support for, and adolescent progress toward, separation-individuation reveal that healthy separation-individuation predicts adolescent adjustment and the ability to gain adult-sufficiency in emerging adulthood (Allen & Hauser, 1996; Bell, Allen, Hauser & O’Connor, 1996). Further research has indicated that forms of parental support are correlated with adolescents’ sense of self-worth and adjustment (Scholte, van Lienhout, & van Aken, 2001), and life satisfaction (Young, Miller, Norton, & Hill, 1995), and that smaller social support networks (less social capital) are associated with higher likelihood of homelessness (Reilly, 2003).

Family relationships influence emerging adults’ psychological development (including adjustment to new roles, health and risk-taking behaviors, capacity for intimacy, and identity formation), and autonomous/secure states of mind with regard to attachment relationships emanating from positive parent–child experiences are carried forward into adult intimate relationships and the capacity for establishing healthy adult interpersonal skills (Masten, Obradovic & Burt, 2006; Scharf et al., 2004). In addition, a number of studies have pointed to the importance of parental investment in explaining diverse patterns of coping with social and economic disadvantage in adulthood (Furstenberg & Hughes, 1995; Garmezy, 1985; Williams & Kornblum, 1985).

Individual differences in temperament, attachment history, or traumatic interpersonal experiences appear to be critical factors in the degree to which young adults are able to garner and utilize social capital (Labouvie-Vief, Zhang, & Jain, 2003; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2001). A large proportion of youth who age out of foster care experience significant social capital deficits. Unconnected to committed and permanent adults in their lives they do not have the benefit of their birth parents’ preparation for the adult world. By its very nature, foster care disrupts a youth’s relationships with parents and extended family (Freundlich, 2009). A significant proportion of youth in care (particularly those living in out-of-home care situations such as residential treatment facilities and group homes) have few or no relationships or connections with parents, extended family members, or significant other adults who can provide the needed social support to make a successful transition to adulthood. Since the family unit is the central provider of lifelong relationships for children (Collins et al., 2008), foster youth without families do not have the comfort and security that belonging to a family network brings, and they lack models for creating resilient families, successful work lives, and strong cultural and ethnic identities. Importantly, as they approach adulthood they lack a vital safety net (Freundlich, 2009).

For older foster youth (ages 16–18) many child welfare agencies have long since discontinued their efforts to sustain the youth’s relationships with family, reconnect youth with family members with whom contact has been lost over time, or assist youth in the developing of new relational networks with caring adults who can become “family” for youth as they enter emerging adulthood. In addition, because of their histories of child abuse and neglect, many youth preparing to leave foster care have physical, mental health, and developmental issues that elevate the importance of having caring committed adults available to support and guide them. They face the very real risk of aging out of qualification for the kind of help that most young people in modern societies require and receive as they establish themselves as independent young adults. The absence of strong “social scaffolding” in the lives of foster youth aging out of care is, no doubt, the critical predictor of the deleterious post-foster care outcomes that research has recently uncovered. The pursuit of enduring relationships, alongside the delivery of support services, is essential in “permanency oriented” child welfare services (Kerman & Glasheen, 2009).

4. Examining independent living programs

Adolescents comprise a significant proportion of the foster care population in the United States. In 2006, 40% of children in foster care, comprising more than 190,000, were age 13 and older; and one-fifth of the children were older adolescents 16 and older. Over the past decade, the number of youth who age out of foster care has steadily increased. In 1998 17,000 youth “aged out” of foster care; by 2006 that
number had increased by 50% to more than 26,000 youth (Kids are Waiting, 2009). In 2006, only 32,000 youth ages 12–20 (or 14%) lived in kinship family foster homes, while 35% of youth lived in group homes, institutions, or supervised independent living (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (2008)). Freundlich (2009) notes that most youth in care live in group homes or institutions that do not provide opportunities for them to form the kind of lasting relationships with responsible adults that will help them move into adulthood.

The primary federal policy designed to assist youth with the transitioning out of foster care is the Foster Care Independence Program (FCIP) which was intended to provide resources to states to develop programs and services to assist youth to establish independence after leaving care. Although FCIPs provide a range of services that could be expected to prepare youth for the transition into adulthood on some functional dimensions, data have shown that only about two-thirds of eligible foster youth receive independent living services, with the quality of services varying significantly among states (Courtney, 2005). Furthermore, recent evaluations of independent living programs have found few impacts of FCIPs on any measureable successful outcome for youth exiting care, leaving evaluators to conclude that there is no reason to believe that the services have a significant positive impact on any of the concrete indicators of successful transition to adulthood, such as educational attainment, employment, earnings, and avoidance of economic hardship, etc. (Courtney & Zinn, 2008). These findings, combined with research findings reported earlier on child cognitive, emotional, and behavioral development, have led scholars to raise doubts whether a healthy or successful adult by any definition truly lives “independently” from others and is self-reliant in meeting their needs at any age. Let alone age 18 (Iglehart, 1994; Reindal, 1999), and in child welfare circles the term ‘independence’ has recently been rejected as a policy and practice goal in favor of ‘interdependence’ as a synonym for self-reliance and interpersonal autonomy (Samuels & Pryce, 2008).

Current child welfare philosophy is evolving to the position that successful transition from care is not only dependent on effective independent living skills, but is likely to be dependent on other aspects of child welfare policy implementation within the service system (Collins et al., 2008). The FCIP and the programs interventions it supports do not specifically address assisting youth with reconnection to birth family, kin, and other significant other adults in their lives that will be the permanent safety net for them in the future (Collins et al., 2008). Research suggests that many youth exiting care have a need unforeseen in Chafee, i.e., enduring, supportive relationships with adults as they transition into adulthood. Foster youth in the study reported the absence of caring, stable relationships with responsible adults that will help them move into adulthood.

Although at one time it may have been a developmentally appropriate expectation for a young person to be on their own at age 18, demographic evidence clearly indicates that in contemporary U.S. society young people are at a decided disadvantage if they lack the support of their family, or a family like unit (Aquilino, 1996; Avery & Freundlich, 2009; Greeson & Bowen, 2008; Goldscheider & Goldscheider, 1993; Mendes, 2006). The failure of the foster care system, and independent living programs in particular, to prepare youth for connectedness to caring adults who can provide the supportive net as they explore adulthood is well-documented (e.g., Courtney et al., 2001; Georgiades, 2005; Mann-Feder & White, 2003; McMillen, Rideout, Fisher, & Tucker, 1997).

5. Hearing from youth in care

The search for permanence, including a reliable, lifelong parenting relationship and the opportunity to maintain contact with family and other important people, is described by youth and foster alumni as a core need to be balanced with the simultaneous need for independence (Samuels & Pryce, 2008). Foster youth report rarely being involved in the decisions made about their short- or long-term care plans made for them (Unrau, 2006), and report having minimal, if any, control over maintaining core relationships with those to whom they are attached, most notably siblings (Harrison, 1999; Herrick & Piccus, 2005; Mullender, 1999). In a study by Geenen and Powers (2007) current and former foster care youth emphasized the importance of taking part and having a say in the important decisions that impact their lives while in care, and the importance of caring long-term relationships with adults as they transition into adulthood. Former foster youth in the study reported the absence of caring, stable relationships in their lives and feelings of isolation and disconnection after exiting from care.

Caseworkers interviewed in the Geenen and Powers (2007) study recommended that questions regarding a foster youth’s contact with birth parent(s) be revisited as the child becomes older and immediate concerns regarding safety or care-taking are less of a concern. The fact is that, although many child welfare systems have worked diligently to become more family centered, there remains a fundamental tension between child protection and family services (Collins et al., 2008) that undermines case work focused on reconnecting foster teens with their birth family and extended kin. McMillen and Tucker (1999) and Freundlich, Avery, Munson and Gertenzang (2006) raise excellent questions in wondering whether the child welfare system does not consider these family members as placement settings while the youth is still in care given the reported incidence of the extent of teens’ reconnection with birth families after they leave care.

6. Deleterious consequences of not achieving permanency

Young people “aging out” of the child welfare system are undergoing a dual transition—one from the care of the system to autonomy and a second from childhood to adulthood—and they face numerous challenges in making this transition and many experience a range of negative outcomes (Shook, Vaughn, Litschge, Kolivkoski, & Schelbe, 2008). With overwhelming consistency, research suggests a startling constellation of increased risk factors for deleterious outcomes for youth aging out of foster care (Samuels & Pryce, 2008). These include homelessness, early pregnancy, incarcerations, victimizations, and poverty (Barth, 1990; Courtney et al., 2005).

They quickly confront the harsh realities of life as an adult when they lack family relations and resources to support them (Courtney & Hughes-Heuring, 2005; Freundlich, 2009; Shook et al., 2009), and are at high-risk of failing to meet even minimal levels of self-sufficiency and acceptable behaviors (McDonald, Allen, Westerfelt, & Pilavin, 1993). Growing literature on foster youth outcomes illuminates a legitimate and very worrying concern that this population will experience their adulthood in the context of other public service systems and institutions (Samuels & Pryce, 2008).

Two recent studies examining the experiences of youth following their exit from care found that these youth often struggle to complete their education, they frequently have significant health and mental health problems; they often are unemployed or underemployed and face poverty; and, as a group they are more socially isolated than their non-foster care peers (Courtney & Dworsky, 2005; Pecora et al., 2005). They often have had contact with the justice system, live in socially disorganized neighborhoods that have higher rates of crime, experience substance abuse or mental health problems, leave the child welfare system with educational deficiencies, and are either unemployed or experience employment instability (Courtney et al., 2005; Vaughn, Shook, & McMillen, 2008).

In a similar study Shook et al. (2009) found that youth often attach to “deviant peer relationships” for support after exiting care, and youth with high levels of deviant peer affiliations were more likely to be
fired from a job, to possess a diagnosis of antisocial personality disorder, to report higher levels of substance use, and to report being arrested than youth in the low or medium deviant peer affiliation groups. It is interesting to note that youth in the low deviant peer affiliation group had higher levels of family support and lower levels of neighborhood disorder than youth in the other two classes.

Foster youth also experience risk related to socio-emotional well being. A recent collaborative study by Harvard Medical School, Casey Family programs, and state agencies in Washington and Oregon found that former foster youth (ages 19–30) demonstrated post traumatic stress disorder stress rates up to twice as high as U.S. War Veterans (Pecora et al., 2005). In a comparative study, Lawrence, Carlson, and Egeland (2006) report foster youth in their sample indicated mental health and behavioral problems at rates more severe and more frequent than children from similar backgrounds (e.g., maltreatment) who were not placed in foster care. Even in studies where mental health is one of many outcome domains assessed, foster youth exhibit depression (Barth, 1990) and other psychological health problems at rates higher than in the general populations (Courtney & Hughes-Heuring, 2005).

Numerous studies have shown that a high percentage of the homeless population on the streets of U.S. cities and towns are former foster care youth. For example, the Coalition for the Homeless reported that 60% of the homeless in New York City’s Municipal Shelters have some history of foster care (Coalition for the Homeless, 1989). Shaffer and Canton (1984) in their study entitled “Runaway and Homeless Youth in New York City” found that 50% of the homeless young people who came to shelters had previously lived in a setting provided by the Child Welfare System, either in a foster home or a group home. In a study of 168 youth interviewed at Covenant House, the only youth shelter in New York City that accepts youth up to the age of 21, it was found that 27% of them had spent time with a foster parent, and another 43% had spent time in foster group homes (Margeson & Lipman, 1990). The National Foster Care Awareness Project reported that 40% of the nation’s homeless were in foster care as children (National Association of Social Workers, 1991, October). In addition, in a survey conducted by the Chicago Coalition to the Homeless (1989) approximately 44% of homeless youth in Chicago report having been wards of the state. Furthermore, 46% of youth in runaway and homeless shelters in New Jersey reported that they had lived in New Jersey’s foster care system in the previous year before they entered the shelter (data provided by New Jersey Division of Youth and Family Services, 2005).

Even more disturbing are results from research indicating that there is an intergenerational component to post-foster care homelessness that could well impact future generations as well. Homeless parents with a history of foster care are far more likely than other parents to have their own children in foster care. The National Alliance to End Homelessness conducted a survey of 21 housing provider organizations serving 1134 people in the programs during a two week period (Roman & Wolfe, 1995). They found a drastic difference between homeless parents who grew up in foster care compared to homeless parents who did not grow up in foster care. Of those who had no foster care history and were homeless, 27% had at least one child who had a foster care history or was in foster care. Of those who had a foster care history and were homeless, 77% had at least one child who had a foster care history or was in foster care. Furthermore, one of the main precursors to any child entering foster care is having an active case open with the local Child Protection Service (CPS). The Institute for Children and Poverty (1997) examined the difference between homeless parents who did and did not grow up in foster care in New York City. They found that homeless parents without a history of foster care had active cases with CPS 29% of the time, while 19% of them had been previously homeless. On the other hand, homeless parents with a history of foster care had active cases with CPS 73% of the time, while 49% of them had been previously homeless.

7. Conclusions regarding youth permanency and child welfare practice

State and federal policy and support programs for youth aging out of care currently reflect a focus on preparing youth for “independent living” at age 18 and, until recently, have had a resultant lack of focus on developing and nurturing social capital prior to exit from care. In recent years there has been a growing awareness in the child welfare community (as evidenced in the literature and Federal grant RFPs) for the need to develop and implement policies and practices that ensure that youth have permanent committed relationships (adoption, guardianship, or other permanent outcomes) with adults before they leave care. This awareness has been accelerated by recent studies examining the post-foster care functioning of youth. These studies have provided convincing evidence that most youth who age out of foster care at 18 simply cannot make it on their own (Courtney et al., 2005; Courtney & Dworsky, 2006; Furstenberg et al., 2005; Masten et al., 2006). They simply do not have the developmental maturity needed for successful entry into adult roles—especially youth with emotional, psychological, educational, and behavioral deficits resulting from early childhood experiences of abuse, neglect, and abandonment. Furthermore, there is a growing awareness that “independent living” is simply not a feasible option for the majority of youth in foster care who, unlike children who are not in foster care, lack the social scaffolding of stable family and community networks to support them (Voices Issue Brief, 2004).

Of particular concern to the child welfare community are youth aging out of foster care who are members of racial/ethnic minority groups, who comprise the majority of youth aging out of the system. The transition to ‘independence’ is particularly difficult for members of racial/ethnic minority groups because, in addition to personal identity exploration facing all emerging youth, these youth also must deal with identity issues in relation to their racial/ethnic heritage—and these racial/ethnic identity domains are far more central for youth of color than for Caucasian youth (Phinney, 2006; Phinney & Alipuria, 1990). For youth of color, a sense of membership in an ethnic, racial, or cultural group is an underlying issue that pervades and influences progress toward adulthood. In addition, these youth are frequently faced with discriminatory attitudes and evidence of their lower status and power in society which forces them to have to continually negotiate their sense of self in relation to other groups.

Another accelerator of this change in focus in the child welfare community is the consistent finding from studies of youth leaving care that they frequently connect to their families of origin, including residing with family members, after leaving foster care (Courtney & Dworsky, 2006; Courtney et al., 2001; Iglehart & Becerra, 2002). Because homelessness is a significant threat to this population (Park, Metraux, Brodbar, & Culhane, 2004) successful reunification with kin prior to exit from care may save these youth from being on the streets. Although family reuniﬁcation is a core objective during the time children and youth are in care, the process of reuniﬁng with families after leaving care is outside the scope of the child welfare system and often neglected in child welfare case planning. Because these post-foster care connections with family occur outside the child welfare system little is known about the process and outcomes of these reconnections (Collins et al., 2008).

While permanency has for decades been a core principle of child welfare work, its accepted deﬁnition within the child welfare community in terms of lifelong connections to kin and fictive kin appears to be gaining even greater currency (Collins et al., 2008). This is evidenced in a deﬁnition of permanancy offered by Frey and Greenblatt (2005, p. 3) “Permanency” is about having an enduring family relationship that is safe and meant to last a lifetime; offers the legal rights and social status of full family membership; provides for physical, emotional, social, cognitive, and spiritual well being, and assures lifelong connections to birth and extended family, siblings, other significant
adults, family history and traditions, race and ethnic heritage, culture, religion, and language. As early as 2000 Charles and Nelson (2000) discussed the importance of permanency for older adolescents in foster care in terms of the need to help youth make lasting connections to family, friends, and supportive networks, and Bussiere (2006) recommends integrated service plans that create permanency for older youth in terms of social supports, involving older youth as participants in their own permanency plans, identifying caring and supportive adults, exploring adoption options, and including family members in reunification plans. This “social capital” based definition of permanence is being driven by research that is just beginning to explore supportive networks and relationships as protective factors against many negative outcomes predicted for this population (Massinga & Pecora, 2004; Perry, 2006; Propp, Ortega, & NewHeart, 2003).

So, while general resilience and youth development literature outside of foster care contexts has long identified the benefits for youth of being connected to supportive adults, including its positive effects on self-esteem, psychological health, educational achievements, and social skill development (Massinga & Pecora, 2004; Perry, 2006; Samuels & Pryce, 2008), it is slowly developing as a priority focus in the child welfare literature and research. For example, the presence of at least one caring adult who offers social support and connectedness was identified as a protective factor for youth across a variety of risk conditions in studies by Fraser, Kirby, and Smokowski (2004) and Werner and Smith (2001), and studies by both Munson and McMillen (2007) and Ahrens, DuBois, Richardson, Fan, and Lozano (2008) showed that the presence of a natural mentor was significantly associated with foster youth’s positive psychological outcomes.

Commensurate with this refocusing of the definition of youth permanence in child welfare has been the emergence of “best practice” strategies for attaining that permanence for youth aging out of care (National Resource Center for Foster Care and Permanency Planning & Casey Family Services, 2004). The need to achieve and sustain family-based permanence for youth has prompted the development of child welfare practices that: help young people and their families cope with trauma, separation, and other challenges that can be barriers to reconnecting with kin and fictive kin; fully engaging youth in their own permanency planning; and serious reconsideration of the role of birth families as planning and permanency resources (Freundlich, 2009). Practice models are calling for youth-centered permanency planning teams: developing an individual team for each youth; asking the youth to identify important members of their own team; making the youth the central team player on the team; joining youth, birth parents, foster parents, family members, and other important adults together with professionals on the planning team; and facilitating a pro-active and continuous teaming process until youth reach permanence rather than episodic or crisis-driven meetings (Frey, 2009). In fact a variety of best practice model programs are using family teaming to involve youth and families in the permanency process (e.g., Permanency Team, Team Decision Making, Family Group Decision Making) (Kerman & Glasheen, 2009). Frey (2009) further suggests fully involving youth in their own permanency plans by: asking them whom they love, who loves them, and to whom they want to be close and connected and asking them about blood and legal relatives, informal family members and other significant adults (teachers, coaches, mentors, etc.) they are close to.

8. Promising practice model

Attention is now turned to a model demonstration project, funded by the Children’s Bureau (DHHS) during 2004–2008, that used a “social capital building” model to achieve permanence for teens at risk of aging out of care unconnected to permanent families. The program model is based in the assumption that the strongest, most secure, and most enduring “social capital” for aging out of care is a permanent nuclear and extended family achieved through adoption or other permanent commitment.

8.1. Target population and approach

The “Permanent Parents for Teens” project was a federally-funded demonstration effort funded through the Children’s Bureau at the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. The goal of the project was to find permanent adoptive parents for teens that were freed for adoption or to find committed permanent parents who would morally adopt teens who are not freed but in danger of discharge from foster care to homelessness. Using a multi-prong approach, the project tackled the problem of finding permanent homes for referred teens in the care of New York City’s (NYC) foster care system before they were discharged from care. Target teens were currently residing in congregate care facilities in and around the NYC metropolitan area. The project utilized a partnership between NYC’s Administration for Children’s Services (ACS) and the grantee agency You Gotta Believe. Teens were referred to the project by staff at both the residential treatment facilities and the staff at the DSS.

8.2. Project model

The project model out stationed specialized staff at fifteen different residential facilities and group homes in and around New York City and Westchester County, including eight residential treatment centers and six group homes operated by NYC’s Administration for Children’s Services’ (ACS) Office of Direct Care, and ACS’s Office of Youth Development (OYD). Through the regular presence of project staff out stationed in these facilities they were able to regularly interact with facility social workers and resident teens and build up ongoing and consistent relationships in support of the youth. They were able to provide on-site training about teen permanency, attend staff meetings for teens, and become a part of the management culture in these programs that facilitated their efforts to refocus planning efforts on youth permanency.

8.3. Child-specific recruitment approach

The project accepted referrals of teens residing in these, and other, congregate care facilities. Specialized case-work activity focused on a child-specific recruitment approach called Permanency Action Recruitment Teams (PART). PART meetings were convened for all teens referred to the project, unless a permanent resource had already been identified for them at the time of referral. The PART meeting brought together all parties involved in the permanency planning process for the teen, including individuals in the teen’s life who could potentially be a permanence resource for them, and focused on goal setting and strategy development for achieving permanency for teens prior to their exit from care. The PART meetings were attended by the teen, the teen’s social worker, facilities staff, and other individuals involved in the teen’s life (relatives, acquaintances, etc.). The meetings were led by the family permanency advocate, a teen permanency advocate (both project staff members), and the teen themselves. Prior to a PART meeting the family permanency advocate would work diligently with the teen to identify significant others (kin, fictive kin, friends, acquaintances) in their life with whom they had a positive constructive relationship and who could potentially be a permanent resource for them. This included scouring their case files for potential names of individuals who previously had been foster parents, friends, teachers, etc. The staff member then contacted these individuals and invited them to take part in the PART meeting, made home visits to people who couldn’t make a day-time meeting, offered to arrange to get people who know the teen to special meetings, and reached out to relatives not previously considered as a permanency resource.
In cases where teens were unable to identify potential permanency resources in their lives at the time of referral, project workers immediately involved the teens in opportunities for sharing time and space with prospective permanent parents including: hiring the teen as a training consultant and panelist during the Adopting Older Kids And Youth (A-OKAY) classes; hiring a teen to work around the office where waiting families often came to go through books, look at pictures, use the internet, etc.; invited waiting teens to all agency events such as holiday parties (Halloween and Christmas), summer picnics, trips to amusement parks and minor league baseball games, etc., which offer waiting teens and parents an opportunity to share the same time and space; and, setting up individualized special events that provide an opportunity to bring together youth and prospective parents, such as talent shows, craft events, etc.

8.4. Parent education and training

The grantee agency You Gotta Believe, a licensed foster care agency, held certification trainings in eight different locations and in and around the New York City area convenient to all families and at after-hour and weekend times convenient to families. These trainings were heavily advertised throughout the community and were open to anyone who heard the message and decided to attend the trainings, included those who were invited by a project worker, a friend or neighbor, or invited by a teen. Attendance at the trainings was completely voluntary and anyone who walked through the door was welcomed to participate.

These trainings formed a critically important role in the project model since they focused on parent preparation for teen placement in the home. The rotating nature of the ten separate classes (30h of training) meant that families could join the trainings at any time and start the classes in any order, providing maximum flexibility for prospective families. These trainings were designed to prepare new families for unconditional commitment to teens and to increase the receptivity of trained families for youth placement in the future. Through these trainings the project was able to license the family, place the teen into the licensed home, and then transfer a fully NYS-approved home to the agency that has the teen in its care until the teen was legally adopted.

Four of the ten A-OKAY classes were specifically focused on older child adoption: Class 1: Experienced Parent Panel: the panel brought together three or four experienced parents who had adopted teens to talk about both the rewards and challenges of raising teens permanently and about making lasting commitments. Class 2: Youth-in-Care or Former Youth-in-Care Panel: this panel brought together three or four youth in care or former youth in care to talk about how important lifelong permanency is for them. Class 3: Adolescent Development: this very unique workshop was developed by You Gotta Believe staff to look at the developmental needs of adolescents. The class addresses the uniqueness of moving into a home from a differently structured congregate care facility, the internal conflict within the teen about wanting to attach to their new family, and their struggle for independence. Class 4: Behavior and Unconditional Commitment: this class addresses how important it is to make a lifetime commitment to a teen regardless of their behavior. It helps prospective parents understand that so called “bad” behavior needs to be treated, and that re-abandoning the child should never be part of that treatment. The class stresses the importance of treating any teen’s “bad” behavior with the identical commitment to that offered a birth child.

8.5. Professional trainings

Project staff also provided ongoing trainings for staff at the congregate care facilities where they were out stationed. These trainings emphasized the urgent need to get every teen into a permanent home before their discharge from foster care. Information was shared during these trainings about the strong connection between aging out, homelessness, and other deleterious outcomes for youth. The trainings were designed to empower staff at all levels to help explore the constructive adults in the teens’ lives, including opening these staffers up to the possibility of being a parent themselves. The trainings emphasized that one of the primary obstacles keeping teens out of permanent homes is worker attitudes and beliefs about the possibility of permanent parents for older teens.

Project staff also worked with New York City’s Office of Youth Development and other agencies serving New York City teens to encourage them to allow project staff to bring in panels to talk to their youth about permanency. These panels, organized through the Project’s “Speak-Out Bureau”, addressed a primary concern many teens have—a strong belief that nobody wants them. The panels included teens and young adults who were adopted as teens, certified prospective parents who wanted to adopt teens, as well as new parents who recently received the placement of a teen. The goal of the panels was to help teens understand that not only are teens getting permanent homes—many from the constructive adults already in their lives—but that there are parents who come forward to do this as well. The project’s “Speak-Out Bureau” gave staff, parents, and teens an opportunity to share their stories with the rest of the child welfare community. It was believed that the stories of these individuals would have more impact on the target audience than training alone, and that personal testimony would be a powerful influence on attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors.

8.6. Post-placement services

After a teen was successfully placed in a home by project efforts, an experienced adoptive parent (Shadow Worker) was assigned to the family to make regular contact with them for as long as the family needed help and guidance. In addition, the staff held ongoing monthly Parent Support Groups for any parent who had a teen placed by the project in their home, and Shadow Workers and Permanency Advocates Parents fielded calls from parents or teens whenever needed. This project element filled a major child welfare service gap by providing critical post-placement support services that were significant in securing the stability of the teen placement.

9. Evidence-based practice

The project model was a highly successful one in terms of teen permanency outcomes and evaluation data indicate that the strategy of home finding used in this project, i.e., exploring currently existing kin, fictive kin, and other significant relationships already existing in the teen’s life at the time of referral, is a highly successful recruitment strategy for older teens in care. In addition, evaluation results indicate that the dual project strategy of child-specific recruitment and focused parent training (A-OKAY training and certification) was primarily responsible for the high teen placement rate in this demonstration project.

9.1. Teen permanency placements

A total of 199 teens were referred to the project during the funding period. The majority of referred teens were living in institutional settings, residential treatment facilities (75.9%) and group homes (18.6%). The average age of referred teens was 15.7 years and, on average, these teens had spent 7.4 years in foster care and 2.7 years in their current congregate care facility. Many teens referred to the project had multiple and severe special needs, including emotional, behavioral, learning, psychiatric, developmental, and physical/medical needs. The success of project efforts is indicated in the evaluation result that 98 of the 199 referred teens (or almost 50%) were permanently placed into homes by end of the project period.
9.2. Adoptive parent training

The evaluation design was unique in that it allowed for a natural experiment to occur regarding the A-OKAY parent trainings. This natural experiment provided strong and convincing evidence of the success of a project model in which child-specific recruitment is paired with targeted parent training. The grantee agency, You Gotta Believe, conducts their A-OKAY training for both project parents (i.e., potential permanency resources identified by referred teens) and other parents who are either referred to the agency for foster care training or who turn up at the trainings simply interested in learning more about adoption and fostering. Documentation was made of all people who started the A-OKAY training at any of the agency's training sites during the 4 years of the grant. Individuals were then classified into people who knew a specific teen needing placement at the start of their training, and people who did not know a specific teen they were interested in at the time of training. In evaluating the data presented below it is important to note that the project's outreach to both the general public unconnected to a specific teen, and to anyone else who might know a teen, is to actively encourage them to take the A-OKAY trainings. The project did not screen anyone who turned up to the trainings, and everyone from the community was welcomed. In fact, outreach activities advertised the classes to the general public on the You Gotta Believe radio program, TV program, and literature to come and “Learn about Adopting Teens”.

In evaluating the data presented below stark differences are found in training completion rates, home study completion rates, licensing rates, and teen placement rate between the two groups (Table 1). Throughout the 4 years of the project a total of 1143 people walked through the A-OKAY training doors and participated in an orientation session. Approximately 449 (or 39%) of those people completed the 30 h of training, 190 (or 17%) completed the training and got licensed, and 120 (or 10%) completed the training, got licensed and got a teen placed with them through the project efforts. A little more than 10% of the people who walked through our door had a teenager placed with them.

The interesting contrast, however, and one that has significant implications for teen recruitment efforts, is the difference that emerges in training outcomes when people are classified by whether they knew a specific teen at the time of training initiation or not. Of those people who did not start the training with a particular teen in mind (987 or 86% of all people who walked through the doors), 324 (or 33%) completed the 30 h of training, 106 (or 11%) completed the home study, and only 37 (4%) got a teen placed with them. In stark contrast, of those people who started training knowing a specific teen (154 or 14% of all people who walked through the doors), 125 (or 81%) completed the 30 h of training, 84 (or 54%) completed a home study, and 83 (or 53%) got the teen placed with them. The numbers in the last column of the table tell an important story. Overall 63% of the people who completed the training and their home study had a teen placed with them, but when you classify those parents by whether they had a particular teen in mind at the initiation of the training, only 35% of those who did not know a teen competed the home study and had a teen placed with them while 99% of those who knew a specific teen at the time of training initiation completed the home study and had a teen placed in the home.

These comparative data really help to dispel several myths about recruitment and training. The first myth is that if you recruit someone a teen knows, you should not ask them to take a 30-hour parent preparation class about how important it is to remain unconditionally committed because that would turn parents off. The evaluation data indicate that 81% of the people who walk through the training doors who knew a teen completed the entire 10-week, 30 h training. Another myth is that there are a large number of people from the teens’ lives that are not qualified to be permanent parents. The data indicate that over half of the parents were qualified enough to complete a home study and get licensed.

9.3. Other project elements contributing to this ‘promising practice’ model

One of the most important strengths of the project was the background of project staff. All staff had significant personal experience with older child adoption (i.e., they had been adopted from care as teens themselves and/or were adoptive parents of older youth) and consequently had deep personal knowledge of the teen placement process. Project staff were selected based on particular personality characteristics of motivation, empathy, the ability to engender trust and confidence, and excellent management skills which facilitated continuity and follow-up in service delivery. In addition, staff were selected based on their firm belief that every child in care deserves a home and that there is a home for every child in care. This belief was unwavering in all staff members and resulted in the significant success of the project in terms of goal outcomes. Furthermore, the staff management model used on this project greatly contributed to enabling the talented staff members to do their job effectively. The fact that staff were out stationed at the congregate care facilities rather than operating out of a central office enabled them to develop close and ongoing relationships with both the teens and congregate care staff members, facilitated time management, and allowed them to meet the needs of teens and parents at convenient locations and on their own time schedules.

10. Other collaborative efforts

Farmer (2008) reports on another similar child-specific recruitment effort involving You Gotta Believe at Children’s Village. The project serviced 69 teen residents (ranging in age from 13 to 20), all of whom had been in residential care for at least 5 years and were, more or less, poised to age out of the system without leaving care. They hired two permanency specialists to find homes for these youths. The approach they used was to find matches with individuals teens already knew and felt a special connection with, such as an aunt, uncle, for former foster parent by asking the teens themselves, pouring over the case records, and actively searching for leads. They worked with You Gotta Believe using a range of matchmaking efforts, such as using teens as panelists for educational seminars and orientations geared to prospective foster parents, but the most effective recruiting strategy was simply talking to the youth about anyone in their past or in their current sphere of connections with whom they might like to live. A critical part of this recruitment process was the 10-week A-OKAY parental training and licensing course offered by You Gotta Believe.

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number of entrants</th>
<th>Completed training</th>
<th>Home study completed</th>
<th>Teen placed in home</th>
<th>Percent completing training, the home study, and with a teen placement</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>1143</td>
<td>449 (39%)</td>
<td>190 (17%)</td>
<td>120 (10.4%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Did not know teen</td>
<td>987 (86%)</td>
<td>324 (33%)</td>
<td>106 (11%)</td>
<td>37 (4%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Did know teen</td>
<td>154 (14%)</td>
<td>125 (81%)</td>
<td>84 (54%)</td>
<td>83 (53%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

11. Current evolving “family-finding” technologies

Recent technological improvements have made it easier to locate missing family and important adults assumed lost (Louisell, 2009). The Homecoming Project began in 2003 as a five-year Federal demonstration project. In addition to seeking adoptive families the project also had the explicit goal of strengthening participating youth’s connections to caring adults and the larger community by engaging in child-specific recruitment efforts. An analysis of project records and administrative data shows that 51% of these youth in the Homecoming Project achieved permanency during the funding period (Skrypek & Gerrard, 2009). Family-finding efforts for youth in residential care in Santa Clara County, CA located more than 220 relatives for eight youth by doing only 9 hours of family search work (Campbell et al., 2003, p. 15). In 2006 the California Permanency for Youth Project (CPYP) (Friend, 2009) created the Emancipated Youth Connections Project (EYCP) to assist twenty young adults who left the foster care system without sustained relationships to a caring adult. This 18-month project was tremendously successful in finding family or other caring adults to be lifelong connections. Data available for 19 of the 20 participants showed that: 139 new permanent connections were made with biological family members and 42 new permanent connections were made with non-biological family members. These results demonstrate that permanency can be attained for older youth in foster care through successful child-specific recruitment efforts such as those reported in this paper.

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by Pat O'Brien
Executive Director

When you take the P.A.R.E.N.T. out of PERMANENT
You are Left with M.(ostly) N.(ot) E.(nough)

There is lots of talk going around the country these days about Teen Permanency and about how urgent it is to get teens “permanency” before they age out of care. And of course we would jump on that bandwagon if only they were talking about getting the teens the parents they so desperately need before their discharge from foster care. However, a lot of things being sold as teen permanency have absolutely nothing to do with recruiting a forever lifetime parent who will be both unilaterally and unconditionally committed to them in the way that the other 98% of Americans whose childhoods did not touch the United States foster care system had. Each and every one of us whose childhood did not touch foster care can trace back our success as a person to our origins as members of a family; a membership that continues today no matter how old we are.

Here are the bill-of-goods that are being sold as “permanency” for teens:

1) Mentors – an older person who can teach the younger mentee some skills.
2) Volunteers - like Big Brothers or Big Sisters
3) Connections or Significant Connections – often members of birth family
4) Resources or Permanent Resources

Now, are any of the above a bad thing? No. They are just not permanent. Only parents are permanent. And it is interesting if you take the six letters that make up the
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UNCONDITIONAL COMMITMENT:

The Only Love That Matters … To Teens

by Pat O’Brien

Having directed both foster care and adoption programs that place teenagers into permanent families, and then having founded an agency that places teenagers into permanent families, I often get asked the question “what kind of people will offer their home permanently to a teenager?” My answer is always the same. I always say “any and all kinds of people who, after a good preparation experience, are willing to unconditionally commit themselves to a child no matter what behavior that child might ultimately exhibit.” Teenagers need first and foremost at least one adult who will unconditionally commit to and claim the teen as their own. Any thing less is an artificial relationship. Teenagers need unconditional commitment before anything else constructive can happen.

This country has tens-of-thousands of young adults between the ages of 18 and 21 being discharged to no one but themselves. Half the homeless population is made up of these foster care discharges. This is in spite of the fact that teenagers, as a general rule, are easier to care for and the rewards and gratification for caring for them come back a lot sooner than accepting younger children for permanent placement.

However, our child welfare culture seems to have an anti-permanency bias against caring for teenagers. Very few organizations even have the slightest expectation for the prospective parents who come forward to offer their homes to teens that the commitment they make must necessarily be unconditional for the placement to succeed. Parenting strategies and a whole variety of other skills we teach families in pre-placement preparation and training are essentially rendered useless if unconditional commitment to a child is not imbedded in the philosophy of the preparation and training we offer to these prospective families.

My working definition for “unconditional commitment” is simply that there is nothing a teenager can do to stop being someone’s child. Unconditional commitment means that we treat any child’s behavior with the exact same commitment we would treat a biological child’s behavior who might commit the very same act. If a bio-child commits a crime in the community, that bio-child might go to jail. But that child does not lose his parents because he makes a mistake. If a bio-child becomes mentally ill that bio-child might have to be hospitalized on a long-term basis. But that child does not lose his parents because he has an illness that needs to be treated. If a bio-child becomes heavily involved in drugs that bio-child might have to be placed in a residential treatment therapeutic community. But that child does not lose his parents
What is Family Finding?
March 2015

Often as we traverse the country to assist sites to learn, implement, integrate and hopefully sustain Family Finding into their practice models, we encounter vast differences in the interpretation of the terms “Family Finding”, “Family Finding and Engagement” and “Family Search and Engagement”. These interpretations can range from the sole activity of constructing an internet search to the full deployment and implementation of a 6 to 8 step model that identifies tools, activities and targets to utilize and achieve in order to involve “family” members in the key decisions about the lives of their kin (“family” being inclusive of birth/adoptive family, and chosen family). The interpretations can also be limited to the application of these models to a select number of children who have languished in the system and are not on a path to permanency, or to address every initial encounter with the child welfare system as an opportunity to bring as many “family” members to the table to address safety concerns and potentially avoid entry into the system, while building a safety network.

From our perspective, we would like to clarify the purpose and intentions of the models of Family Finding, Family Search and Engagement, and Family Finding and Engagement, and as such, what is meant when those terms are utilized. Break here for full article

We look for the following to be present:

- That a primary focus of every encounter with the child welfare system is geared towards identifying and immediately convening as many family as possible to avert, or at least minimize, the disruption and disconnection of the children from those they love, trust and rely on, and to develop a safety plan with proper oversights to prevent future harm.

- For matters that cannot be immediately remedied at the first encounter, that a variety of discovery tools are utilized in coordination with an identified team of involved informal and formal connections (parents, relatives, connections, CASA, case managers, therapists etc) who are relentlessly and respectfully curious to determine who is related to connected to the young person on the planet.

- That as the team relentlessly conducts “Discovery”, that key “family” are genuinely engaged and invited to participate in a variety of ways to support their kin in this time of crisis; and that once invited, they are welcomed and encouraged to actually participate in such a manner to promote the well-being and safety of the young person.

- That a group of caring adults (referred to here as an enduring natural support network) is formed to participate in the planning and decision making as the day to day experience of their kin, as well as to their sustained safe exit from the foster care system. That this exit be based on the establishment of an enduring relationship with at least one adult who will act in
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YOUTH HOMELESSNESS AND THE LACK OF ADOPTIVE AND OTHER PERMANENT PARENTAL PLANNING FOR TEENS IN FOSTER CARE:
PREVENTING HOMELESSNESS THROUGH PARENTING

I would like to start out my discussion concerning youth homelessness and the lack of parental planning (i.e. a discharge from foster care to an adoptive or other permanent parent) for older foster children by pointing out the homeless youth problem we face right here in N.Y.C. which is true in many other parts of the Country as well:

- The Coalition for the Homeless had reported to then Mayor Dinkins that 60% of the homeless in NYC Municipal Shelters have some history of foster care. (1)

- Shaffer and Canton found in their study "Runaway and Homeless Youth in N.Y.C." that 50% of the homeless young people who came to shelters had previously lived in a setting provided by the Child Welfare system; in a foster home, a group home, or other child care institution. (2)

- Out of 168 youth interviewed for a study at Covenant House, one of the few in N.Y.C., and the only youth shelter that accepted 18, 19, and 20 year olds, 27% reported having spent time with a foster parent and 43% reported spending time in foster group homes. (3)

On a nationwide level, the following have been reported:

- The National Association of Social Workers conducted a national survey of shelters for runaway and homeless youth and found that 38% of the youths surveyed had been in foster care at some time during the previous year alone. An additional 11% had arrived from another runaway or crisis shelter accounting for a total of 49% coming from some out-of-home facility in the previous year. (4)

- On January 6, 1991 the New York Times reported in a front page Sunday story that "a large and disproportionate number of the Nation's homeless are young people who have come out of foster care programs without the money, skills, or family support to make it on their own." (5)

- In a report prepared by the National Alliance to End Homelessness they found "there is an over-representation of people with a foster care history in the homeless population" and that homeless parents with a foster care history are three times more likely than homeless parents who did not grow up in foster care to have their own children in foster care. (6)

- In an analysis conducted by the Urban Institute, 61% of homeless youth under the age of 20 reported having been placed in foster care, Group Home, or other Institution before the age of 18. (7)

And what about youths due to be discharged from the foster care system? The Citizen's Committee for Children found this:
Forty-nine percent (49%) of the children with goals of independent living and nearing their discharge date, had no plan in their record indicating what their living arrangements would be upon discharge from the foster care system and that this was true for 58% of the boys.

CCC also found that 63% of all youths living in foster homes with the goal of independent living had no plan for what their living arrangement would be upon discharged from foster care and that only 13% of their foster parents were identified as potential resources. (8)

So, what does all this have to do with permanent relationships for teens via relationally planning for them before their discharge from foster care? Well, when one considers the plight of the young homeless noted above, and then one considers the plight of the nearly discharged foster child with the permanency planning goal of “Independent Living” or APPLA also noted above, one must begin to wonder what it is we are doing as a system to our children in the name of “Child Welfare.” We are, in actuality, creating half the homeless population in our City and our Country by not taking on the responsibility of finding permanent parents and families for these teens while they are still in our foster care. Let’s explore.

I. WORKING CLASS YOUTH IN FAMILIES VS FOSTER CARE YOUTH DISCHARGEES

WORKING CLASS YOUTH IN FAMILIES:

Child development theorists are now viewing adolescence in today’s society in two developmental stages: stage one from age 13 to 17 and stage two from ages 18 to 25 and beyond. The reasons are many-fold. Consider the following:

- Our own, yours and my, anecdotal experience tells us that many young adults between the ages of 18 and 25 who come from fairly well off home environments and intact families, and who even manage to get through college, find themselves still living with their parents until their mid to late 20’s.

- To back up our own unempirical anecdotal experience consider an article that appeared on the front page of the Sunday New York Times on June 16, 1991 when it reported that 32% of single men (and 20% of single women) between the ages of 25 and 34 were living with their parents during the year preceding the article. (9).

- In another article in the Employment Press it was reported that in the northeast in the past 10 years the economy has completely shifted from an industrial one to a service orientated one. This transition has left almost all young men who are living in working class urban communities unemployed and unemployable. These young men do not even have the skills for the jobs available where they will eventually be able to work their way up to a descent $30,000 per year middle class wage with benefits unless they are willing to go for training in traditionally “female” service industry jobs such as teaching, nursing, or secretarial type of positions.” (10)

- Also consider a recent book written by Christopher Jencks simply entitled The Homeless. The author identifies a very significant fact about the homeless:

(Preventing Homelessness Through Parenting – Page 2)
"When unmarried adults get into economic trouble, parents are usually their first line of defense against homelessness. 5.6 million unmarried working-age adults had incomes below $2,500. Forty two percent of them lived with their parents, compared to only 9 percent of unmarried adults with income above $30,000. The contrast leaves little doubt that the main reason unmarried adults live with their parents is economic. It also shows how important parents are in keeping younger adults off the street, especially today when the income differential between the young and their elders is widening." (11)

So, why are these young adults, predominately working class but even many middle class, prolonging their adolescence by living with their parents well into their mid-to-late 20’s? Because they cannot possibly afford to live on the salaries they are making, assuming they are making any salary at all. Thank goodness they have parents and families to help out.

**FOSTER CARE YOUTH DISCHARGEES:**

Now let's compare the 18, 19, 20, or 21 year old foster care youth discharged from foster care, possibly with a high school diploma, but probably not, and having no permanent parents in his or her life. How is this youth – with no place to call home – going to survive in our society? Well let's look at a survey published by the Foster Care Youth United that highlights some of the concerns and fears of the young people themselves who were still residing in foster care. Of the 12 youths who responded to the question “If You Left Foster Care Tomorrow, What Would Be Your Biggest Worry?” (12) Eight of them specifically expressed fears about their living situation in one way or another upon discharge from the system. Some of their responses were as follows:

- “If I left the group home, my biggest worry would be ending up on the street with no job and no place to live.” Kiesha, age 18.

- “My biggest worry would be living my life. Once I’m out on the street, I’ll have no control over my reaction to circumstances beyond my control, and being that my life is my most important possession, losing control of it would be very frightful.” Mathew Dedewo, 18.

- “I guess my biggest worry would be how I’m going to support myself now that I’m on my own. And if I have a job that don’t pay me enough money for me to get my own apartment, where am I gonna live? How am I gonna find an apartment that rents for a low price?” Angi, 16

- “If I had to leave foster care tomorrow, my biggest worry be becoming homeless. That’s a fear that I’m sure people in foster care have. To wonder where I’m going to sleep and where my next meal is coming from and, most of all, wondering will I die on the streets.” Kenyetta Ivy, 18

- “My biggest worry would be finding a place to live, because if I got discharged I wouldn’t go back to my parents and most shelters are filled tight with people anyway.” Keith Saliski, 19.

- “My biggest worry would be getting a job and then an apartment.” Latrice, 19.

- “My biggest worry would be how to support myself and where I would go. This is why I don’t get too dependent on foster care and do things for myself.” Shaniqua Gray, 16.

- “If I left the group home, my biggest worry would be how I would survive without the help I need.”

(Preventing Homelessness Through Parenting – Page 3)
Consider also a recent documentary entitled *Aging Out* which aired on PBS stations across the United States on Thursday night May 26th, 2005. The documentary feature three stories about four youth aging out of care, capturing the tail end of their foster care stay and a period of time after they aged out of foster care to no one but themselves. Out of the four youth featured, two have already died (Risa Bejarano and David Griffin) while one of the other two youth (who happen to be married to each other) finds himself in harms way serving in Iraq.

So, what happens to youth upon their discharge from foster care? We fear that for far too many of them if it is not the local homeless shelter, it may be prison; if it is not drugs, it may be alcohol; if it is not prostitution, it may be hooking up with an abusive significant other; if it is not dying from homicide it may be dying from suicide; if its not psychiatric hospitalization, it may be hospitalization for life threatening diseases. We fear that for far too many of these young people, like Risa and David noted above, will die at way too young an age.

And these children would not be fairing well due solely to their “house”lessness. These children would not be fairing well because the child welfare system in our country had not taken it upon itself to help these children develop a lasting permanent parent and family in their lives while they were still in foster care. The system basically says to a child, “Oh, you’re 14? We’re not going to terminate your parents’ rights. You’re far too old for that sort of thing. We’ll just give you this fabulous goal of ‘Independent Living’ or “APPLA” and send you on your way when you are, say, 18, 19, 20, or 21.” This is the true source of half the homelessness in this City and Country. But before we go into how it is that the child welfare permanency planning goal of Independent Living or “APPLA” actually creates half the homelessness in this country, let us first explore some of the myths about why there are homeless on our streets to begin with.

**II. Where Do the Homeless Come From? Some Common Myths.**

Many of us have experienced what it is like to walk down the street in our respective neighborhoods or places of work and have to walk around, over, or through the living dead referred to as “the homeless” in our big cities. Many of us know what it is like not being able to walk a three block radius without being approached three or four times by different people begging for money. Some of us know the awkward feeling of walking down the street with our child and trying to explain why the homeless exist when the child asks us the innocent question “where do the homeless come from Daddy” like my daughter did one day walking to work together.

The general wisdom of most homeless “experts” is that the homeless exist for the following reasons:
1) **Unemployment:** People are homeless because of a lack of jobs. Though there is an element of truth to this, we still must ask the question “why does unemployment lead to the homelessness of any given individual?” We all know unemployed people who are not homeless.

2) **Poverty:** People are homeless because of overwhelming and oppressive poverty. Clearly there is an element of truth to this as well. But we must still ask “why does poverty lead to the homelessness of any given individual?” Most of us know poverty stricken people who are not homeless.

3) **Alcohol & Other Drug Addictions:** People are homeless because of their addictions and abuse of substances. Again, there is an element of truth to this, but we must still ask “why does addiction lead to the homelessness of any given individual?” Almost all of us know addicted people who are not homeless.

4) **Mental Illness:** People are homeless because of deinstitutionalization which leads to the homelessness of the mentally ill. And even though there is some truth to this, we still must ask “why is any given mentally ill person who might have been deinstitutionalized homeless?” Many of us know mentally ill people who are not homeless.

These four factors cited above and the four questions that followed them are extremely important because the answer to each of them is the same. The answer to each question noted above has been left out of every homelessness analysis ever done, even though the answer is the same for 100% of the homeless. And that answer, or most important factor when one considers homelessness, is:

5) **Lack of Relationships:** People are homeless because they have no functioning human relationships in their lives. It is not just their unemployment, poverty, addictions, or mental illnesses that make them homeless; it is any of these factors combined with the fact that they have no functioning human relationships in their lives, be it with a parent figured, spouse, adult child, close friend, or other family relationship.

This knowledge is disheartening because, as we noted earlier, half of this could have been prevented. Half the homeless could have had the opportunities that relationships bring had we not had a federally sanctioned, State and locally enforced “permanency planning” goal called “Independent Living” or APPLA that allows teenagers as young as 14 to sign their lives away to that **never ever** land of impermanency called “Independent Living.” “**Never ever**” because in this economy there is a high likelihood that these teens, upon discharge from the system, will **never ever** get a job or **never ever** find a permanent place to call home without a functioning human relationship recruited for them before their discharge from the foster care system.
III. INDEPENDENT LIVING vs INTERDEPENDENT LIVING

This is where relationships are crucially important. Relational planning, or the developing of a permanent lasting relationship with at least one unconditionally committed claiming parent, is the primary hope for our older foster care youth. *You Gotta Believe!* is now beginning to turn aside the myth that there are no families who want to unconditionally claim older foster children as their own. There are many many families out there who want to parent teenage foster children. Many of them don’t even have the youth move in until they already have turned 18. In addition to all the families we find who are unknown to the children that we ultimately place them with, there are also many families out there who are already in a child’s life who would be willing to parent the child as well if they were approached in an appropriate and sensitive way.

This includes people who know the older foster child they want to parent people such as the child’s social worker, the child’s school teacher, the child’s paraprofessional, the child’s volunteer, or the child’s best friend’s parent. We have made placements of children with all of the above as well as with their very own unexplored biological relatives such as aunts, grandparents, siblings, and cousins on both the maternal side and paternal side of the family. Melanie Tem, in a paper she delivered at a NACAC conference in 1985, wrote that even though “there is considerable support for the notion that most of us {people in Society in general} have ‘attachment’ problems to some degree” that we nonetheless know that “an individual who truly has no attachments does not survive.” (14) If there is one positive thing we can say about kids in foster care is that they are alive and they are survivors. Hence, you can’t tell us that a youth who has lived to the ripe old age of 16, 17, 18, 19, or older does not have some attachments in his or her life who might be very responsive to learning more about bringing the child permanently into their home. And if the system would do away with its homelessness causing loophole it defines as a *permanency planning goal* for the child, “Independent Living”, it would be forced to come up with creative forms of recruitment like what we just mentioned and accept the responsibility of finding “Interdependent Living” relationships for all its children rather than “Independent Living.”

Perhaps the greatest line in Hillary Clinton’s book *It Takes A Village* is the first line of the book that simply reads “children are not rugged individualists.” (15) This concept of “Independent Living” is a very upper class American creation that was hopefully never developed to apply to children or young adults who can not possibly survive on their own. The whole concept of “Independent Living” implies we should be raising our children, while they are still children, as rugged individualists. But who in this society can live “Independently”? Any why is that so desirable anyway? I’m a grown man well into his 50’s and I can tell you that I have yet to have been discharged to “Independent Living.” I would have found it extremely difficult, if not impossible, raising a family on my own without the benefit of a second income. I always needed to live in an “Interdependent” relationship with my partner. And I have always lived in Interdependent relationships: with my parents until I was 25 and with my partner since I was 25. And when I fell upon financially hard times after a divorce, my parents were still there to help out.

*(Preventing Homelessness Through Parenting – page 6)*
So, what do we expect our older children in foster care to learn about “Independent Living” anyway? As far as I am concerned, for any working class youth living in any neighborhood to live “independently” in our big cities is close to impossible. This economy is not good for young people no matter how well it’s thriving for Wall Street. We need to teach our young people “Interdependent Living” skills and there is no better way to teach a child aging out of foster care to live interdependently, to live in relational growth with other human beings, than to find a permanent parent and family for each and every one of them before they are discharged from the foster care system.

IV. WHAT CAN BE DONE?

Child permanency advocates such as the Board, staff, and volunteers at You Gotta Believe! are beginning to change the attitudes of many child welfare professionals about the relationability of every teen and pre-teen in their foster care barring no one. In addition, however, we also need to recommend some systematic changes that will hopefully begin to change the structure of the system from one that currently allows for a “permanency planning” goal of “Independent Living” to one that will not consider discharging any child from its care without an “interdependent living” relationship with at least one unconditionally committed permanent parent.

1) ABOLISH THE “PERMANENCY” GOAL OF INDEPENDENT LIVING!

If a child has a goal of “Independent Living” this means that the child’s birthparents’ failure to plan for their future is so clear cut that the system changed the child’s goal to discharge to no one but themselves via the goal of “Independent Living.” If he is not going to return home to his birthparents, his birthparents’ rights should be terminated and he should be freed for adoption. The child should under no circumstances, as is permitted for 14 year olds in New York State, be allowed to sign a waiver stating he doesn’t want to be adopted and that he wants his permanency planning goal changed to “Independent Living.” This is akin to asking a child to sign his own homelessness warrant and, in some cases, to sign his own death warrant.

What can 14 year olds do in this society anyway?

• Can they sign a legally binding contract?
• Can they work at any job during the school year?
• Can they serve their country in a time of war?
• Can they vote?
• Can they go to a bar or local deli and buy a beer?
• Can they drive a car?
The answer to all of the above is, of course, NO!!!!

But can this same 14 year old sign a piece of paper stating that he does not want to be adopted, thereby having his permanency plan goal changed to "Independent Living," thereby relieving the system of any responsibility to identify a permanent lasting interdependent relationship for him? The answer to this question is a resounding --- YES!!!

So, why does such a destructive permanency planning goal as "Independent Living" exist in the first place? Ironically, the answer to this question is: Children’s Rights!!! Yes. The theory goes that a child has a right not to be adopted. “No one should ever force a child to be adopted,” they say. And, of course this is true. It is just that we want every child to have the right to turn down Mr. And Mrs. Jones, not a nebulous abstract concept such as adoption. When we change the child’s goal to “Independent Living” we are saying to the child, “we are not even going to introduce Mr. and Mrs. Jones to you.” This family is the very family that would make a lifetime commitment to the youth and prevent the youth from becoming homeless upon his or her discharge from the foster care system.

It is natural and understandable for any child who has been bounced around the foster care system to say at 14 she doesn’t want to be adopted. Why should she invite potential pain and suffering? The system has trained her that she’s too old to be adopted anyway. Why should she actually believe she is adoptable? No one around her believes it. She must protect herself by stating she does not want to be “adopted.” But ask her if she wants to belong somewhere. Ask her if she will meet Mr. and Mrs. Jones. Her reply will be a lot different than if you ask her if she wants to be adopted. All children want to belong somewhere. All human beings want to belong somewhere.

However, if the child is not made available for adoption, we will never know whether, if we worked extra hard, would we be able to identify a permanent parent for him. Perhaps even the home of someone he already knows. Perhaps even a biological relative who simply would not present self as a resource or interfere in child’s life until the birthparents’ rights were terminated. I have had the experience of placing a number of children with biological relatives who have fallen into this category.

Indeed, in many ways “adoption” is both the best "Independent Living” and the best “another planned permanent living arrangement” program ever invented.

2) EVERY CHILD WITH A GOAL OF INDEPENDENT LIVING SHOULD BE FREED FOR ADOPTION NO MATTER WHAT THE CHILD’S AGE.

It is age discrimination at its most destructive worse when the child’s age influences the decision of the court or child welfare bureaucracy to not move forward toward the termination of a birthparent’s parental rights. If a child’s permanency goal is “Independent Living” rather than discharge to a birthparent, then there is no birthparent who is permanently planning for that child’s discharge from foster care.

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This means the child is legally allowed to stay in a legal limbo. We technically can't find an adoptive home for the child because the child is not freed for adoption. Why do we not, then, at least free for adoption every child with a goal of "Independent Living" who is not ever going to be discharged to a birthparent? In this area we find usually very legalistic judges talking very much like the social workers they so often express much contempt for. Judges will ask "why should we terminate a parent's rights and disallow a child access to his birth parent when the child is very unlikely to get adopted." The judge will ask this question even in cases where the parents' failure to plan is so clear-cut that the child is going to age out of the foster care system to homelessness. The CATCH 22 is, of course, how can we get a child adopted if the child is not freed for adoption? However, in this one of the very few instances that our Family Court judges put down their legal gloves and view the case the way, say, a social worker might, they happen to have a very good point.

Why should any child be deprived of the right to see his birthparents simply because his birthparents' rights have been terminated? Who says that just because a parent's rights are terminated that a child cannot see his birthparents anymore, particularly if the child has no adoptive resources on the horizon? Well, children's rights advocates hear this! Its true, under the law as it stands now, a foster child does not have the right to see his birthparent after the parent's rights have been terminated, and this has got to change.

3) LAWS SHOULD BE CHANGED TO ALLOW FOSTER CHILDREN THE RIGHT TO SEE THEIR BIRTHPARENTS BETWEEN THE TIME OF TERMINATION AND ADOPTIVE PLACEMENT.

No birthparent should have the right to keep his or her child in a legal limbo that will ultimately lead to the child's homelessness. This is giving too much power and control to a person who has no right to such power and control due to their inability to plan for the child's future. However, does this mean that the reverse be true? Does this mean that the child should not have a right to see his birthparents solely because his parent's rights were terminated?

It should be every child's legal right, up to the time of an adoptive placement, and perhaps even after, that the child have access to his birthparents if the child so desires the relationship. Child Rights Activists should jump on the bandwagon to give children this right and to effectively advocate for their parents' rights to be terminated. This is the primary issue Law Guardians and Judges raise at termination hearings in cases where the birthparents' failure to plan is clear-cut. If the child has the right to see his parents after termination this issue would become moot. Let's give the child the power and control and not leave this power and control with a birthparent who cannot parent the child enough to plan for the child's future and prevent the child from becoming homeless upon discharge from the foster care system.
And, of course, it is wise, even after an adoptive placement, that every child that had communication with his or her biological relatives be allowed to continue this communications afterwards. It is virtually impossible, and highly inadvisable, to prevent any older child from having communication with people in his or her past life, particularly if these people are his biological relatives. After an excellent 30 hour pre-placement training, like our program requires before anyone ever adopts a teen, most prospective parents are in tune with this when it is safe for the child to have contact after a placement.

4) MAKE RECRUITING PERMANENT PARENTS & FAMILIES A CONDITION OF ANY FUNDING THAT IS GIVEN FOR ANY OF ACS’S PREPARING YOUTH FOR ADULTHOOD (PYA) PROGRAMS
CONCURRENT PLANNING AT THE EXIT END OF THE SYSTEM

New York City’s Administration for Children’s Services recently released a Child Welfare Services with Community Coalitions Concept Paper in order to help frame and give purpose to the $650,000,000 worth of Request for Proposals it expects to release in 2008 for the implementation of services to children and families in 2009. In this concept paper ACS did note that one of its major principles, goals, and expectation that will drive its design and delivery of services will include “increasing the number of older adolescents who are discharged from foster care each year to families and improving the effectiveness of services to prepare youth for adulthood so they have the education and work skills that they need to achieve independent living. One of the City’s major initiatives is a concept they are calling Preparing Youth For Adulthood (or PYA.) The goals of PYA for all youth before they are discharged from foster care include:

- Youth will have permanent connections with caring adults.
- Youth will reside in stable living situations.
- Youth will be afforded opportunities to advance their education and personal development.
- Youth will be encouraged to take increasing responsibility for their work and life decisions, and their positive decisions are reinforced.
- Young people’s individual needs will be met.
- Youth will have ongoing support after they age out of care. (16)

Do you know how difficult all of the above goals will be to achieve for the average 18, 19, 20, or 21 year old with out a permanent unconditionally committed parent, a real parent, in their corner who will remain committed to them long after their years in foster care are over? Having a “permanent connection with a caring adult” is a nice enough idea, but it’s a real parent that will see to it that this “permanent connection” will stick long past the youth’s years in foster care are over. Stating that youths “will reside in stable living situations” is a nice statement but having a real parent who will offer the youth a safety net long after their years in foster care are over is what will make it happen. Parents prevent homelessness. How can one possibly afford a youth the opportunity to receive advanced

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education or personal development if there is not a real parent helping create those opportunities in a non-time pressured environment; just like the environment the rest of the youth in the United States of America live in if they did not happen to grow up in foster care? Who encourages and reinforces “youth to take increasing responsibility for their work and life decisions” if not real parents? Who will see to it that any young person’s “individual needs are met” if not real parents? And most of all, who will provide a youth with any “ongoing support after they age out of foster care” if not real parents?

The flaw, then, in this PYA concept paper is that it does not mandate the concurrent funding of a constant, on-going, never stopping, never ending, all out effort to recruit youth moral and legally adoptive parents until their very last day in foster care. Almost all of the good ideas PYA offers in its goals are offered in lieu of family. Almost all of the PYA goals above assume teens and young adults will not get parents and families before they age out of care. Parents and family are the only answer for these youth and we must make a commitment to never stop looking until that youth’s, or young adult’s, very last day in our care. We as a bureaucracy owe every child and youth that concurrent effort!

CONCLUSION

There is a clear-cut connection between youth homelessness and the lack of adoptive and other permanent parental planning for teens and pre-teens in foster care. There are issues that we outlined here that should be looked at into eliminating the bureaucratic and legal obstacles to finding teens permanent parents and families before they age out of care.

However, the major obstacle will continue to be the belief of almost everyone that finding permanent homes for teens is rare and that these teens are very hard, if not impossible, to place. People often want to know that their belief systems are right. People want to know that the things they believe in are, indeed, correct. This brings to mind a favorite quote of mine by Henry Ford:

If you think you can – you can!
If you think you can’t – you can’t!
You’re always right!

If you happen to believe teens are unrelational, unfortunately you are right. If you happen to be in charge of planning for a teen’s future and you believe the teen is unrelational and that a home cannot be found, then the teen becomes unrelational and a home will not be found. But always please keep in mind a home was not found because that is what you believe.

On the other hand, if you happen to believe every teen you have planning responsibility for is relational, then you are right too. If you believe this teen is relational, a permanent parent and family can be found for that child. But always keep in mind that the reason the child got a permanent family was because that is what you believed.

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The writer of this testimony believes in the relationability of all teens in foster care without exception. A family can be found for every child. I believed this because our program was able to recruit permanent parents and families for nearly 250 teenagers, average age of 16, during the past 7 years we have been placing teens and young adults for New York City. We became such advocates for the permanent placement of teens that we went out and started an agency that we refer to as "a movement" called YOU GOTTA BELIEVE! THE OLDER CHILD ADOPTION & PERMANENCY MOVEMENT, Inc. YOU GOTTA BELIEVE makes placements for any teen or young adult in foster care who needs a permanent family without regard to whether that child is freed for adoption or not. We simply believe that all children deserve permanent parents and families who will be there for them long after their years in foster care are over and we set out to find a home for every one of these youth who need one. And that is why it was essential for us to call our movement "You Gotta Believe!"

Believing is contagious. What you believe is always right. Why not choose to believe in the positive over the negative? It's your choice. Choose to believe in the relationability of every teen and young adult and there will be a dramatic reduction in the homeless population in our City and Country. Fight to get rid of the goal of "independent living" so that the system is obligated to continuously find permanent parents for every youth up to the date of that youth's discharge from the foster care system. Short of achieving this goal, fight for the inclusion of recruiting permanent parents and families as the single best way to prepare youth for adulthood when Request For Proposals are issued offering funding to service teens in the area of helping to plan for them long after their years in foster care are over.

And always remember:

A
FAMILY
ISNOWHERE

Do you see "A Family is No Where?" Or do you see "A Family is Now Here?" You see, we all can see the exact same thing but see something entirely different. That is why we at YOU GOTTA BELIEVE will always choose to believe and see that "A Family is Now Here" in every child's life. Join us in believing and help our movement reduce the homeless population in half.

This testimony was written by Pat O'Brien, M.S., LMSW, Executive Director of You Gotta Believe! The Older Child Adoption & Permanency Movement, Inc. Pat can be reached at 1-718-372-3003 (e-mail, vybpat@msn.com) if anyone is interested in speaking with him about the contents of this paper or about having Pat come to you town, committee, or agency to talk about the ideas he expressed in this paper.

(Preventing Homelessness Through Parenting – Page 12)
NOTES


2) Shaffer, D. and C.L. Caton, 1984 Runaway and Homeless Youth In New York City New York City: Study funded by a grant from the Ittleson Foundation and the NYS OMH Page 57.


7) Urban Institute, Analysis of weighted 1996 NSHAPC client data.


12) Foster Care Youth United May/June 1994 “Speakout: If you Left Foster Care Tomorrow, What Would Be Your Biggest Worry?” A publication of Youth Communications, Inc. New York, pp.2-3

13) Weisberg, Roger & Vanessa Roth Aging Out: What Happens When You’ve Grown Up in Foster Care and Suddenly YOU’RE ON YOUR OWN? A documentary that aired on PBS stations across the United States on Thursday May 26th, 2005. Mr. Weisberg wrote, produced, and directed the documentary and Ms. Roth co-produced and co-directed.


15) Clinton, Hillary 1996 It Takes A Village pg.1

16) New York City Administration for Children’s Services - June 2006 - “Preparing Youth for Adulthood” a 29 page downloadable concept paper that can be obtained by going to www.nyc.gov/bcs.

To learn more about the need for permanent parents for teens and young adults in foster care you can listen to our live radio call-in show “The Adopting Teens & ‘Tweens Radio Forum” every Sunday evening from 8-9pm (Eastern Time) by logging on to www.am1240wxyb.com. You can also watch a live-stream of our weekly cable access television show entitled “The Adopting Teens & ‘Tweens Show” every Thursday at 12 noon and 8pm (Eastern Time) by logging on to www.bcat.tv/bcat and then click on the television with the #2 inside it under the words “Watch BCAT Live.” Our e-mail address is ygb.par@msn.com Our address is You Gotta Believe, 1728 Mermaid Avenue, Brooklyn, N.Y. 11224. Our website is www.yougottabelieve.org.
the role of a parent that both the young person and adult are committed to, and that this enduring support network will follow.

- That once a plan to attain legal permanence has been achieved, the enduring natural support network will develop, monitor and participate in a plan to ensure that the young person is safe and well, and will include at least two back-up plans that the group has identified, just in case…

The list above are broad brush strokes of the approaches; in finer details we look to ensure that young people and families are supported by permanency competent workforce (inclusive of those who care for children or provide therapeutic services) that assists children and families to clarify and integrate their losses and traumatic history in order to attain a readiness to successfully engage in the reciprocal relationships that produce permanency. We also strive to create support networks that affirm the young person’s identity, sexual orientation and gender expression to promote the young person’s ability to safely clarify the same for his/herself. We support the development of supervision and coaching within an environment that promotes the practice and constantly attends to the individual and systemic barriers that interfere with this approach.

Ultimately, the goal of the Family Finding approaches is to create a robust asset base of support for every young person and family touched by the child welfare system, and that the asset base is respectfully engaged, welcomed and encouraged to participate in the support of the young person while developing and determining the plans for their future. This can be achieved for every child in danger of or entering the system, as well as for children languishing in the system.

Therefore, when one asks the question of whether “Family Finding” has been done, from the viewpoint of those who have developed, taught/trained and led implementation of the approaches in sites across the United States and internationally, the answer is yes only when the above steps have been completed. If only the first step, or a portion of the first step has been completed, from our perspective, then Discovery is being accomplished, but “Family Finding” has not. Furthermore, if a site says we already do “Family Finding” here, but have children languishing in care that do not have an activated asset base of support who keeps them connected and is relentlessly determined to attain permanence no matter what, then there is still (perhaps much) work to do. If children enter care without consistently embracing and involving relatives and connections who can support them and are brought to the table on the behalf of their kin, then there is still (perhaps much) work to do. If Dependency and Delinquency Courts (as well as the legal advocates) do not oversee and ensure this practice happen for every child served, there is much work to do.

Finally, from both NIPFC’s perspective as well as from a review of the research conducted by Child Trends in the article in this blast, conducting Discovery and Engagement steps or phases of the work without continuing that work with a well performing family centered practice model that consistently maximizes family participation, legal permanency will not improve significantly. We stridently believe full model needs to be implemented in order to attain the desired results for children and families. While we are confident that the integration and implementation of these Family Finding approaches within a robust family centered practice model can assist and help improve the lives of every family, we continue to strive to learn how better to install, implement and administer Family Finding in public and private child welfare setting to meet the increasing federal mandates established to meet the needs of our vulnerable children and families.
because he has the disease of addiction. But most importantly, if a bio-child has a real nasty attitude a parent develops ways to deal with it. The child does not stop being that parent’s child because of the attitude.

This, of course, is not the case for teens living in traditionally prepared foster homes. Simply put, what all teenagers need is unconditional commitment. They need a place they can make mistakes and not have the equivalent of a child welfare capital punishment sentence imposed on them. So many teens in foster care lose their parents simply because they do what teens do. All parents who come forward to help children they did not give birth to must be prepared in the same permanency philosophy that biological parents automatically imbed in the care-taking of their children.

I have had the privilege to orientate about 2,000 prospective foster and adoptive parents over the past three years. I always ask prospective parents why do they want to be parents to children not born to them. Generally, in a first session orientation all the answers take the form of they either love children and/or they want to help children. My second question to them is “who is coming forward to be a foster or adoptive parent to hurt hurt children?” Usually one person who wasn’t paying much attention to my question raises his or her hand. All the other participants are usually baffled by the oddity of the question. Then I go up to the person who raised her hand and ask again “you really want to hurt hurt children?” At which point she immediately withdraws her raised hand. Then I asked six more similar questions to the rest of the group changing just one word. The words I substitute are as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Hurt</th>
<th>Who wants to hurt children?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Abandon</td>
<td>Who wants to abandon abandoned children?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reject</td>
<td>Who wants to reject rejected children?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Traumatize</td>
<td>Who wants to traumatize traumatized children?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Victimize</td>
<td>Vicitimze victimized children?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abuse</td>
<td>Abuse abused children?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neglect</td>
<td>Neglect neglected children?</td>
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Invariably no one raises their hand for any of these seven questions. Then I point out to them every time a foster or adoptive parent attempts to return a child for a behavior that they committed we are “re-everythinging” them. We are re-abusing, re-abandoning, re-hurting, re-traumatizing, re-victimizing, re-rejecting, and re-neglecting the child.

Every person who comes forward to help a child must come to this work with an unconditionally committed permanency mindset. For example, if they are going to be a foster parent they must commit to the child’s permanency future. The number one permanency plan is for the child to return home. And until that goal is achieved that child needs one placement and
one placement only. Anxious children invariably must do things that upset foster and adoptive parents. Can you even begin to imagine what it would have felt like to have someone give you up as a child every time you did something they did not approve of, particularly if your behavior occurred during the most difficult period in your childhood? This happens to teenagers in care every single day as a matter of accepted and common practice. Accepted and common practice that we professionals perpetuate and endorse both implicitly and not so implicitly.

Often a teenager in foster care is in foster care because they have no one planning for their permanency future. They may have a goal of adoption but most often they have a goal of independent living. Both goals mean if the child does not get into a permanent family before discharge from foster care they run a high risk of being alone in the world and becoming homeless after they are discharged from care. Way too many of these youths living in congregate care facilities, particularly group homes, until their discharge from care. They may be taught skills but if no one is found to unconditionally commit to them before their discharge from care their hopes for a brighter future are drastically reduced.

Very often the system takes a half-full approach to teens in foster care and attempt to find conditionally thinking traditionally prepared foster parents for them. Intake workers across the land make the same mistake when they called traditionally prepared foster parents for a teen. They make “the deal.” “Try it and see if it works out.” The implication being that if it does not “work out” the child will be removed. Can you imagine if you had to love under those conditions when you were a teenager? Can you imagine if you had the equivalent of child welfare capital punishment inflicted on you (i.e. losing the bed you slept in last night) every time you caught an attitude, or every time you came home late, or every time you got caught smoking a cigarette, or every time you broke even the most basic of rules? I knew a teenager kicked out of his home for washing his sneakers in the washing machine. I knew another teen who got kicked out of two houses: one house because he flushed the toilet at night and the other house because he did not flush the toilet at night. The first house the father woke up at 4am and no one dared wake him up with the flush of a toilet. The other house found it very disgusting that this same teen did not flush the toilet. Both houses kicked him out for this utterly minor offense. This happens to teens time and time again because we do not imbed the unconditional commitment permanency philosophy in our preparation of these families.

We have dehumanized teenagers in our care. We have treated them like disposable garbage. And we have to stop it. Kids should not have to grow up in institutions, but they equally cannot grow up in conditional homes. You Gotta Believe, the agency that I founded, makes it a practice of teaching each and every one of our families how important unconditional commitment is. We will only approve prospective families who agree to practice this form of love. Every time we place a child that child is placed forever. We support families through their hard times after kids are placed. And we are there to constantly remind our families that if this child’s adolescence is handled in the right way this child will have a family for life and this family will have this young person in their family forever. And we teach each and every family to treat each child they accept as if this is the child who will bring them their last glass of water. Having practiced for over 15 years in this field, I know of at least three placements where the child that we placed was the child who brought their adoptive parent her last glass of water even over the dying parents’ biological children.
We have to stop accepting that teenagers in particular are not worthy of permanency. We have to continue to recruit only unconditionally committed permanent families for every teen in our care who will be discharged to no one. If we don’t we will continue to perpetuate what we did to another group of human beings in our Country’s history. In an article written in the November 2000 issue of Harper’s Magazine “Making the Case for Racial Reparations” there was an eerie quote in it about the condition that slaves found themselves in when they were emancipated and set free:

“Think about this. In 1865 the federal government of this country freed 4 million blacks. Without a dime, with no property, nearly all illiterate, they were let loose upon the land to wander.”

Willie E. Gary.

It was so eerie when I read this because here it is 148 years later and we do the exact same thing to tens-of-thousands of predominately African American and Latino children in our Country’s care every year. We discharge them without a dime in their pockets; without any property; rarely with a high school diploma so they mind-as-well be illiterate. And without an unconditionally committed permanent family in their corner they are simply being “let loose upon the land to wander.” We can absolutely do better for our kids. All we have to do is believe there are enough people willing to offer them unconditional commitment and then go about the good work of bringing those families into the process. It is far easier to find these families than you think. But you can only do so if you first believe it is possible. The choice is yours. Choose to believe. You gotta believe! Our children’s future depends on it.

Anyone interested in contacting the writer of this article, Pat O’Brien, Executive Director, of You Gotta Believe! The Older Child Adoption & Permanency Movement, Inc. can e-mail him at ygbpat@msn.com or call him at 718-570-5134 or write to him at 3114 Mermaid Avenue, Coney Island, N.Y. 11224. Pat would be very interested in sharing ideas with you about how you might go about finding homes for teen and pre-teen children in foster care.

To learn more about adopting teens and pre-teens from foster care watch “The Adopting Teens & ‘Tweens’ TV show every Thursday at noon and again at 8pm (Eastern Time) by logging on to http://www.bricartsmedia.org/community-media/bcat-tv-nenwork and scroll down and click “Launch” under BCAT 2. And/or you can listen to “The Adopting Teens & ‘Tweens Radio Forum” every Sunday night from 8-8:30pm (Eastern Time) by logging on to www.am1240wgbb.com. Listen to our radio support group on the third Sunday of every month for all foster and adoptive parents of teenagers. You can call into this radio support group when the phone number is announced during this live broadcast. If you miss the Sunday night radio broadcast feel free to listen to the program at your leisure by logging on to www.adoptingteensandtween.com Scroll down page to Archives and pick the program you’d like to listen to.

This article was written and copyrighted in January of 2001.
word P.A.R.E.N.T. and you scratch them out of the nine letter word permanency you are left with these three letters: M.N.E. Which we say stands for Mostly Not Enough. It’s not bad; it’s just not enough. It does not meet a young adult’s greatest need who faces aging out of foster care to no one but his or herself. And that greatest need is the need for a parent who will make that young adult a permanent member of a family.

When you talk about substituting mentors, volunteers, connections, and resources in place of parents you are really misunderstanding from where permanency flows. Permanency flows from a parent who makes a unilateral decision to stay unconditionally committed to their child for a lifetime. Now the 98% of us whose childhoods never touched the foster care system never fully appreciated what our parents have done for us. They gave us the foundation from which we sprang into our future.

You see mentors, volunteers, connections, and resources can be very important pieces of the village that can help our own You Gotta Believe parents raise the teens and young adults we place with them. For instance, at You Gotta Believe 70% of the parents who make a lifetime commitment to teens in foster care are single parents. 85% of those single parents are single women. However, whether one is a single mom, single dad, or a couple raising a teen, all our parents can benefit from having the village to help raise their child. However, there is no village without the parent.

Yes when I grew up it was difficult for me to cause trouble in my neighborhood because Mrs. Houser on the corner would see me doing something wrong and she would, at first, come down and correct me. But she made it perfectly clear; if she ever saw me doing the same thing again she would waltz right down to my house and speak to my mother. I changed my behavior immediately because I dared not have my mother find
out about my misbehavior. Mrs. Houser was part of the village that was raising me --- the child. However, there would have been no village for me --- the child --- had I not had a parent known to all in that village.

So mentors, volunteers, connections, and resources may not have anything to do with providing the permanency our teens so desperately need, they can be an instrumental part of the village that supports the parents we recruit for our teens once the teen has the foundation of the family with at least one parent. The most meaningful role for mentors, volunteers, connections, and resources is after a placement is made.

The other way mentors, volunteers, connections, and resources can play a crucial role for the teen or young adult foster youth who has no parent identified is when we deputize them to help us recruit that forever permanent parent who will either legally or morally adopt the youth. Their involvement in the young adult’s life can be instrumental in identifying a lifetime parent for that youth. Do mentors, volunteers, connections, and resources have cousins, parents, employers, churches, friends, and other family members? Of course they do. We need to educate these folks about the greatest need their young mentee/client/relative/connection has. And that greatest need is to have a permanent lifetime family and parent recruited for them before they age out of foster care. Once mentors, volunteers, connections, and resources understand the urgency of permanency, they can then explore all the options for the youth from the constructive adults who are already in their own lives.

One final point. Half the homeless population is made up of people who were previously in foster care. Half. Picture a youth discharged from foster care to no one but him or herself. No place to live. Not earning enough money to afford rent. Having no
place to do their own laundry or to even take a comfortable shower or bath. Picture that young adult stepping outside the foster care door and walking right into quick sand. Now the young person is slowly sinking in the quick sand and his mentor, volunteer, connection, or resource comes up to him, looking down as he is sinking, not really noticing the sinking because it is happening so slowly, and they will ask him how he is doing. He is so overwhelmed with his life problems he does not know what else to say so he says “fine.” “Everything is fine.” When one is not a parent one does not explore further. They simply accept “fine.”

What a parent does is come up from the bottom of the quick sand so that they can stop the sinking. Parents understand young adults today cannot make it without the support of a family. They create a safety net environment and give that young adult the time that he or she needs to get it together. No one anywhere between the ages of 18 and 21 can make it on their own these days in this economy. And this has been true for the past two-and-a-half to three decades. Parents have always known that. Very few can even finish college in four years these days. Parents understand that. Even when one graduates from college and gets a full time job, most of these young people do not leave “the safety net” because they can’t pay off their loans and support themselves on the income they are bringing in. Parents accept that. Parents stop the sinking by giving their children the time they need to make it in this economy and offer the emotional support that every young person needs to make it through life.

So when someone tries to sell you a bill of goods by sharing with you that there are a variety of “permanency options” for teens and young adults aging out of foster care, please feel free to share with them that there is only one option. And that option is
family. Second best strategies may be good programs, may help some kids when they are discharged to no one but themselves, but second best strategies do not meet our youth’s greatest need. And that is the need to belong in a family with at least one parent. Just like the other 98% of us whose childhoods did not touch the foster care system.

To learn more about the need for permanent parents for teens and young adults in foster care you can listen to our live radio call-in show "The Adopting Teens & ‘Tweens Radio Forum" every Sunday evening from 8-8:30pm (Eastern Time) by logging on to www.am1240wgbh.com. If you happen to miss the live broadcast you can listen to past radio programs by clicking here: http://www.adoptivefamiliesandtweens.com

You can also watch a live-stream of our weekly cable access television show entitled “The Adopting Teens & ‘Tweens Show" every Thursday at 12 noon and 8pm (Eastern Time) by logging on to www.bricartsmedia.org/community-media/bcat-tv-network and then scroll down and click on the word “launch” under the words “BCAT 2.”

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