

Council on Accreditation Innovative Practices Award

Permanency for Teens

The Children's Village

Abstract

The Children's Village (CV) has worked in partnership with families to help society's most vulnerable children for nearly 160 years. We provide residential and community-based services focused on keeping children safe and, whenever possible, with their families in the community. In 2004, CV began a comprehensive approach to an initiative commonly called Families for Teens. Known as Permanency for Teens, the goal was to find at least one stable, appropriate, and willing adult resource for every youth in our residential programs without one. In so doing, our intent was to prevent homelessness for youth aging out of foster care and improve the outcomes for youth whose well-being had been negatively impacted by the absence of a permanent resource.

CV developed a set of approaches and expectations uniquely structured to wrap around each youth in need. We identified a number of successful components and joined them together to create a multi-pronged team approach that established resources and prepared youth for their transition "home." Through a gradual matching process, this new method allowed both the youth and identified resource to talk about their expectations, hopes, and barriers, and feel in control of their progress. Since the program's implementation, we have seen an increased number of youth matched with new families in addition to significantly shortened lengths-of-stay in residential care. Currently, 50% of the targeted youth have been adopted or are living successfully in the community with a permanent adult resource and lengths-of-stay have been reduced by more than a year, giving hope to youth who otherwise had none.

Problem and Innovative Practice

Most residential programs serving New York City children have thought of themselves as serving a different population than the rest of the country. Long lengths-of-stay were the norm. We were child and treatment focused without putting adequate diligence and resources towards permanency for all children. The norm was to work with children towards reunification with their families, and for those who did not have a viable family resource, to prepare them to transfer to a group home once they were old enough. What the system did not give adequate attention to was how youth fared when they were discharged from the group homes or when they simply aged out, or walked out of the foster care system. The data shows that youth who age out of foster care without a permanent adult in their lives are much more likely to experience such problems as homelessness, unemployment, legal system involvement, and substance abuse (Courtney, Dworsky, Ruth, Havlick & Bost, 2005).

In 2002, New York City's Administration for Children's Services (ACS) began to question these practices and challenged private agencies to partner with ACS in addressing the poor outcomes faced by older youth in residential care. CV's Chief Operating Officer (COO) learned of ACS's initiative and began to question our past practices. Could we really significantly change our system and find families for the many older teenagers in our residential treatment center? How could we make this happen? We started with the resources we had. We asked all Units on our residential campus to refer to our Adoption/Foster Care department all youth who had no viable resource. There was of course skepticism. Where were these magical families going to come from? Our youth were so damaged, some said. How realistic was it to find a family or an adult willing to a permanent commitment to them?

One of the assumptions challenged was whether our own employees could become resources for some of these youth. This was a very controversial topic of discussion. During this time, New York City hired a consultant, Robert Lewis, to work towards improving foster parent recruitment strategies. CV invited Mr. Lewis to meet with our staff and instill in them the idea that recruitment is everybody's business. As this notion was being conveyed to our staff, we began to talk about how we might change our policy regarding employees' ineligibility as a resource for an agency child. Our major concern over the years was how to protect children and staff by ensuring they maintain appropriate boundaries at all times. CV had put many safeguards in place to ensure that staff members do not overstep their bounds – do not take children off campus without approval, do not show favoritism, do not buy gifts, etc. Now here we were contemplating how to permit staff members, under very prescribed circumstances, to become permanent resources for youth in our care. After all, it was so hard to find good people to commit to our teenagers. If we already had some good people who really cared about particular children, didn't we owe it to those children to let them have the opportunity for a real, forever family? We concluded that we did and so, in 2003, CV developed and spread the word about our new policy for employees to become adoptive resources. We built in several levels of screening, including a group interview with a designated Clinical Leadership Committee. We wrote in the ground rules – never talk with the child about their intentions ahead of time, ensure the child and employee are in different agency programs, do not as a rule license the employee as the agency's foster home but rather refer them to another agency to license and monitor.

In 2004, CV began to address other barriers to progressing with this new approach to the Families for Teens initiative. Our Foster Boarding Home program was relatively small, and as such, did not have many available foster parents at any given time. As with most agencies, foster

and adoptive families were more eager to take young children into their homes, not teenagers with a history of behavioral and emotional problems. We were fortunate that another organization, You Gotta Believe (YGB), had recently received a federal contract to recruit, train and match adoptive parents with teenagers in residential treatment centers. YGB assigned one of their best staff to be stationed on our campus at least one day a week. CV's COO hired a new Permanency Specialist to provide adjunct services needed to assist social workers in successfully matching teenagers with permanent homes. Together they took on the assignment of meeting weekly with YGB to review children who needed families. Around a small conference table, we began to talk about each youth and what he needed in a family, and we watched the initiative come to life. YGB and CV's Permanency Specialist met with each youth and talked about his past relationships – with whom he might want to reconnect. We began to hear about willing families who were attending the Model Approaches to Partnerships in Parenting (MAPP) classes provided by YGB. In fact, CV made a large conference room available to YGB one night a week, so that the MAPP classes could be offered right on our campus. Things started to gel, but we wondered how were we going to get the residents on board? This had to occur by continuing to shore up our staff to be believers. If the direct care staff and social workers believed that we could find families for these teens, then the kids would follow. Buy-in was coming slowly from staff and youth.

Robert Lewis' workshops helped to light the fire for many CV staff. They committed to helping us find families through their churches and other community connections. We also began to do child specific recruitment, meeting with some of our most institutionalized and challenging youth. They were excited to see their pictures on the back of business cards. They, along with other children, were invited to attend the YGB MAPP class which was set up as a

panel where residents helped prospective adoptive families understand what kids in care need and what their experiences have been. In fact, this was one of the matching techniques utilized by YGB – a way for youth and families to meet without feeling they were under the pressure of meeting their “soul mate”.

The components we joined together to create CV’s Permanency for Teens approach for youth in residential treatment included: creative outreach for permanent families for teens with problematic behaviors and traumatic histories; individual and group counseling that engaged youth about their expectations for living with a family, their fears and other barriers, and the realities of finding the right match; a team approach to screening prospective families, thoughtful preparation of the families and a gradual matching process that allows both the youth and the family to feel in control of the process; family therapy to help the new family coalesce and begin to talk about expectations, hopes and dreams; a strong connection with CV’s Adoption/Foster Care department so that the transition from residential care to foster boarding home care would be as seamless as possible; and an approach to the clinical work done in residential treatment that is trauma focused with the intention that work will continue after the transition to the home.

While these initiatives were underway, the COO and the Permanency Specialist planned a kickoff event for the 23 residents on campus who had a permanency goal of “Independent Living” (which we now call the “I give up” goal). The Permanency Specialist was not optimistic when given the 23 names, as she recognized many of the boys as the longest stays and toughest cases on campus. Nevertheless, she organized our first Options Fair (careful not to name this gathering anything that had to do with adoption or families). She met with each youth individually before the fair to engage with them and challenge them to just attend. We asked each social worker to accompany their youth, promised pizza, and set an agenda which focused

on career/education goals, mentoring/tutoring, and relationships/families, including youth from NYC's Youth Speakers' Bureau, who had been trained to talk about their journey towards finding permanent families. We were shocked that day to see that every single one of the 23 boys showed up. A few youth even came up to the Permanency Specialist at the end to say that they were interested in working with us to find a family for them. Our work was taking hold!

As YGB was successful in recruiting families, CV began to make matches. We worked with new resources and reconnected some youth with their extended families with whom they had lost contact. Clearly, we had to review the clinical work we were doing and ensure that our professional staff had a common strategy for preparing youth for new families. We had several clinical staff meetings and talked about the need for family therapy for new matches. We set an agency standard that no youth would be transferred to a new family without a minimum of five family sessions. All were on board and were excited about the families who were coming forward and the matches that were under way. A few employees began to express an interest in becoming resources. They enrolled in the YGB MAPP classes, with a few following through to the point of welcoming a young man from our residential program into their home.

In addition to the family work that was clearly indicated, we began to run Family Bound preparation groups for youth on campus. These followed the model created by Bob Lewis. We determined that we needed two different groups – one for youth who already had a match in the works and one for youth who were still waiting and still unsure about what they wanted. These groups were incredibly powerful and supportive to youth. Some found the strength to opt out of a particular match, finding the courage to express their concerns and speak to what their unmet needs were. Others were able to talk about their ambivalence and work it out so that they could more comfortably move to their new home.

We systematized our process to ensure that the social workers, who manage all the cases, were thinking about permanency for ALL children from day of admission. We added a section on Permanency for Teens to our new Social Worker Orientation in order to get new staff acculturated to our expectations and values. We also offered booster meetings to talk about current issues related to Permanency for Teenagers. Throughout this process, the Permanency Specialist worked with staff members as the liaison to the agencies such as YGB and COAC, and to CV's own Adoption Foster Care department housed in Harlem to find permanent homes. The Specialist receives and reviews all home studies by other agencies with treatment teams, and ensures that all details are covered to make a successful match, including securing all the approvals required by public agencies. The Specialist counsels youth on expectations for family living and helps to prepare him to accept a new family. They also take youth to events where they have an opportunity to meet prospective adoptive families like Meet and Greets and tapings of The Freddie Mac Foundation's Wednesday's Child television feature.

CV's clinical work has continued to evolve. Two years ago we began to implement Trauma Systems Therapy (TST) throughout our campus. This focus on trauma has further strengthened our Permanency for Teenagers initiative, giving all staff the tools to assess youth's environments and formulate trauma treatment plans which give more thought to permanency matches and after care transition plans. Another addition to our clinical work was the recent introduction of TST to the Adoption/Foster Care department. This work just began last year and provides a strengthened continuum of clinical care to youth who transition from the residential treatment center to a foster/adoptive home. The continuity of this approach will further enhance outcomes, improving families' prognosis for bonding and ultimate stability/ permanency.

Impact and Implications

The goal of the Permanency for Teens initiative is to prevent homelessness for youth aging out of foster care and improve the outcomes for youth whose well-being had been negatively impacted by the absence of a realistic permanency resource. Since its inception in 2004, the program has worked to match 97 youth, ranging in age from 13-20, in residential care who were poised to age out of the system without a permanent resource. Of these youth, 69 were matched. Currently, 48 of these 69 youth continue to live successfully with their family or are near to transfer, thus indicating a 50% success rate.

Of the 48 youth who were successful, 12 have already been adopted, another 11 are pre-adoptively placed (meaning their families are actively pursuing the legal process of adoption), and 25 more have remained stable in the community and formed permanent adult connections, even though they have ultimately chosen not to be formally adopted. Many of these youth are now attending college, working in the community, or living independently. Taken in sum, this means that 30% of those youth who stepped down are on the path to adoption or have been adopted already, and 70% are living successfully and permanently in the community, an outstanding outcome when one considers the rates of incarceration, recidivism and homelessness for youth leaving residential care without a permanent resource.

Of the 21 remaining youth who were unsuccessfully matched through the program, some returned to residential settings, while others were disrupted from their original placement or had legal problems after stepping down. Many still remain in the community, struggling to make the transition to adulthood while grappling with their own feelings about permanent families and adoption. We cannot say with certainty what will happen to these young men, but for those still

in care, we continue to provide services designed to help them become productive and independent citizens, and continue to hold out hope that each may yet find a permanent family.

While matching youth with permanent families was the goal, another clear outcome was shortened lengths-of-stay in residential care for youth involved in Permanency for Teens. The culture shift that occurred ensured that from the day of admission, social workers were identifying the permanent resource for each youth. For those new admits who did not appear to have a viable discharge resource, the social worker began talking to the youth about his past and who were the important adults in his history – relatives, previous foster families, etc. The length-of-stay was static for more than a decade, and with the initiation of the Permanency for Teens program the overall length-of-stay dropped from 32.3 months for 2002 admissions to 22 months by 2005, and continued to drop to the current low of 14.7 months.

Further evidence that our initiative has worked can be measured by the non-existence of Group Homes in CV's continuum of care. For over 35 years, CV operated five group homes throughout the metropolitan New York area. These group homes housed the many older teens from our RTC who had no place to go when they were ready for discharge. From 2004 to 2008, our group home census continued to drop, necessitating the closing of these residences, one at a time. The last one was closed in 2008. CV attributes this entirely to the Permanency for Teens initiative. We are very proud of the fact that our belief in finding families for every youth has made a dramatic improvement in services throughout the agency. We continue to utilize Supervised Independent Living Apartments for some of the youth not successful in finding a home, and occasionally transfer an older youth to a Group Residence for his special needs, but we continue to strive towards family life for every youth and do not anticipate having group homes in our continuum of care again.

We never lose sight of the fact that our Permanency for Teens work comes with a degree of risk. One risk is that we build up a child's hope and optimism that he will have a family some day and then fail to find one. There are additional risks in that a first match will not work out and yet one more family must be found. At what point do we believe we are doing more harm than good by replacing a youth in another "permanent" home? Each case scenario is different, each youth has a different level of resiliency, and each disruption has its own set of explanations. CV continues to build in many supports to address the inherent risks in this work. We pride ourselves on slow transitions from residential to permanent homes so that we can adequately prepare all parties and reduce the likelihood of disruptions. An adoptive parent who is a consultant to CV runs a monthly foster parent support group and helps provide 24/7 crisis response to foster parents who are struggling with their teenagers. The Foster Parent Advocate is also available to provide support and counseling and the Behavioral Specialist is on board to provide respite to foster families and assist them in advocating for their children with the education system and community services. Our goal is always to maintain the family placement.

CV's approach offers a successful model for the expansion of the Families for Teens program that is both measurable and replicable. Some residential programs have pieces of CV's program, but most do not offer the full scope of this initiative.

The key factors critical for replication are:

- Strong collaboration with foster parent recruitment agencies;
- Strong leadership that drives a culture/belief system throughout the organization that a "family" connection is critical and that there are good families available for teens with behavioral and emotional problems;
- Strong clinical program in both the residential and foster boarding home services.

The Permanency for Teens program has positively impacted the agency as a whole. The initiative has helped promote a collaborative culture, by providing a concrete plan to match teens with families and showing staff that there are endless possibilities for these youth if we just look for them. CV's volunteer mentors realized that they, too, could impact our Permanency for Teens work. In addition to mentoring youth throughout the matching process, all mentors are now considered as possible foster parents. Often mentors form a bond with youth, which over time leads to the pursuit of becoming a permanent resource.

CV's work has also had a significant impact on the greater community. As we lowered the length-of-stay in residential care, each youth admitted from 2002-2008 stayed in the RTC an average of 12.8 fewer months, amounting to an estimated savings of over \$2.4 million (the difference between the median RTC and TFBH rate). CV's forward thinking about permanency for teens brought us recognition by New York City as a leader in residential treatment, including presentations at Foster Care Directors meetings and articles in well-known publications, such as *The New York Times* (Foderaro, 2008) and *Child Welfare Watch* (Farmer, 2008).

The Permanency for Teens program has brought systematized change to CV, significantly reducing lengths-of-stay and matching 50% of targeted youth with a permanent resource. The program will continue to benefit future residents, and we are optimistic that there are good families out there waiting for these youth. If we do not look for them, they will not be found, and youth will miss the opportunity to experience caring family members by their side. It is a magical experience watching youth go from hopeless to hopeful, and see their transformation begin to shape the entire agencies' perception that there are families yet to be realized.

References

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