

Catalyst for Kids

Priority - Improve the safety, well-being and permanency outcomes for adolescents.

Why this is important

Adolescents do not consistently receive the protection and services they need from our state's child welfare system. In each of the following priority areas, the experiences and outcomes of adolescents who interface with the child welfare system are less than they need and deserve.

Safety -

A major threat to adolescent safety is that fact of their "aging out" of the foster care system at age 18. In most cases, Washington State foster youth who earn a high school diploma/GED and turn 18 immediately become ineligible for foster care support, including housing and health care. Each year, approximately 300-400 such youth "age out" of Washington's foster care system. Few are prepared to survive on their own.

- Only 30% - 35% have earned a high school diploma or GED at the time they "age out."
- One study (2003) of the status of Washington youth 6 - 12 months after leaving foster care found 1/3 on some form of public assistance, 25% suffering from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder and 22% having experienced one or more days of homelessness after turning 18.

Well-being -

Considerable and overlapping health and mental health problems compound the problems of adolescents in foster care.

- An estimated 30% - 40% of foster children have physical or emotional difficulties.
- These difficulties continue after they age out of care, yet few have access to even minimum medical coverage.

Educational outcomes for youth in foster care are also compromised. In comparison to other students youth in foster care:

- Score 15 - 20% lower on achievement tests.
- Twice as many have repeated a grade, changed schools or enrolled in special education.
- Up to 2/3 do not graduate from high school.

Permanency -

Every youth transitioning from foster care should have the opportunity to either reestablish a relationship with his or her biological family, establish a legal relationship with another family, or both. If children do not have a family or significant adult committed to them, they are at high risk of experiencing the problems listed above, when they leave foster care. Permanency, however, is often not established for teenagers:

- Most of the children in non-relative foster care for over four years are adolescents;
- 2/3 of these adolescents have had five or more placements;
- Almost 2/3 of these adolescents are legal orphans.

Desired Results

- Permanent connections to family members or other significant stable adults.
- Improved quality and accessibility of services for adolescents.
- Greater educational achievement of adolescents and better preparation for adulthood.
- Increased youth involvement in case plan development and major decisions.

Response Highlights: Throughout the state diverse stakeholders are responding to these needs. Examples include:

Safety ~

- Three programs of the Children's Administration - Independent Living Services, Transition to Independence, and Responsible Living Skills - help youth currently or formerly in foster care prepare for self-sufficiency through skill development and/or assistance with education, employment, housing and life skills.
- HB 1408 provided \$1,000,000 for Individual Development Accounts (IDA), of which \$200,000 was set aside to pilot IDA programs for youth in foster care. Youth will be eligible for matched savings that they can invest in self-sufficiency supports such as rental housing, health care premiums, automobiles and/or computers.
- In response to concern that abuse or neglect allegations involving adolescent victims were not being adequately screened, SB 5583 requires the Children's Administration to develop a curriculum to train staff on how to better respond to adolescent victims of child abuse and neglect, and to track and report on the status of adolescent referrals.

Well Being ~

- The Children's Administration, the Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction and local school districts are collaborating to implement SHB 1058, which requires these bodies to work together to improve the education stability and attainment of foster youth.
- Higher education for foster youth is advanced by the Governor's Scholarship Program, which, since 2001, has provided scholarships for continuing education to 97 youth in foster care, and by HB 1050, passed in 2005, which created a foster care scholarship endowment program.
- The Treehouse program offers an educational support model for children in foster care that includes tutoring, education advocacy and Coaching to College for youth in foster care. Treehouse is managing \$900,000 allotted by the state for statewide Education Advocacy Coordinators whose work will improve educational outcomes for youth in foster care by providing effective educational planning and advocacy for youth, advocacy training to youth, caregivers and social workers, and collaboration with community partners.
- Focused work of the Everett Adolescent Child Welfare Services team is building a unit culture and practice strategies that are resulting in high rates of high school graduation and permanency among the youth they serve.

Permanency ~

- Family Group Conferencing (FGC) is a family-empowerment strategy for reestablishing family ties and promoting permanency for adolescents who have been in foster care for many years. A 2001 study found that children who had a family group conference experienced high rates of reunification or kinship placement and low rates of re-referral to CPS. Although CA budget cuts resulted in the loss of several FGC facilitator positions, regional budgeting decisions have maintained the work of Family Group Conferences in several offices throughout the state.
- *Finding Our Roots*, a three-year Family Group Conferencing project is working in King County and Yakima to enhance the permanency outcomes of adolescents who have been in care for at least two years and to support the integration of this effective practice in offices throughout the state.

Action Needed in 2006

- Support the Children's Administration in the implementation of a redesigned service model for adolescents.
- Work on strategies to support youth in foster care in achieving academic success.
- Maintain and expand upon promising practices underway throughout the state.