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Urgency to Permanency

By Rose M. Handon, PhD, LSW
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In a brief interview with Margaret (aka Margie) Shelton,

Division Director II, Adoption/Resource Unit, Mississippi Department of Human Services, Division of Family and Children's Services, she took time out of her busy schedule to respond to our interests related to her leadership in the field of adoption and the advancements inside her agency to secure permanency and critical connections for youth and families throughout their community.

"Urgency to Permanency" is "Ms. Margie's" plea as her agency seeks to secure permanency for not only Mississippi waiting children but to also secure permanent connections and support for all families following the finalization of an adoption. This urgent cry aims to shift the child welfare paradigm amongst professionals, foster, adoptive, kin caregivers, and a host of others across the state and our nation, to place an emphasis on permanency for our youth. This emphasis starts from their *first day* of connection with the child welfare system, throughout a continuum of care, support, and an array of post-permanency services when critical needs arise.

Specifically, Margie suggests that agencies begin with their recruitment message. Rather than a focus on "opening your hearts and homes to a child" the focus would call for resource parents to become a permanent support through shared parenting of a child or youth whose family is struggling to meet their needs for safety, permanence, and well-being. If permanency is the goal (ensuring that a child/youth lives in a safe, permanent

family for a lifetime), the community needs to support the permanent family, whether that be the biological family, a relative caregiver, or a non-relative adoptive family. They should not have to lose one support system in order to gain another. If the path to permanency is reunification, then that child/youth's resource parent is available to the child/youth and family as a strong support system for the rest of the child/youth's life. However, if the path to permanency is adoption by the resource family, the child/youth also maintains a permanent relationship with his/her biological family and that support system.

Family relationships are so important to all of us. A child should never have to pick and choose which relationships he/she will keep and which he/she will have to give up in order to have his/her need for permanency met. A child can be a part of more than one family—he/she can love and be loved by all.

Further, this is a shift for the entire community. The importance of lifetime relationships needs to be at the crux of community education. These lifetime relationships are not only immediate family ties with parents and siblings but community ties at the child's school, neighborhood, day care, church, sports teams, etc. Communities need to be engaged in supporting families struggling to meet the needs of children. Communities must perceive that keeping the family intact is the ultimate goal, whether the primary family is the birth, kin, or adoptive family. The commitment of the child/youth's community is key to ensuring post-permanency services are available and effective.

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Urgency (continued from front page)

Some post-adoption services are administered by Mississippi Department of Human Services, Division of the Family and Children's Services (DFCS) adoption specialists which are located throughout 13 regions. Parents may contact the local Family and Children's Services Office or their Regional Office to access services such as, crisis intervention, case management, assistance in admissions to acute care or residential care, re-adoptions following parents' death or disability, and referrals to other needed services. A list of the Regional Offices is available at www.mdhs.state.ms.us/fcs_rd.html or call (601) 359-4999.

A particular program of interest in Mississippi, Partners in Permanency (PIP), is a program administered through Southern Christian Services for Children and Youth, a private child-placing agency which provides post-adoption services to adopted children/youth in Mississippi. These services include information and referral, educational materials through training and a lending library, support groups for parents and children, crisis intervention (limited), referrals to adoption competent counseling, retreats, and respite care. The PIP team can be contacted at (800) 748-3005.

As Mississippi continues to emphasize the urgency of permanency, the current gaps in post-permanency services are being identified. Partnerships with other public agencies, as well as private agencies, are being formed in order to meet the needs of families in communities across the state. There is much work to be done in order for all of Mississippi's families to have access to services within their community that will keep children in safe and stable homes for a lifetime.

Great things are Happening in Mississippi

In FY 2012, Mississippi finalized 417 adoptions. In that same time period, federal adoption incentive award funding was used to support adoptions in a number of ways, including sponsoring resource staff to national conferences and training events.

In addition, Mississippi hosted an annual Permanency Conference that focuses on the

importance of every child having a permanent family. This year's conference theme was "The Urgency of Permanency" and provided attendees with more insight as to what happens to a child who lingers or ages out of foster care without a permanent family to support them for a lifetime.

In 2013, a single, consistent home study format was implemented. Families are licensed as *resource parents* who are often involved with shared parenting and

permanent connections with the child/youth and birth family regardless of the permanency option outcome (reunification, relative guardianship, or adoption). In the future, the State will reach out to private providers to encourage them to use the same home study format.

In 2011, a statewide Diligent Recruitment and Retention Plan began with specific messages geared toward targeted populations of individuals who have the skills and abilities to parent the child/youth in foster care who are in need of a supportive resource family. This program has emphasized the need to educate and engage the communities on how to meet the ongoing needs of these children/youth and their families.

In addition, the implementation of a child-specific adoption recruitment plan began with one teen-focused adoption recruiter to work with the teens who are available for adoption but resistant to this permanency option. Mississippi plans to utilize adoption promotion funds to launch their version of "100 Longest Waiting Teens" Initiative. This Initiative will include a team of adoption specialists skilled in working with teens who express a disinterest in being adopted. The team will assist these teens in making permanent connections and lead them to a more positive attitude toward legal permanence through adoption. The adoption specialists will engage youth, placement resources, staff, *and the community* to seek legal permanence for each youth with a goal of finalizing an adoption prior to aging out of foster care. Each member of this specialized team will be assigned a caseload, not to exceed 10 youth.

Teamwork, Leadership, and Commitment Makes a Difference!

Margie recognizes the need for child welfare agencies, both state and public, to become strong allies. Services from each agency must complement all others in order to fill the "gaps" that currently keep children/youth from being placed in safe, permanent families where all their needs are met for a lifetime. Margie acknowledges the critical component of *team members* throughout Mississippi who play an integral role in meeting the permanency needs of children, youth, and their families throughout the state.

Building on a legacy of embracing challenges and change, she openly credits the leadership of The Honorable Governor Phil Bryant and his staff; Dr. Kim Shackelford, Deputy Director of the DFCS; child welfare employees; parents; caregivers; kin; behavioral health providers; private agency care providers; recruiters; university partners; and a host of other colleagues throughout and across many states, including care providers and national partners who advocate and support children and families.

Finally, Margie openly gives credit to her own family and children who remind her daily of the importance of a forever family.



Keeping Permanency at the Forefront



Permanency is an initiative that starts when a child or youth first enters care. As Deborah Goodman, Adoption Program Administrator in Oklahoma states, “In order to improve timeliness to adoption, the focus must be on everyone within the agency moving toward the desired outcome.” Oklahoma has put significant effort into keeping all staff involved and accountable for permanency. This is just one of several strategies that Oklahoma Department of Human Services has implemented to improve their permanency outcomes.

The second strategy involves the use of a Quadrant Model. A staffing is held for each child/youth who has a case plan goal of adoption. The staffing explores the current legal status of the child/youth and identifies known, prospective adoptive placement options. Combined, this information is used to determine the initial Quadrant. As shown in Figure 1, there are four Quadrants. Children who fall into Quadrant 1 are likely to move expeditiously to permanency. Children in Quadrant 2 are legally free for adoption but will require immediate and progressive casework efforts to identify an adoptive family and achieve permanency. Initial and subsequent Quadrant staffing occurs throughout the State on a quarterly basis. Based on case circumstances, a child or youth can be moved to a different Quadrant during the staffing.

Figure 1

Quadrant 1	Child is legally free and there is an identified placement.
Quadrant 2	Child is legally free but there is not an identified placement.
Quadrant 3	Child is not legally free but there is an identified placement.
Quadrant 4	Child is not legally free and there is not an identified placement.

The Quadrant Model combined with field management reports has helped staff learn how to identify cases ready for permanency. It has also provided a structure for line level staff to prioritize their workload in a manner that keeps permanency at the forefront. Staff receive a monthly data report identifying all children and youth with a current case plan goal of adoption. In addition, adoption efforts towards permanency are identified on the report. Staff are able to easily focus on assignments, identify children/youth within a particular Quadrant, and track casework progression. This report is used in various ways within the Oklahoma Department of Human Services and is often shared with judicial staff. Oklahoma strives to use data at every level, making reports readily available to track the desired outcomes.

All of these strategies have helped to significantly increase the timeliness to permanency. The Oklahoma Department of Human Services doubled the percentage of children (20% to 40%) who were adopted within 24 months of entry into care.

As Oklahoma continues to make improvements to the system, the Quadrant Model has laid a strong foundation for timeliness to adoption.

For information about the Model, please contact Deborah Goodman at Deborah.Goodman@okdhs.org.



Best-kept Secret: MALDI

By Karen Miskunas, Program Manager

Connecticut Department of Children and Families, Office of Foster and Adoption Services

My MALDI experience can be summed up by the following words: opportunity, education and growth.

I was introduced to the National Resource Center for Adoption's Minority Adoption Leadership Institute (MALDI) during my first National Adoption of State Adoption programs (NASAP) meeting. I had never heard of MALDI but as I learned more, it seemed like one of the best-kept secrets. I was excited about the opportunities it held!

I returned from NASAP and learned that some of my colleagues had participated in the MALDI. They all reported positive experiences, including how it had helped them to become leaders in our agency.



Less than two years later, as I thought about staff development and initiating new practices in my workgroup, MALDI

came to my mind. Our agency had set a new mission and goals for our work in children's protective services to include partnering with families and communities; advancing the health, safety and learning of the children we serve; ensuring permanency for children in care; implementing strength-based, trauma-informed practice and programs; addressing racial inequities in practice and culture; building new community partnerships and improving agency leadership to become a learning organization.

Within my workgroup, we set new goals around achieving permanency for children in our care. The time seemed right to get one of my staff to participate in MALDI. The decision to move ahead wasn't a carefree decision. I was concerned that MALDI might interfere with work time, whether the person could handle competing interests, and if I could be a good mentor for one of my staff. These questions turned into the exact reasons MALDI was such an important opportunity for education and professional growth!

I had a particular staff person in mind. I had watched her develop professionally over a course of two years,

and I was impressed by her passion to find permanency for adolescents. I felt that MALDI could be the vehicle for my staff to further develop her leadership skills. After submitting the application, we got the good news . . . she was accepted to the program. We both asked, what happens next?

The first thing we learned is that we should have applied years ago! With her project outlined and with great anticipation we attended a series of meetings to orient ourselves for the work ahead. We were immediately embraced as part of the MALDI family.

Mentees and mentors both received incredible professional support and training from the MALDI team leaders. These leaders demonstrated their commitment to the mentees individual professional growth and project development from the outset. The leaders continued availability and support of the mentees was invaluable and supported the mentoring relationship tremendously.

All of the mentors were given tools to further define their leadership styles as well as assistance in developing their own professional plans. My plan is best summed up by John Quincy Adams, "If your actions inspire others to dream more, learn more, do more and become more, you are a leader." Mentors were fully engaged throughout the training and were pointedly challenged to look at themselves in new ways. The leadership education I received through MALDI not only supported my role as a mentor in MALDI, it was the most inspirational I have been exposed to in my child welfare career.

MALDI has helped to remind me of the impact child welfare supervisors and managers have in shaping the path of their staff. In the words of MALDI's mission statement, "to improve the overall capacity of the child welfare system to sustain systemic changes that address the adoption-related needs of the families, children and youth it serves," this is an obligation managers and supervisors should heed. So next time you hear about MALDI, take the next steps and become part of an exciting process that will enhance your own skills as well as the capacity of your team members.

To learn more about MALDI, visit website at <http://www.nrcadoption.org/programs/maldi/home-2/>.

The National Resource Center for Adoption (NRCA) engaged over 30 experts from across the nation, who work in both the public and private sector, to dialogue about the components necessary for a State, Territory, or Tribe to have a robust permanency support and preservation program. Recognizing the need to integrate permanency and preservation services throughout the continuum of care, starting at entry through post finalization, participants discussed ways in which existing systems can be reframed and enhanced to achieve increased permanency outcomes.

The feedback obtained from these experts will assist the NRCA to develop a model that highlights fundamental components necessary to embed a permanency framework into all activities. Once developed, the model can be used by States, Territories and Tribes to assess their current systems, identify needs for increased adoption competencies, and distinguish areas their systems can reframe to improve permanency outcomes. In addition to the model, the NRCA will develop various tools that further flush out components of the adoption continuum.

More information about the model and the tools will be available in November. Please contact Janice King at jking@nrcadoption.org if you are interested in obtaining additional information about the model or how it can be used in your jurisdiction.



We are pleased to announce the following people who have joined our team at NRCA:

Jackie Crow Shoe, Regional Lead Consultant for Tribes, has been a project lead for a collaborative effort between the courts, substance abuse, and child safety. Jackie is an enrolled member of the Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa Indians from North Dakota. For the past 18 years, she has provided services in Indian country in the area of social services, including sexual abuse, domestic violence and child protection. Jackie consults nationally providing training and technical assistance to both counties and tribes.

Kris Henneman, Consultant has 33 years experience in child welfare, mental health, residential services, and community development. His areas of focus include evaluation of permanency services, community development, and recruitment and support of kin, foster and adoptive families. He has facilitated organizational strategic planning meetings to improve organizational outcomes and has been involved in the development of national curriculums on adoption.

Leslie Cohen, Consultant, has 21 years of experience in child welfare program/policy development, implementation and evaluation. She implemented an extended family support program for children residing in informal kinship care arrangements, implemented and managed program evaluation for IV-E Subsidized Guardianship Waiver demonstrations in Illinois, Wisconsin and Tennessee, and evaluated the post- permanency needs of children exiting the Illinois child welfare system to adoption and guardianship arrangements.



- **Tip Sheets** on Child/Youth & Family Assessment and Preparation and on Decision Making & Placement Selection at <http://www.nrcadoption.org/resources/childwelfaretopics/>
- **MALDI Action Research Projects 2013** at <http://www.nrcadoption.org/programs/maldi/action-research/4686-2/>



UPCOMING WEBINARS

Webinar Coming in January

“Understanding and Complying With Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Multiethnic Placement Act of 1994, as amended”

This presentation will focus on:

- Federal laws that apply to the consideration of race, color, and national origin (RCNO) and how they interrelate.
- Practical guidance on how child welfare agencies and social workers can comply with MEPA in their programs and daily practice.
- Enforcement of Title VI and MEPA
- Compliance Tips
- Resources

Watch for the announcement on this webinar coming soon!

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