The ROUNDTABLE

Oklahoma Swift Adoptions Program Excels in Moving Children to Permanency

By Deborah Goodman, MSW

With passage of the Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997 and changes in Oklahoma statute, our Oklahoma Department of Human Services (OKDHS) was mandated to expedite permanency planning for children and to secure an adoptive family for each waiting child. The Department director challenged his management staff in the Children and Family Services Division to develop an innovative program that would help children in custody achieve permanence in a "swift" manner. This vision called for major changes in how we were moving children to achieve permanency.

In 1999, OKDHS developed and implemented Swift Adoption Services, a new program for moving children waiting in foster care through the adoption process in the State of Oklahoma. The Swift Adoptions program was designed to address the barriers to adoption and permanency for more than 1,200 children in the child welfare system waiting for adoptive families. Swift Adoptions focused on placing children already waiting for adoptive families and on establishing a system of concurrent planning for children identified as needing adoptive placement in the future. Program staff members made the commitment to increase customer satisfaction by providing a higher quality of services.

They adopted this statement of purpose: "The mission of Swift Adoption Services is to secure an adoptive family for every waiting child for whom adoption is the goal. Children can be assured a permanent adoptive family through early identification, assessment and child preparation, aggressive recruitment and preparation of prospective adoptive parents, the elimination of legal and other barriers to adoption, and the adequate provision of supportive services."

The vision of Swift Adoptions is that "no child" will wait for an adoptive family. The adoption of children with special needs will become a normative way of creating families. Through partnerships between the Department, other agencies and communities, we will identify and support families willing to adopt these children. The vision also perceives that high-quality services will result in positive adoption outcomes for waiting children and families.

Several major components have made this program successful over the past 10 years:

- Adoption staff members report directly to Swift Adoptions program staff in the Children and Family Services Division.

"Embracing partnerships that build strong foundations for the adoption of waiting children in the child welfare system!"

Natalie's Notes

Hello Friends:

This edition of *The Round-table* is dedicated to the issue of "timeliness to adoption." We are pleased to highlight the work of four jurisdictions and the various strategies they have employed in an effort to make a positive impact toward achieving timely adoption outcomes.

With passage of the Adoption and Safe Families Act (ASFA) in 1997, child welfare focused its attention on the law's emphasis on improving safety, permanency and well-being for children, and youth in foster care. The goals of ASFA are to move "children languishing in the foster care system to adoption or other permanent placements" as well as to "change the experience of children/youth entering the system to increase the timeliness of securing permanency."

In 2000, implementation of the federal Child and Family Services Reviews (CFSR) nationally reinforced the goals of ASFA. All jurisdictions have completed Round 1 of the CFSRs process; currently Round 2 is underway.

In Round 1, the "timeliness to adoption" national standard measured in the CFSRs required that "32 percent of the children who exit foster care during the period under review to a finalized adoption, exit care within 24 months from the time of the latest removal from the home." This standard was highly interdependent with the permanency indicators and the child well-being indicators. For example, if parental rights were not terminated in a timely way, the jurisdiction would find achieving the timeliness-to-adoption indicator extremely difficult.

Furthermore, ASFA has dictated a change in thinking about some of the decision-making factors involved in termination of parental rights (TPR). Before passage of ASFA, some jurisdictions considered the child's age and the availability of adoptive homes prior to making the TPR decision. ASFA requires that the TPR decision be based neither on age nor the likelihood of adoption, but rather on the length of the child/youth's time in foster care. In Round 1 of the CFSRs, only 9 States met the national standard for timeliness to adoption; no State achieved substantial conformity with Permanency Outcome 1: "Children have permanency and stability in their living situations."

In Round 2 of the CFSRs, data composites were added to the measures used to determine how well outcomes have been achieved. "Data composites will provide a more holistic view of State performance in a particular domain than a single data measure can achieve" (Federal Register, 71, No. 109, June 7, 2006, p. 32970). In Round 1, there was one timeliness-to-adoption measure, as articulated above. In Round 2, there are three components and five performance measures for the timeliness-to-adoption composite (see chart on page 3).

In Round 1, a great number of the child/youth population waiting for adoption had exceeded the timeliness-to-adoption time frame specified in the CFSR. Some States expressed concern that the subsequent adoptive placement of these children would negatively impact their CFSR performance. With the addition of these additional data composites, these concerns have attempted to be addressed.

A review of the findings from Round 1 shows that among the 35 States that did not meet the national standard for timeliness to adoption, the top three practices facilitating or impeding attainment of the standard were concurrent planning, lack of timely completion of home studies or adoption-related paperwork, and lack of timely TPR filing.

Challenges to permanency for children and youth included the following:

- Inconsistent concurrent planning efforts
- Maintaining the goal of reunification for long periods of time without re-evaluating the appropriateness of the goal
- Not seeking or filing for TPR in a timely way
- Not completing adoption studies and paperwork in a timely way
- Lengthy TPR appeals processes

We have heard from the Federal CFSR Team that preliminary results from the 32 States in Round 2 show similar concerns. These include[2]:

- Inconsistent concurrent planning efforts (especially when goals of reunification and adoption have been identified)
- Court delays: Lack of timely TPRs and not filing for TPR until an adoptive family has been identified, multiple and ongoing continuances, parents given more time for reunification, and changes in bench officers
- Worker turnover/lack of urgency on the part of the agency to pursue adoption goal
- Delays in progress on adoption goal due to the child staying in care to keep services in place
- Lack of clarity regarding the availability of adoption subsidies
- Lack of effort to identify pre-adoptive families

Our Center specializes in providing technical assistance, tools, and on-site support to enhance the practice knowledge, skills, and abilities of States, Tribes, and agencies in improving time-to-adoption outcomes. If your State or Tribe would like to obtain technical assistance from the NRCA, contact your federal Regional Office of the Children's Bureau to obtain approval, or send an e-mail to the NRCA's Director of Training and Technical Assistance at jlevesq7@maine.rr.com. You also may request technical assistance online through our web site at www.nrcadoption.org.

The Center is part of the Children's Bureau Training and Technical Assistance Network, which is operated under the auspices of the Children's Bureau and is available at no cost to States and Tribes to assist them in increasing their capacity to better serve children and families in the child welfare system.

Components and Performance Measures for the Timeliness-to-Adoption Composite	
Component A: Timeliness of adoptions of children discharged from foster care	
Measure 1	**Measure 2**
Of all children who were discharged from foster care to a finalized adoption in FY 2004, what percentage was discharged in less than 24 months from the time of the latest removal from the home?	Of all children who were discharged from foster care to a finalized adoption in FY 2004, what was the median length of stay in foster care (i.e., the number of months from the time of removal from the home to the time of discharge from foster care)?
Implications: Component A focuses on the children discharged to finalized adoptions in the fiscal year. Its corresponding measures focus on discharges to adoption within 24 months of entry and on median length of stay in foster care for all children discharged to adoption. The latter measure ensures that adoption planning is neither forgotten nor dropped for children who have been in care for more than 24 months.	
Component B: Progress toward adoption for children who meet Adoption and Safe Families Act time-in-care requirements	
Measure 3	**Measure 4**
Of all children in foster care on the first day of FY 2004 who were in foster care for 17 continuous months or longer, what percentage was adopted before the end of the fiscal year?	Of all children in foster care on the first day of FY 2004 who were in foster care for 17 continuous months or longer, what percentage became legally free for adoption (i.e., a TPR was granted for each living parent) within six months of the beginning of the fiscal year?
Implications: Component B focuses on children who have been in care for 17 continuous months or more. Its corresponding measures focus on the adoptions from this pool of children and the TPRs entered on their behalf during the fiscal year. The measures aim to ensure that permanency planning for children is not forgotten because of their length of time in foster care.	
Component C: Progress toward adoption of children who were legally free for adoption	
Measure 5	
Of all children who became legally free for adoption during FY 2003, what percentage was discharged from foster care to a finalized adoption in less than 12 months?	
Implications: This component focuses on the children discharged to finalized adoptions within 12 months of entry of a TPR. The measure looks at the speed at which adoptions are finalized after TPR versus the speed to adoption from the date of entry into foster care (Component A).	

[1] Note: From "Round 2 of the Child and Family Services Review: What Every Adoption Services Professional Should Know," by Ernestine Moore, 2008. Copyright 2008 by the National Child Welfare Resource Center for Adoption.
[2] Note: From "Results of the 2007 and 2008 Child and Family Services Reviews," Children's Bureau, Administration for Children and Families, Department of Health and Human Services. www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cb/cwmonitoring/results/agenices_courts.pdf.

- An adoption unit has been established for each of the six areas in the State. Staff members are dedicated to the completion of adoption-related activities. Supervisors are responsible for supervising adoption workers in multiple counties and for coordinating all adoption activities in their respective areas. This includes monitoring and coordinating contract work for their areas. This has provided uniformity in adoption work across the State, plus the ability to evolve the process as needed. It also has enabled us to communicate quickly and directly with staff members.

- Each permanency planning group in the State is assigned an adoption specialist as a consultant. The consultant communicates directly with permanency planning staff members to assist them with the process of moving children toward the goal of adoption.

- Private agencies are contracted to complete home assessments of prospective adoptive families and the child's profile. (This document, provided to adoptive families for purposes of full disclosure, includes the child's biological family background, social, educational and medical history). Because completion of these tasks is the only responsibility of the contractors, this has resulted in more thorough and higher-quality child profiles and home assessments. It also has freed adoption staff members to perform the other tasks related to finding permanence for children.

- Adoption Transition Units have been established in two metropolitan counties where the majority of our children reside. Their purpose is to expedite the adoption process for children whose birth parents' rights have been terminated. Each transition worker is assigned a limited number of children at any one time; new assignments are made as these children's adoptions are finalized.

- An adoption specialist carries a combined caseload of adoptive family recruitment, assessment of the family in terms of placement potential, and supervision of newly created families that would lead to a finalized adoption.

Before implementation of Swift Adoption Services, the number of children moving into permanence through adoptive placement by public agency averaged 300 per year in Oklahoma. Since the inception of Swift Adoptions, the number of children being authorized for adoptive placement has quadrupled.

During this 10-year span, we have seen an average of approximately 1,300 children authorized for placement with adoptive families yearly. With the increase in our efforts to find permanent families for waiting children, the Oklahoma Department of Human Services has finalized 11,700 adoptions as of July 6, 2009.

Swift Adoptions has had a remarkable impact on the lives of 11,700 children and their adoptive families.

Deborah Goodman, MSW, is the Adoption Program Manager in the Oklahoma Department of Human Services, where she directs the Swift Adoptions Services program. An adoptive and kinship parent herself, she has worked in the Department for more than 30 years. She received a 2005 Adoption Excellence Award from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services for "outstanding accomplishments in achieving permanency for America's children waiting in foster care."

Michigan Counties Collaborate to Increase Adoptions

By Justice Maura D. Corrigan

The results are in. After a yearlong collaborative effort of cross-disciplinary teams representing the 13 Michigan counties with the largest adoption dockets, adoptions have increased by 14 percent among those counties involved!

This project began in March 2008, with an Adoption Forum, which was a statewide meeting of teams from those 13 counties. Before we convened, I contacted each chief or presiding judge in those counties. I asked each judge to assemble a local team who would work to overcome bureaucratic obstacles to permanency for children languishing in foster care. We specifically targeted cases of children for whom adoptive parents had been identified and who had been waiting for adoption for more than one year after termination of their birth parents' rights.

All the judges complied. They formed teams composed of judges, social workers in public and private agencies, lawyer guardians ad litem, foster and adoptive parents, and court-appointed special advocates. They then met in their home counties to identify local barriers to adoptions and worked together to remove those barriers. They also collaboratively responded to questionnaires that identified local and statewide barriers, and reported on promising local practices. We met together as a group at six-month intervals in Lansing to report our progress.

The efforts of the 13 counties—Berrien, Calhoun, Genesee, Ingham, Jackson, Kalamazoo, Kent, Macomb, Monroe, Muskegon, Oakland, Saginaw and Wayne—paved the way for implementation of policies that have expedited the movement of children from foster care to safe adoptive homes. Our results were especially remarkable in the face of Michigan's lagging economy, the dislocation caused by the lawsuit and settlement in Dwayne B. v. Granholm, the massive transfer of adoption cases from public to private agencies, and statewide preparation for the federal Child and Family Services Review and Title IV-E Foster Care program audits.

All the teams identified common obstacles to adoptions. These included lack of communication and collaboration among the agencies that perform adoption work, high caseworker turnover, and failure to hire replacements. Perhaps our greatest contribution to future efforts was compiling best practices identified through each team's problem-solving activities. Teams suggested solutions aimed at eliminating the most common delays in adoption, such as assisting adoptive families with the required paperwork and setting deadlines for returning it. Courts also created "rocket dockets" specifically for backlogged adoption cases. These improvements have become a blueprint for our work in Michigan's remaining counties.

The Adoption Forum demonstrated that if we eliminate systemic obstacles to adoption and encourage judicial leadership, more children can attain permanency. The forum also identified specific legislative obstacles. For example, the Michigan Children's Institute superintendent had a large backlog of cases waiting for his consent to adoptions. We believe this delay can be solved by allowing the superintendent to delegate approval authority to local supervisors. A bill delegating consent authority to local supervisors is expected to be introduced in the Legislature shortly.

We have begun a second forum that involves 10 additional counties—Bay, Cass, Clinton, Ionia, Lenawee, Midland, St. Clair, St. Joseph, Van Buren and Washtenaw. This time, the effort has been expanded to promote timely reunification with birth parents, as well as adoption. We hope to reach all children in foster care who have been waiting too long for permanency.

Ultimately, Adoption Forum I demonstrates what can be accomplished through meaningful collaboration to identify barriers and to target solutions. The success of the Adoption Forum extends well beyond the 14 percent statistical increase in adoptions among 13 counties and the blueprints to be followed statewide. Now, through the creation of local teams working together, more of our State's most vulnerable children have a chance for a better tomorrow.

Our complete Adoption Forum Report can be obtained at: http://courts.michigan.gov/scao/services/CWS/BestPractices.htm#adoption.

The **Honorable Maura D. Corrigan** has served as a Justice on the Michigan Supreme Court since 1999, including four years (2001-2005) as Chief Justice. Previously, she served on the Michigan Court of Appeals; as a partner in the Detroit law firm of Plunkett Cooney, PC; and as the first woman to hold the position of Chief Assistant United States Attorney in Detroit. She was chosen as a commissioner on the Pew Commission on Children in Foster Care. In 2005, she received an Angels in Adoption™ Award from the Congressional Coalition on Adoption Institute.

Management of Adoptions Outcomes
Using Data-tracking Tools at the County Level

By Loc H. Nguyen, DrPH, MSW, and Corey Hanemoto, MSW

The Adoptions and Safe Families Act (ASFA) of 1997 emphasized that child welfare jurisdictions must strive to improve accountability via the provision, interpretation, and utilization of data. In the social work arena, child welfare has the richest history of employing automated data to drive system-wide practice and change efforts (Nguyen, 2007). Much of the data has to be comprehensively processed by knowledgeable staff, yet few could translate this information in an understandable manner for line staff (Webster, Needell, & Wildfire, 2002).

To a great extent, this is still true in large child welfare jurisdictions such as Los Angeles County. There are nearly 3 million children in the County. The Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS), with 18 regional offices, is providing services to some 16,000 children in out-of-home care. The DCFS Adoption and Permanency Resources Division (APRD) is providing services to some 9,500 (or 59.4 percent) of the out-of-home care population. The APRD is the largest public adoptions agency in the nation, with 336 professional staff comprised of 2 senior managers, 7 line managers, 279 children's social workers, and 48 supervising children's social workers.

Since enactment of ASFA, APRD managers have recognized the need to monitor certain adoption milestones (important dates in the adoptions process that occur sequentially) and the time frames between these milestones, especially the time between termination of parental rights (TPR) and finalization.

The evolution of these efforts to utilize data has been an incredibly resource-intensive process. In 1999, APRD committed more than 1,900 staff hours in a one-time effort to identify the adoption milestones in all APRD cases at that time (Nguyen, 2007). In 2001, APRD developed a reporting system that utilized business intelligence components of Microsoft Access and Excel. It provided managers with some ability to review aggregate and case-level information on milestones and the time frames between the milestones. By allowing managers and supervisors access to adoption-related information on all cases under their purview, timelines between adoption milestones were streamlined.

However, there were limitations. APRD analysts had to download the information manually twice a month, to analyze the data and to update the reports, which resulted in some of the data being up to two weeks old when viewed. Furthermore, it was not an Internet-based system, so it could be accessed by only a handful of people.

Over time, technological advances led to the availability of more advanced business intelligence software, resulting in better access to the data. IBM's Cognos, a business intelligence software program, was first utilized by APRD in the summer of 2007. Cognos allowed for reports that provided automatic updates on a daily basis. It is an Internet-based system, allowing access by more staff members. It has enabled staff members to "filter" certain fields, giving greater precision to the data and flexibility in the reports. For example, if one were to look at representation of children in care by race/ethnicity, a report could be generated on the length of time that cases were in the system, with those elements.

There have been a number of initiatives implemented at DCFS, including the redesign of Concurrent Planning, meetings for Family-to-Family Team Decision Making, up-front assessments through Differential Response, and the utilization of Family Finding techniques and Internet searches.

These initiatives, in close concert with the development and utilization of automated reporting by APRD, have had a transformative effect on achieving the primary outcome of timely permanency for children. In CY 2000, the average length of time to adoption finalization was 59.7 months. This was reduced by 26.6 percent, to 43.8 months, in CY 2009 year-to-date (YTD). Similarly, the average time from TPR to finalization was reduced by 29.4 percent, from 18 months on average in CY 2000 to 12.7 months in CY 2009 YTD. Similar to the concurrent planning research findings, the overall percentages of family reunification within 12 months increased from 24.4 percent in CY 2000 to 60.5 percent in CY 2009 YTD.

Some strategies for developing adoption milestone tracking systems include:

- Managers should work with information technology staff to identify fields in their department's child welfare database that can populate to reports.

For Utah Child Welfare Staff, Permanency is the "Other Half of the Job"

By Carol M. Baumann, PhD, LCSW

Why are there still so many children in foster care without permanent families? Children in foster care rarely can find their own permanent families. That is our job. The first half of our job of child welfare involves removing children from their caregivers to keep them safe, then attempting reunification. If these efforts are not successful, we are obligated to perform the second half of our job: to find those children another family—one that will commit to "being there" for them through childhood and beyond. Permanency planning tools, plus resources such as Adopt UsKids and The Adoption Exchange, can help. More important than these, the "other half" of our job requires our personal attention, focus, and belief to make permanency happen.

The history of permanency in Utah includes a 1996 decision by the Legislature to add judges and attorneys to address the backlog of appeals in cases of termination of parental rights (TPR). Since then, the appeals court has reduced the time it takes to render decisions in TPR cases from two to three years down to two to three months.

For many years the Utah Division of Child and Family Services has practiced concurrent planning. Children are placed with families who are willing to work at returning them to their birth parents and, at the same time, are planning to adopt the children if those efforts are not successful. An amazing number of foster parents put their hearts on the line and manage this heroic task. During 2008, Utah had 497 adoptions. The average time from TPR to adoption was seven months.

How has this been accomplished? In the Northern Region of Utah, permanency has become the focus of all decisions regarding custody, treatment, and placement. The vision statement of the region is: "A nurturing, safe and permanent family for every child." It was developed by the region's associate director and the child welfare administrators who supervise the supervisors and caseworkers.

This group of administrators has carried the vision statement into the field. The administrators take part in weekly residential reviews and placement decisions. They track data monthly to monitor how many children exit the system and where these children go. This administrative focus is crucial to the ultimate success of the region's stated goal: "By the year 2014, no child will have been in our custody for more than 36 months."

In addition, the region's training manager organized a Permanency Symposium that was mandatory for all staff to attend. The symposium, held in September and October of 2008 in three locations in the region, included regional caseworkers telling their own stories of how they came to believe their job was to find a family for every child on their caseloads. This belief, crucial to the success of any permanency effort, led them to find families for children that others believed were "unadoptable." Caseworkers reported that this was the best training they had ever attended. They returned to their offices with a renewed commitment to find families for the children assigned to their care.

A Permanency Committee meets monthly to assist caseworkers in placing children who are "stuck" in the foster care system. Committee members include representatives from the community. The committee participates in brainstorming with the caseworkers about potential solutions. One committee member is assigned to work with each caseworker on any follow-up assignments and to report back the next month. Each child is tracked at every meeting to determine progress.

Every month, the regional director sends an e-mail to the region's staff members. Always included is a success story of permanency that occurred within the region. The story might be about children returning home or finding previously unknown relatives or being adopted. At the core of each story is a message about the extraordinary efforts made by the caseworker and the team to make permanency happen.

The Northern Region of Utah has taken the tools and the resources available and has begun to do amazing things with them. There is a shared core belief that the job of keeping children safe does not end until each child has been helped to find enduring relationships that will last a lifetime. That belief is reinforced at all levels of the region. Every success is noted and celebrated!

This is what it takes to make permanency happen. The children entrusted to our care deserve nothing less!

Carol M. Baumann, PhD, LCSW, is the Director of the Northern Region for the Utah Division of Child and Family Services. She has served as an adjunct professor at Utah State University since 1999.

Practice Protocols

Establishing an Evidence-Informed Practice in Los Angeles County: The Concurrent Planning Redesign Initiative

By Janice King, LMSW

The need to identify evidence-informed practice continues to be a focus for the National Resource Center for Adoption as it provides strategies in training and technical assistance to States, Tribes and agencies. The Center strives to increase their capacity in adoption as well as to improve the effectiveness and quality of adoption and post adoption services provided to children, youth and their families.

The Center seeks to identify agency practices that have begun to establish the foundation for evidence-informed work. The components needed to substantiate a practice as evidence-informed include empirical evidence, theoretical knowledge, data, comparison of interventions, and lessons learned.

A look at the Concurrent Planning Redesign initiative of the Los Angeles County Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS), started in 2004, indicates the foundation for evidence-informed work in concurrent practice.

In 2007, Los Angeles County published a summary of the trends identified in literature and data for concurrent planning. To prepare this summary, the County engaged the Child Welfare Research Center at the University of California, Berkeley, along with DCFS Adoption and Permanency Resources Division staff. The research team retrospectively analyzed the County's administrative data concerning state and county performance in several areas, including reunification and length of time to adoption. This information was a supportive plank of the platform for implementing the Concurrent Planning Redesign.

In reviewing the Los Angeles County initiative, the Center identified the following foundational components of an evidence-informed practice:

- Review of the literature. This was documented in "Concurrent Planning Statistics Preliminary Trends 2007."
- Analyses of the data. LA County's retrospective analyses provided baseline data for comparing the County's data with data from the State and other California counties.
- Establishment of a tracking system for monitoring critical milestones. The LA County tracking system enables DCFS staff members at multiple sites to monitor adoption milestones in the concurrent planning process (see "Management of Adoptions Outcomes Using Data-tracking Tools at the County Level" in this issue of *The Roundtable*).
- Written documentation. The LA County documentation includes a practice guide, a policies-and-procedures manual, and memoranda related to concurrent planning practice.
- Comparison of interventions. In LA County, implementation at the sites using concurrent planning was compared with practice at sites not participating in the program redesign.
- Multi-year outcomes data. LA County has produced outcomes data for multiple years from the sites implementing practice redesign.
- Peer-reviewed publication of the intervention. LA County has yet to have a peer-reviewed publication of the redesign.

The Los Angeles County Concurrent Planning redesign was a part of the State of California's Systems Improvement Plan's continuous efforts to improve timelines to adoption. This practice model identifies many of the critical components for increasing evidence-informed practices and ensuring positive outcomes in the delivery of child welfare services to children, youth and their families.

Reference

Adoption and Permanency Resources Division Department of Children and Family Services County of Los Angeles. (2007). Concurrent Planning Statistics Preliminary Trends September 2007.

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SPOTLIGHTING THE

CHILDREN'S BUREAUS' 2005 . . .

Open Adoption/Youth
Permanency Grantees Cluster

Developing Services and Supports for Youth Who Wish
to Retain Contact with Family Members
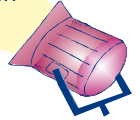
The Dumisha Jamaa Project's
Public/Private Collaboration in Permanency

By Barbara Turan, LCSW

A key strategy in the development of the Children's Bureau discretionary grant programs was the decision that the open adoption youth permanency cluster grantees would be collaborations between public and private agencies.

In the Dumisha Jamaa Project, in the Bay Area of California, the collaboration was developed between the Alameda County Social Services Agency (the public child welfare agency with custody and control of youth), Family Builders (a non-profit agency with experience in the adoption of children with special needs from the foster care system), and the Edgewood Institute for the Study of Community-Based Services (a non-profit research institute with expertise in evaluation of children and family programs).

While it is standard practice to use an outside agency for program evaluation to provide objectivity, it is novel to devise a program that deeply integrates a public agency with a private partner to deliver services. Three years into the project, we feel that the strengths of this approach have far outweighed the challenges.

Characteristics of the Dumisha Collaboration

Co-location: The permanency workers (Family Builders employees) were given office space, computers, and telephones within several units of the Alameda County SSA on the same floors as the long-term foster care units. These workers were given ID badges and were allowed to move freely within the building.

Access to the files: Early in the collaboration, the Dumisha staff was given access to the computerized filing system, the Child Welfare Services/Case Management System (CWS/CMS), at Alameda County in order to research information on youth in the system and their families. In California, CWS/CMS is a statewide, electronic, child welfare database that also links to court information. In addition, the Dumisha staff was given access to the full child welfare paper files, including the archived files.

Shared decision making: Case planning and ultimate case and placement decisions remain the responsibility of the public agency. However, the close working relationship and frequent communication between collaborators allow for much input from the permanency project and result in case decisions reflecting the goals of both agencies.

Regular meetings between the partners: The partners, including the evaluator, meet monthly on an administrative level to manage the collaboration. On an ongoing basis, the Dumisha supervisor meets with the various Alameda County supervisors in charge of the referred cases. Because of co-location, there are daily interactions between the permanency workers and the child welfare workers (CWWs) assigned to the cases. The evaluator occasionally attends Dumisha staff meetings to communicate with permanency workers about the administration of research measures. When conducting qualitative interviews, the evaluator also has direct contact with youth and with adults identified as their permanency providers.

Challenges to the Collaboration

Turf and resentment: The permanency workers have smaller caseloads and can seem to have goals that are "too idealistic." Advancing permanency can put short-term stability at risk, which CWWs might view as disruptive of their work. These differences are inherent to moving in

the direction of permanency within a traditional child welfare agency; but because the "change" is embodied in an outside agency, it can lead to stereotyping and entrenched resistance.

Assimilation: Surprisingly, our experience has been that assimilation within the public child welfare system has been more of a challenge than isolation. Because of the daily sharing of space and cases, the permanency workers over time have become very close to the public workers and have begun to share their ideas, beliefs, and daily practices. At times, it has been difficult to maintain the "outsider" focus on permanency over the daily case and crisis management. This probably would have been less of an issue if the permanency workers had not been housed within the public agency.

As we work closely together, the need has become increasingly clear to have all partners understand the court process and the time frames involved. A guardianship can take up to 10 months to occur once a permanency plan has been identified. The work of moving the plan forward is largely the responsibility of the county, but all parties involved need to understand the process.

Public administrative support: This kind of collaboration required a major administrative investment by the public agency. The child welfare administration needed to commit significant resources and to allow extensive access by an outside agency. Integrating the program essentially guaranteed that it would lead to system change and to all of the inherent disruption and stress that change engenders. The Dumisha Project clearly benefited from the commitment to permanency in Alameda County, but

this factor could be a major challenge to the model's replication in other public child welfare agencies.

How to capture permanency work in the information systems: A smaller detail that we still are resolving is how to record the permanency work within the child welfare file and the automated information system. As more work is done by the permanency workers, it becomes increasingly important to make their work part of the official case record. We need to document clearly the efforts and strategies that have been tried for each child and family. Lack of documentation is an unintended consequence of partnership, resulting from the permanency workers not being county employees. We are devising a summary reporting system to give updates to the CWW that can be added efficiently to the file. We still are thinking about how best to get information into the electronic system.

Benefits of the Collaboration

Communication: Co-location allows for daily communication about case plans. This model has encouraged the concept of permanency to infiltrate the corporate culture of the public agency. Differences in goals and strategies tend to be identified early, so resolving differences is an integrated, daily activity. This is not to say that differences have ceased to exist. Rather, case discussions have underscored the tension between "safety" and "permanence" as competing strategies in child welfare operations. The strength of the collaboration model is that it has made this underlying stress overt; its resolution has promoted system change.

Access: Full access to the files and the electronic data system es-

sentially has eliminated the problem of access. Once a referral is made, the permanency worker can retrieve all of the needed information without being dependent upon the availability of the CWW.

Broadened expertise: The private agency brought experience with adoption recruiting and with the placement of children and youth with special needs, in addition to a pool of parents and ties to the broader adoption network of agencies and services. Because the private agency was not part of the child welfare establishment, it did not have the establishment's traditional mind-set of safety and stability. The permanency workers were accountable to an external administration with different goals and priorities.

Permanency planning: Because of shared case responsibility, the permanency workers were not responsible for placements, crisis management and court reporting. As a result, they were able to concentrate on finding a permanent family, which can seem a low priority within the child welfare system. The county workers also were able to off-load some of their case planning.

Information sharing: The decision to allow project staff access to the county database and paper files clearly has furthered the project's ability to retrieve detailed background information about youth and their families. The clue to finding a permanent family often is in the old information in the form of relatives' names or information about individuals with whom the child has had a positive relationship. To succeed, the permanency workers need seamless access to this information daily. Because finding long-forgotten family

members and connections is not a daily priority for child welfare workers, these clues are not necessarily in the referral information. Permanency workers need to have the capacity to dig deeper without taking up the CWW's time. Access to the data systems has allowed this to happen in a time- and cost-efficient way.

Advantages for the evaluator: For the evaluator, there are several benefits of the project's public/private collaboration. First and foremost, this successful collaboration has allowed us to collect data in a timely and consistent way with the cooperation of both agencies. Mutual understanding of the importance of outcomes data on the part of the Alameda County Social Services Agency and Family Builders has meant that the research-and-evaluation piece of the Dumisha Jamaa Project is always part of the discussion and execution of the project's process.

The evaluator also can utilize what is learned while collecting data and conducting qualitative interviews to inform the collaboration and to improve program service delivery. As information is gathered, the evaluator learns from analysis and discussion of this information.

Finally, it is instructive for the evaluator to compare meanings of "permanency" among the collaborating partners, as well as among youth and families, to better understand the salient issues for youth seeking lifelong, permanent connections. This is key to identifying barriers and best practices for future work on youth permanency.

Read more about the Open Adoption/Youth Permanency Grantees Cluster on the National Resource Center for Adoption's web site at: www.nrcadoption.org/youthpermanencycluster/index.html.

- Find and use database software readily available in your local jurisdiction that avoids delays from data entry to reporting.
- Have staff members within the department who are solely dedicated to developing these reports.
- Develop reports that are intuitively understandable and readily usable by staff.

DCFS is working to develop other ways to enhance the data-tracking experience, such as a Cognos function that can send an e-mail alert automatically to staff members if something is done or not done (e.g., If termination of parental rights has occurred in a case, an e-mail is sent to the manager.) As technology continues to advance and the tracking systems employed become more robust, social work practice should benefit, as measured by better outcomes, more responsive service to families, and increased leveraging of available departmental resources.

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Spaulding for Children, Michigan, is Awarded Five-year Grant

We are pleased to announce Spaulding for Children was awarded a discretionary grant from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Children's Bureau to continue as the National Resource Center for Adoption (NRCA) for the next five years. As a member of the Children's Bureau's Training and Technical Assistance Network since its inception, the NRCA at Spaulding looks forward to continuing our goal to help build the capacity of States, Tribes, and agencies, while working in collaboration with the other NRCs to explore strategies that help address systemic change within these agencies.

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