

Challenges & Solutions

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STRATEGIES FOR PROMOTING CHILD SAFETY, PERMANENCY, AND WELL-BEING IN NYS

Greetings from...

Jane Lynch, Deputy Commissioner
Division of Development and
Prevention Services

I am privileged to work with you in my new role as Deputy Commissioner for the Division of Development and Prevention Services at the Office of Children and Family Services.

I was formerly the Commissioner of Social Services in Ontario County and have been involved in public service for 29 years in both Monroe and Ontario Counties. I am the immediate past President of the New York Public Welfare Association. I am excited about the challenges that come with the position of Deputy Commissioner and am committed to the families and children of New York State. Collectively we are making a difference yet remain aware of the many competing priorities and issues facing local districts and voluntary agencies. I will continue the Office's inclusive relationships with local districts, voluntary agencies, and State stakeholders while developing and implementing the next program improvement plan.

In this issue of *Challenges & Solutions*, we have listed a group of strategies that continue the work initiated by the Child and Family Services Review Program Improvement Plan (CFSR PIP) (see p.4). Many of the strategies are a continuation of those begun in the CFSR PIP; several are new. Most of the work outlined in the next phase involves the implementation of the policies, practices, trainings, and resources developed during the CFSR PIP.

Consider these strategies as you review your district's or agency's program improvement plan. Feel free to reach out to any of the Strategy Coordinators should you desire more information. We will work with you on this next phase of the Program Improvement Plan.

Older Teens Gain Hope and a Family through Adoption



Back row, from left to right are Daniel (adopted at 13), Ernie (adopted at 18), Eric (adopted at 20); front row, from left to right are Kaitlyn, Danny, Lexie (birth children), Dallas (in the process of being adopted).

"You've taught me so much. I'm trying to use what you're teaching me. Thank you."

— Adopted son, age 20

When children are adopted, the teaching goes both ways. The most important lesson Toni Whiting has learned as an adoptive parent is that children want to be adopted no matter how old they are. Older youth prefer to be adopted by someone they know, but they all want a home where they can go for the holidays. The need for a family does not end at age 16 or even 20.

As a therapeutic foster parent who has adopted three sons, ages 13–20, and is currently adopting a fourth, age 15, Ms. Whiting knows about the need of teens

for family and nurturance. All three adopted teens spent years in multiple foster homes. "The first year can be like going through pregnancy and labor," she acknowledges. But with consistent love and support, all three sons gradually learned to feel secure and trust others. Her recommendations? "Help build on their strengths and see what they're able to do when they are nurtured. Teach them about relationships, as in any family."

continued on page 2 . . .

Adopting Older Teens from page 1

Today, Toni Whiting's first foster child, adopted at age 13, is doing well in school. Eric, adopted at age 20, is now an intern at Walt Disney World in Florida. "From Day One, he soaked up the love in the family; it was everything he had always looked for." Eric stresses that all older kids in foster care need hope, which being part of a family can offer.

Ms. Whiting is grateful for the support her employer gives her in her role as an adoptive parent. She also has help from her partner Dan, who works nights; "Someone is always home for the children (including their birth children)."

This is the kind of family the Office of Children and Family Services (OCFS) wants to see more often—i.e., adults adopting youth up to age 20. At first glance, one might think that by age 18 or 20, a young person might look forward to living independently and reject the idea of adoption. But it is never too late to be adopted.

Current practice encourages linking older teens with adults who will provide support and resources during the transition from foster care to self-sufficiency. The goal is to help youth establish permanent connections with caring, supportive adults who will be available upon discharge from foster care and for the long term.

As part of this effort, caseworkers must explore the possibility of adoption by the foster parents or other adults. Legally freed youth age 14 and older have the right to consent to their own adoption, but even if they refuse adoption at one point, the caseworker must continue to explore it as an option. This includes encouraging youth to be involved in identifying adults they feel close to and reassuring them that they do not need to sever ties with their birth family if they are adopted.

The likelihood of achieving positive outcomes for older youth will be enhanced when the ties between the young person and an adult are strengthened through ongoing relationship, including adoption or guardianship. When youth do not have such support, they are much more likely to have problems with housing, employment, and education. In fact, *You Gotta Believe!*, a New York City agency that focuses on finding adoptive families for older youth, considers itself a homelessness

prevention program.

The need for families to adopt teens is great. As of December 31,

2005, there were 1,534 youth legally freed for adoption in New York State who are 13 to 20 years old. According to the New York Council on Adoptable Children (COAC), most of New York City's adoptable children are over 10 years old and more than 50 percent are adolescents.

Regional Recruiting Efforts

Given this reality, recruitment efforts for adoptive families for teens are flourishing throughout the state. In addition to the Heart Gallery exhibits that feature older children and travel to different locations, there are Adoption Festivals and Teen Fests—notably in the Buffalo Region and elsewhere—as well as longer-term collaborative projects.

For example, in the Syracuse Region, local districts and voluntary agencies received training on developing Individual Adoption Plans (IAPs) for children without a permanent resource. They receive ongoing assistance on holding permanency action meetings; the meetings have been successful in identifying permanent adult connections and adoptive resources for teens.

The Rochester Region also partners with other child-focused agencies in creating IAPs, conducting community outreach, and building on relationships between youth and adults. A recent two-year recruitment project, *One Child At A Time*, was modeled on New York State's *100 Longest Waiting Children*, which had an excellent success rate, placing nearly 80 of the 100 longest waiting children in the state. In Monroe County, five of 15 children found adoptive homes through the project.

In New York City, COAC will be working with the Administration for Children's Services (ACS) and voluntary agencies in outreach to 96 youth in care to find permanent homes. The goal of this project, called *The Road/El Camino*, is to overcome barriers to open adoption while improving permanency for youth age 12 and up.

In Sullivan County, teens now have the opportunity to speak about their desire to be adopted. The district has implemented a new procedure allowing youth to address prospective foster/adoptive parents during a session of MAPP training. As a result, in December 2005, an 18-year-old was placed with a family from the class with a view toward adoption. This is a perfect example of listening to youth and hearing what they want—a permanent home and family.



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John A. Johnson, Commissioner

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Local solutions

Visiting and Learning Go Together in Chemung County

Successful visits are a key ingredient to family engagement when a child has been placed in foster care. Deretha Watterson, Director of Children and Family Services, Chemung County Department of Social Services, says “We wanted to enhance our visiting program. Our goal is to provide a quality experience for families through a consistent and supportive visiting program.”

In July 2005, after a competitive proposal process, the county chose Comprehensive Interdisciplinary Developmental Services, Inc. (CIDS) to do just that.

Through its Home Again Program (HAP), CIDS is providing supervised visiting services to families with children in foster care served by Chemung County DSS. The agency has years of experience with parent education, home visiting, home-based crisis intervention, and prenatal/early infant programs.

The county saw a pressing need to further improve its ability to hold meaningful visits that enhance family connections and help child welfare staff assess a family’s readiness for reunification. To meet these goals, the Home Again Program provides a structured vehicle for visitation in an enriched setting. John Shannon, PhD, Executive Director of CIDS, says, “When you can provide services in a natural setting, children and parents respond better. Visits initially take place in the CIDS facility in a warm environment with the elements of a home setting, including a kitchen, living room, and lots of toys.”

Targeted learning activities designed to build the parent’s capacity to care for their child are built into the visits. In fact, a unique feature of the Home Again Program is the intertwining of the practices taught in the CIDS parenting classes and the opportunity for parents to practice what they have learned in those classes. “We’re pioneering an approach in our community,” says Dr. Shannon. “The goal of the visiting program is to have an enduring effect with families.”

The three HAP facilitators work in partnership with DSS caseworkers to coordinate information, develop a visiting plan, observe, assess, and assist families, and prepare for less structured and, eventually, unsupervised visitation. In addition to continuously monitoring and maintaining the child’s safety,

HAP parents say:

“You make parenting fun!”

“I know you don’t work with me any more, but I always feel so much better about things after getting advice on parenting. I hope you don’t mind if I just call you or stop by occasionally to talk or get advice.”

much of the facilitator’s work with families involves mentoring members for a productive visit, observing the sessions, facilitating planned activities that foster good parent-child interaction, and debriefing with parents and, when appropriate, children.

Asked how the DSS caseworkers are adjusting to the change, Ms. Watterson explains, “Planning has been a collaborative effort from the start. Working through the transition, staff had to learn ways to clarify their roles in this new approach. They are grateful for the opportunity to enhance visitation for families.”

“The concepts are wonderful,” she says. “We’re trying very hard to have family visiting be natural, for families to feel empowered, and for children to have shorter lengths of stay.” The 20 or so families range from those who show promise regarding reunification to those

who do not—but “we want to give them every opportunity to see if they will do a 180.” So far, “the families really like it.” Previously, when visits could not take place at the foster home, they were held at the DSS office, the family home, or in the community.

At first, one birth mother vehemently resisted the program. Late for visits and argumentative when she arrived, she challenged the facilitator and other professionals. Within months, however, she began complying with the requirements. One day, to the great surprise of staff, she arrived with a rose for the facilitator, saying “Thank you for all you have done for me.”

Another parent came to see her decision to surrender her children, ages 4 and 5, as an act of love. The children had been in foster care for several years; the collaborative efforts of DSS and CIDS helped her make this decision.

In the works is a plan to offer videotaping as a tool for parenting skills training. By observing their own behavior in a supervised visit, parents will be able to see what they have learned, what they are doing that is effective, and what they need to do better. This tool will be one component of the ongoing program evaluation.

For more information about Chemung County’s supervised visitation program, contact Deretha Watterson, (607) 737-5402; deretha.watterson@dfa.state.ny.us.

Strategy Coordinators . . .

Who they are and how to contact them

The Program Improvement Plan (PIP) contains 16 strategies to improve child safety, permanency, and well-being. The strategies are listed here along with the OCFS coordinator(s) for each strategy.

For general information about implementation of the strategies, contact William McLaughlin at (518) 474-9465; william.mclaughlin@dfa.state.ny.us.

Strengthening Family Engagement Across the Life of the Case
Linda Kurtz (585) 238-8200
Glenn Humphreys (518) 486-7078

Concurrent Planning
Jack Klump (315) 423-1200
Michelle Rafael (518) 474-4352

Safety and Well-Being of Children in Residential Care
Bill McLaughlin (518) 474-9465
Patricia Sheehy (914) 377-2080

Permanency Mediation
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Bud LePage (518) 473-4073

Adolescent Services and Outcomes
Linda Brown (716) 847-3145
Diana Fenton (518) 474-0014

Workforce Development
Gail Haulenbeek (518) 474-9879
Peter Miraglia (518) 474-9645
Margo Velez-Lemmerman (518) 474-2960

Achieving Child Welfare Outcomes through Enhanced Supervision
Gail Haulenbeek (518) 474-9879
Fred Levitan (212) 383-1788

CONNECTIONS to Support Practice Improvement
Gail Haulenbeek (518) 474-9879
Dianne Ewashko (518) 473-7373

Tribal Consultation
Christine Heywood (518) 402-3213
Kim Thomas (716) 847-3123

Strengthening the Interface between the Courts and Child Welfare
Kathleen DeCataldo (518) 473-9551
Maryjane Link (716) 847-3743
Cheryl Larrier (212) 383-1805

Improving Cross-Systems Collaboration
Bill McLaughlin (518) 474-9465

Strengthening Adoption and Post-Adoption Services
Maryjane Link (716) 847-3743
Cheryl Larrier (212) 383-1805

Reducing Repeat Maltreatment
Dianne Ewashko (518) 473-7373
Catherine Grose (518) 474-9584

Strengthening Service Plan Reviews
Dianne Ewashko (518) 473-7373

CPS/DV Practice Collaboration
Lisa Gordon (518) 474-6512
Jamie Greenberg (518) 473-1327

Practice Guidance
Gail Haulenbeek (518) 474-9879
Larry Pasti (518) 561-8740

E-mail addresses for coordinators consist of the firstname.lastname@dfa.state.ny.us (as in jane.doe@dfa.state.ny.us)



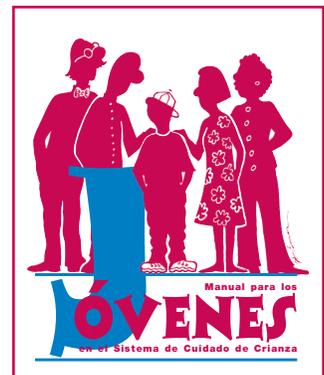
May is . . . Foster Care Month

The Office of Children and Family Services is participating in this year's National Foster Care Month (NFCM) campaign, "Change a Lifetime: Share Your Heart, Open Your Home, Offer Your Help." The need to recruit, train, and retain foster parents is an ongoing pursuit that requires focus, creativity, and public education.

With the designation of May as Foster Care Month, we encourage all local districts and voluntary agencies to dedicate appropriate resources to plan, develop, coordinate, and implement programs that support Foster Care Month activities. To help support local efforts, OCFS in partnership with NFCM is providing a variety of resources to assist your efforts to raise awareness, educate citizens, and promote the creation and participation of local events.

For more information, please contact your Regional Office and visit the NFCM website at www.fostercaremonth.org where you can obtain campaign posters, commemorative pins and ribbons, and obtain access to a variety of other materials to assist you in this year's campaign.

¡Atencion!



The Handbook for Youth in Foster Care is now available in Spanish. For a copy of the *Manual para los Jóvenes en el Sistema de Cuidado de Crianza*, contact your OCFS Regional Office, or download the file from the OCFS website: www.ocfs.state.ny.us (see Publications).