

Permanency: More Than Just Homes

Martin Westerman



Yvonne sits at a cafe table outside the West Seattle PCC Natural Foods Market, wrapped in her red plaid blanket and selling *Real Change*, Seattle’s homeless community newspaper. She has been a friendly fixture there for nearly four years, smiling at shoppers through her black-rimmed glasses and accepting their support, including her blanket and gift cards for meals. “Yeah, I bounced around the foster care system in Los Angeles before I came up here. It’s a nice present for my 50th birthday, finding a place that feels like home.”

Yvonne had passed through eight foster homes and aged out of the system in a boarding school before the first CASA volunteer was deployed in 1977. So she has had to make a home and community on her own. But in the years since, there has been an explosion of “permanency” studies, policy-making and projects. Concurrent planning, foster-adopt options and family mapping were developed; the Adoption and Safe Families Act (ASFA) was passed in 1997, helping double US adoption rates; and CASA programs have helped permanently settle more than two million children. It is a different world from the one Yvonne faced 30+ years ago.

Permanency: It’s in the Relationships

To young people 18 and older, permanency is about building relationships with one or more reliable adults; preserving important connections, including those involving neighbors, community, faith, family, school and friends; and accessing resources that can provide support and guidance long after they emancipate from the child welfare system. (See the *Judges’ Page* issue mentioned in the resources

sidebar, particularly articles by Parnell/Swenson-Smith and DuRocher.)

For minors, permanency is a behavioral health issue. Quick, seamless, permanent placement minimizes trauma and improves brain development, self-esteem and social relationships. Furthermore, long-term costs to the child welfare system and courts are reduced or eliminated.

Each year, children aged 6 or younger make up half of the 300,000 entrants into America’s child welfare systems. Sadly, children’s likelihood of being adopted decreases by 50% the moment they turn 9. The good news is that of the nearly 300,000 children who exit the system each year, 17% are adopted, and 53% are reunited with their birth families after safety can be ensured. (See “Children’s Bureau” in the sidebar.)

But while ASFA has helped improve the pace of permanent placements, achieving them remains a major challenge in a system that harbors more than 780,000 children each year and is accustomed to moving in a slow, straight line, from intake (protective services), to reunification attempts (welfare department), to permanent placement efforts (guardianship-adoption).

Visualize the Endpoint First

To counteract this inertia, CASA of Frederick County, MD, Program Coordinator Jennifer Fuss visualizes the endpoint first. “We get our volunteers excited about the ending, then provide the eyes and ears for the court to get there,” says Fuss, who trains her volunteers in concurrent planning.

Web-Based Resources on Permanency

Child Welfare Information Gateway (childwelfare.gov)

This service of the US Department of Health & Human Services (DHHS) provides a wealth of data, research and listings of federal, state and tribal laws on topics related to abuse, prevention, foster care and permanency. Search for their page on the Adoption and Safe Families Act (ASFA). ASFA tightened permanency hearing requirements, listed “concurrent planning” as a best practice and helped double the rate of US adoptions.

Child Welfare League of America (cwla.org/programs/fostercare)

CWLA helps build public will to ensure safety, permanence and well-being of children, youth and families by advancing public policy and promoting best practices. See especially links to the National Data Analysis System (ndas.cwla.org), which includes state-by-state and national findings.

Children’s Bureau (acf.hhs.gov/programs/cb/)

This bureau of DHHS supports services and productive partnerships with states, tribes and communities to provide for children’s safety, permanency and well-being. See especially the latest information from the Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS). From the above page, search for “report 14.”

EMQ FamiliesFirst (emqff.org)

Provides direct services in California as well as innovative national trainings on mental health treatment, foster care and social services. Follow links to Training/Education, then to EMQ’s Family Partnership Institute, then to the *Family Search & Engagement Practice Guide*, co-published by Catholic Community Services of

Western Washington and EMQ Children & Family Services. See page 63 for section on connectedness mapping.

The Judges’ Page (CASAforchildren.org/judgespage)

Published by the National CASA Association and the National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges, this online newsletter is of interest not only to judges but also to child welfare professionals and CASA volunteers. From the archives at the bottom of the page, look for the link to the July 2008 issue, “The Role of the Dependency Court in Achieving Timely Permanency.”

Lutheran Community Services Northwest (lcsnw.org)

A nonprofit human services agency serving communities throughout Washington, Oregon and Idaho. Carries *Concurrent Planning: From Permanency Planning to Permanency Action* by Linda Katz et al., revised 2000. From the home page, search for “concurrent planning.”

National CASA Association (CASAnet.org)

See especially *How Are the Children?*, a report on focus groups of teens living in foster care. From the home page, look for the link “2008 Foster Youth Focus Groups.”

Urban Institute (urban.org)

Provides social and economic issue data, research and program evaluations to foster sound public policy and effective government. See especially their 2004 report *Foster Care Adoption in the United States: A State-by-State Analysis of Barriers and Promising Approaches* by Jennifer Ehrle Macomber, Cynthia Andrews Scarcella, Erica H. Zielewski and Rob Geen. From the home page, search for “state-by-state.”

“It’s not a good idea to just develop one plan, around reunification with the birth family,” she points out. “What if that doesn’t work? You’re left with ‘long-term foster care’ and no permanency.”

Concurrent planning, dual tracking toward reunification and adoption or permanent guardianship with a relative, conflicts with the child welfare system’s linear structure. But without a backup plan, many children end up “drifting” in foster care for years without finding a place to call home, at great costs to themselves and to society. When they emancipate at age 18, they find themselves without permanent connections to families and resources they need for success as adults. (See Macomber et al. in the sidebar.)

“There’s no reason why things have to stay this way,” asserts Linda Katz, who helped invent the concept of concurrent planning in the 1980s and is now program manager of the Dependency CASA Program in King County, WA.

In the 1970s, when she worked at Lutheran Child & Family Services (LCFS) in River Forest, IL, Katz found a small number of social workers doing dual-track planning. She started insisting on placing children with foster families who agreed to the possibility of adopting, if that became an option, and named the program “Foster Adopt.” She helped LCFS secure grant funding, garner publicity and publish statistics showing that the program could help children get into permanent homes faster, cutting their stays in foster care by about two-thirds, preventing emotional turmoil as well as saving thousands of dollars per child per year for board, Medicaid, social work, therapy, court hearings and other expenses.

Katz offers two contemporary Washington cases for comparison:

- In the first, an 11-year-old girl who did not get the benefit of concurrent planning has gone through 12 placements and

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now may never be adopted, which leaves her likely to suffer emotional consequences.

- In the second, a “preemie” boy with a backup plan was sent directly to a foster home with the option to adopt. The birth family could not be found, so the boy will now move out of the foster care system, saving himself years of emotional stress by becoming a member of a secure, loving family.

“That [second example] is how it’s supposed to work,” says Katz.

Holistic Approach Trumps Piecemeal: Dual Licensing, Family Mapping

Where it happens, licensing of foster families to simultaneously foster and adopt is a giant step toward achieving permanency. “Formerly, child welfare agencies kept those areas separate to keep ‘cleaner’ relationships in each area they handled,” Katz continues. “But that necessitated moving the child between homes, schools, locales and friends at each new stage and causing new trauma every time.”

Katz goes on to extol the benefits of a holistic approach. “Dual licensing has helped families look at the process as a whole, so they can elect to open their homes long-term rather than as just one more in a series of temporary housing options. It has helped create a more seamless process that is better for the child. It eliminates instability in a system built to stay unstable.”

In California, social workers are legally bound to develop concurrent plans for minors at the jurisdiction-disposition hearing. But many social workers are overscheduled and cannot devote much time to concurrent planning at the beginning of a family’s journey through the dependency system.

“Our program encourages advocates to support social workers by helping them develop the concurrent plan early in a child’s case,” says CASA of Santa Cruz County, CA, Program Manager Kelly Wolf. A key element in developing that child’s “Plan B” is a connectedness map or family map (see example).

The Connectedness Map

Key: Blue = Blood (biological) connection

Red = Heart (love) connection

Purple = Spiritual connection

Green = Mind (mental) connection

Place the child in the *center* of the page. Ask her to think of all the people (living or deceased) she is connected to. Include family members, friends, teachers, coaches, pastors, rabbis, etc.—anyone with whom she has/had a connection.

Use one shape to represent males and a different shape to represent females.

Example: Δ = Male O = Female

Next to each shape, write the person’s name and age (if known).

Place individuals who are of similar age to the child on the same level as the child, older people above the child and younger people below to show different generations.

Ask the child how he/she feels connected to each person.

Is this person a blood relative? Does the child love this person? Does this person teach the child, or do they have good, meaningful talks together? Does the child feel a spiritual connection with this person? The child should then draw the appropriately-colored line between him/herself and the other person. If there are multiple connections, there will be multiple lines.

When children have completed their connectedness maps, they may want to hang them up in their rooms. This can be a consistent reminder of all the people in the world with whom they are connected.

Courtesy of the Santa Cruz County CASA Program, CA

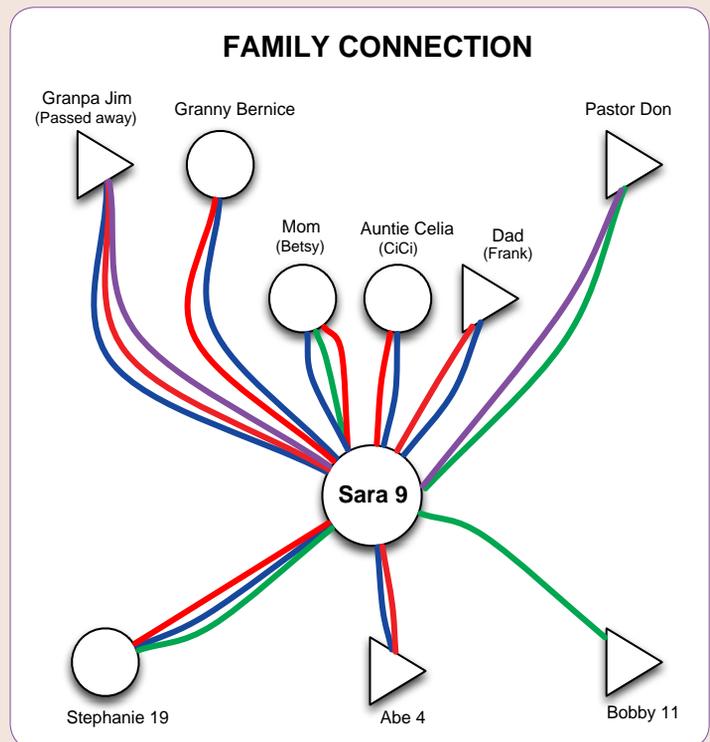


Diagram created by Ray Sherrod

Wolf is among the growing number of practitioners from Hawaii to New York who ask children to generate their own connectedness maps. They do it with the help of supportive adults, informing and adding to the social worker's own list of placement options.

Children's family finding maps incorporate all the people they are, or ever have been, connected to, including family and non-extended relative family members—also known as "family of choice" or "fictive kin." Wolf trained with Kevin Campbell, who now works with EMQ FamiliesFirst (formerly Eastfield Ming Quong) and is known as the originator of family finding. Campbell saw that creating the map reminds foster youth, who frequently feel alone in the world, that they are really surrounded by support.

The maps often include extended relatives, former caregivers, family friends, teachers, neighbors, friends' parents, coaches, godparents and others with whom the child has lost touch. Youth may provide the map to the child's social worker so it can be used as a tool for concurrent planning.

"Frequently, if these people can be found, they are very open to reconnecting with the child," says Wolf. "It's a better option than relying on the general populace to help out."

Once foster candidates are found, alternative placement options present themselves, according to Vicki Wilson, director of Cambria County CASA Beginnings in Johnstown, PA. "Specialized permanent legal custody or guardianship can work for older children who don't want to be adopted and whose parents' rights are not terminated," she says.

A relative can qualify for the federal Kinship Guardianship Assistance Payment (Kin-GAP) program in cases where the child-relative relationship has proven stable, the relative is not willing to adopt, and birth parent reunification efforts have failed. Such cases are closed through dependency court, but the guardian(s) still receives some financial assistance and support.

"Each child, situation and set of permanency goals is unique and needs to be approached differently," says Wilson.



Collaboration: The Antidote to Linear Thinking

Beyond involving children in decision making, several systems are bringing courts and agencies together in successful partnerships.

The Pima County Juvenile Court in Tucson, AZ, was the test bed for Susan Parnell's and Chris Swenson-Smith's 2006 pilot Permanency Collaborative Review Hearing model, designed to help move children who had spent two or more years in care toward permanent solutions. The model brings together case managers, supervisors, the CASA volunteer, the children's attorneys, a behavioral health designee and other involved parties to set agendas and assign actions. It relies on judges to lead processes and conversations; tracks cases on a quarterly basis by child, judge and time in care; sets action goals with courts; and monitors progress toward permanency. In the pilot program, the hearings succeeded in restoring, developing or newly forming connections for 66% of the 26 children they served.

In many cases, it is important to retain cultural connections for children moving toward permanency. Donna Goldsmith and Korey Wahwassuck (see the *Judges' Page* issue referred to earlier) describe groundbreaking agreements in Minnesota that merged Ojibwe Tribal and 9th District state courts into the Leech Lake-Cass County Wellness Court. While it adjudicates post-sentencing

Permanency-Related Tips for CASA/GAL Volunteers

1. Understand federal laws related to permanency.
2. Support the social worker in creating a concurrent plan.
3. Ensure that the child produces a connectedness map as a tool in moving concurrent planning forward.
4. Keep an up-to-date document that tracks kin and significant others, and make sure this information is incorporated into the case plan and prominently placed in the current volume of each case file.
5. Include a review of movement toward permanency in the child and family team process throughout the case, not just at the end.
6. In the CASA report, highlight how long a child has been out of the birth home, and indicate approaching limits. When appropriate, request a ruling from the court about progress toward meeting permanency deadlines.

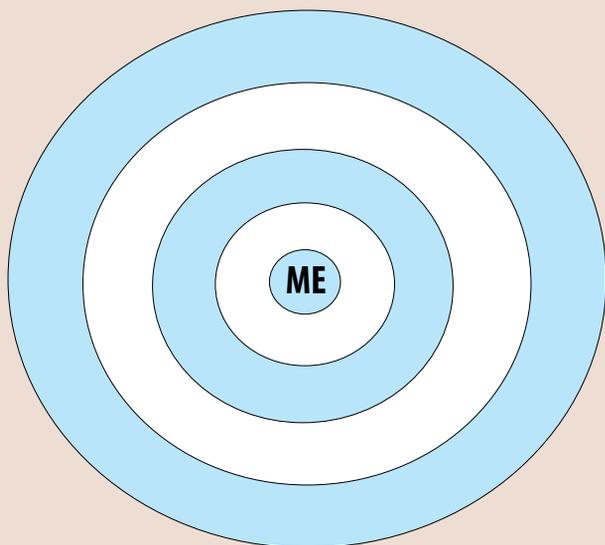
Compiled by the author from interview sources.

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Research on Youth Connections Commissioned by National CASA

In 2008, National CASA commissioned a research study centering on a series of focus groups of teens in foster care. Fifty youth in five US cities participated, providing their insights into their experiences in care. These young people shared their thoughts about the effect of the child welfare system on their motivation, the impact of an adult presence in their lives and the prospect of aging out of foster care.

One exercise used in the discussion groups was completing a “Connection Circle.” Youth were asked to place the people in their lives in various circles, depending on how close the relationship is. Teens placed those closest to them within the innermost circle. Results showed that these young people in care feel most strongly connected to their siblings and biological parents. Regarding the latter, one young woman from Anchorage seemed to sum up how



many of the youth felt: “I talk to my mom on the phone. I don’t want to move back in with her or anything, but we do have a relationship.”

Next highest on the list were youths’ best friends and other relatives (especially grandmothers). Foster parents and CASA/GAL volunteers were close behind these groups in the number of mentions. The main criteria youth identified for placing individuals in their inner circle include: “You can relate to them,” “They will listen to you,” “They’re always there for you,” “They believe in me” and “They had a positive impact on my life.” These qualities mirror those that our volunteers are known for.

For the full results, see “2008 Foster Youth Focus Groups” on the home page of CASAnet.org.

hearings for tribal and non-tribal plaintiffs, the authors see potential in it for managing child welfare cases.

“The joint work of the courts is breaking down cultural barriers and resulting in more effective administration of justice in northern Minnesota,” they write. They suggest that this tribal-state model could be modified to handle Native American youth permanency cases, bypassing the need to decide which court has jurisdiction and resulting in decisions that best reflect the child’s best interests.

Retaining cultural influences in a child’s life is also the goal of Hawaii’s EPIC (Effective Planning and Innovative Communication) family welfare programs. Wilma Friesema highlights three cooperative, statewide models that partner Hawaii’s Department of Human Services with family courts and community agencies to help improve Polynesian family and cultural relationships (see *Judges’ Page*).

Ohana (“family”) conferencing blends alternative dispute resolution techniques with sensitivity to the cultural mores of Polynesian families. The Keiki (“child”) Placement Project helps find the extended families of children aged 0–3 as soon as they enter the foster care system. Often, the Keiki and Ohana models are combined, as in the case of “Isaiah,” the newborn child of a drug-addicted, homeless woman. Keiki was able to locate and contact Isaiah’s 42-member extended family, then hold an Ohana conference, which led to the mother’s grandparents agreeing to adopt the child. Finally, E Makua Ana Youth Circles is a youth-driven process that empowers teens aging out of the system to clarify their goals and identify supportive people and resources. They can ask for a Youth Circle whenever they feel alone or run into difficult challenges as they face adulthood.

The Best System Defense Is a Good Advocate’s Offense

Inertia is built into the child welfare system—partly to provide time for families caught up in it to process their options and make appeals, as Jennifer Macomber and colleagues point out in their Urban Institute study (see sidebar). But ASFA and many states require that permanency hearings begin within 12 months of a child’s separation from home.

To help drive permanency proceedings to successful conclusions, advocates must know laws, procedures and personnel. As Linda Katz asserts, “The CASA volunteer should be able to say, ‘This needs to move; this should be heard; this should be decided.’”

It is that kind of strong advocacy that will help move children in foster care most quickly into homes they can call their own. 🏠

Martin Westerman, father of two sons and author of three books, teaches communications and sustainable business practice in Seattle. This is his third feature story for The Connection.