

## From Evidence to Practice

June 2011

Information for practitioners to help improve the lives of children and families

# Using Evidence to Support Practice Change Initiatives - Case Resolution Meetings



*This article describes one approach to reducing length of stay for children in foster care through a joint initiative with the courts and the child welfare agency in Washington State. As part of our mission at Partners for Our Children, we strive to bring evidence to practice to help inform decision making on behalf of Washington State's most vulnerable children and families. We work with the Children's Administration (CA) and other system partners to develop practice initiatives. We also help to evaluate these efforts by looking at outcomes for children and families.*

## Some children in Washington wait a long time for permanency

On any given day in Washington State, roughly 11,000 children are involved in the child welfare system (WA State DSHS, 2010). Reunification with biological parents is the preferred permanency option whenever it is safe and in the best interests of the child. In fact, reunification is a primary goal of the child welfare system. Extended time in foster care can negatively impact a child's overall sense of belonging, identity formation, and emotional well-being (Mallon & Leashore, 2002). The passage of the Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997 (ASFA) increases the need to move children to permanency. The Act provides funding for time-limited reunification services and allows for the termination of parental rights for children in foster care for 15 of the most recent 22 months (Wulczyn, 2004). However, a 10 year study of reunification in Washington State from 1998-2008, found reunification rates vary from region to region, and county to county (Partners for Our Children, 2009). In several regions in Washington State, a delayed time to reunification or other permanency options has resulted in a sizable group of children who have been in foster care for over 15 months, many for much longer periods of time (Partners for Our Children, 2009). In light of this, both the Children's Administra-

tion and the Juvenile Court have a vested interest in safely expediting permanency for all children in care, particularly for those who have been in care the longest.

### POC's approach in working with the field includes:

1. *Using timely data to understand local practice and to help identify areas for improvement.*
2. *Supporting local leaders and decision makers in child welfare communities to translate the data into meaningful and actionable practice improvements.*
3. *Partnering with change agents at the local level.*
4. *Supporting practice initiatives that are evidence-informed and owned by the field.*
5. *Providing technical assistance to design feasible evaluation processes that help the field to understand and measure the extent to which the practice improvement is having its intended effect.*

## Local change agents take action and develop new approach to reducing length of stay

The reunification study showed several counties in Washington with longer times to reunification. With the support of the University of Washington School of Law's Court Improvement Training Academy (CITA) a "Table of 10" formed in counties identified as having long length of stays. These multidisciplinary groups decided to focus on children in care for over 15 months.

POC's initial reunification analysis showed variation in time to reunification by county and suggested that responsibility for the variation in times to permanency should be shared by the entire dependency system, including both the courts and CA. Child welfare field professionals from the two counties came forward with a cross-sector approach to helping more children achieve permanency through a unique practice innovation: a Case Resolution Meeting (CRM). A CRM is a forum to bring key players in a case – including legal parties – together to identify barriers to permanency for children who had been in care longer than 15 months and to brainstorm pathways to permanency for these children.

## Supporting the development of evidence-informed practice initiatives

The CRM builds on the approach of the Georgia Permanency Round Tables but with a few key differences. Permanency round table members think creatively and to contribute to the development of an effective permanency action plan (Morgan, 2009).

The collaborative CRM is facilitated by an Assistant Attorney General in each county and is supported by both the Children's Administration and juvenile court. Others involved in the case such as birth parents, children (as appropriate), attorneys, Children's Administration staff and other parties deemed appropriate to the case are also asked to attend. This collaborative effort takes a problem-solving approach to address the barriers and brainstorm possible solutions to help achieve permanency for this group of children. Similar to the Round Tables, new ideas are considered as well as ideas that were tried in the past. Each meeting is scheduled for one hour and may take slightly less or more than that depending on the complexity of the case and whether or not it is a sibling group. Meetings are scheduled for one day per month on the same afternoon as the families' Permanency Planning meetings in order to make the best use of available time. Cases in which an

*A Table of 10 is an innovative training concept designed to maximize the desire to link results-based outcomes with training (Court Improvement Training Academy, 2009). Each Table of 10 consists of 10 or so individuals who are viewed as being leaders in a particular county's child welfare legal system. These individuals could be judicial officers, lawyers, GALs, CASAs, social workers, service providers, or any other person who is viewed in the community as a leader in the field. Table of 10 members choose a single data point in the dependency process to focus improvement efforts by developing objectives, goals and implementation strategies.*

*For more information on Tables of 10, contact Tim Jaasko-Fisher, Assistant Director of the Court Improvement Training Academy, at [tjfisher@uw.edu](mailto:tjfisher@uw.edu)*

"Agreed Order" for moving forward cannot be reached, are followed-up on in court.

## Evaluation design and support

POC conducted a formative evaluation of the early stage of this initiative as a preliminary step to more rigorous evaluation efforts. The evaluation identified a number of strengths and opportunities to improve the CRM process. CRM strengths that were articulated by stakeholders included:

- CRMs provided an opportunity for professionals to take a fresh look at old cases.
- Children's Administration area leaders attended the meetings, which allowed for the decisions to be made on the spot.
- There was a time and space for collaborative versus adversarial conversations, which helped to improve case coordination.

Opportunities for improvement included:

- A screening process is needed to ensure that cases that can benefit from the CRM process the most are included, particularly cases that have not seen any movement in a long time or for which the factors leading to delay are not well understood
- Support is needed to schedule the meetings and invite participants
- There is a need for additional assistant attorney general time and high-level Children's Administration staff time to attend the meetings.

Overall focus on permanency, which is important to all stakeholders at the table, has fostered collaboration and mutual problem solving. Participants felt it was vital to have decision makers at the table that could support decision making and provide access to resources. Frequently, permanency plans for children were given renewed attention, and CRMs provided an opportunity to develop out-of-the box ideas to moving the case forward. Having a team of professionals along with birth parents, as appropriate, around a table to focus on permanency was considered to be a good use of everyone's time, regardless of the outcome.

The evaluation found that stakeholders in each of the involved counties felt that the CRM is a useful process that was both "fierce and focused" on permanency for children in long term care. Opportunities for more rigorous outcome evaluation may evolve if the practice is expanded allowing for a more systematic referral of cases to CRMs. Stakeholders are currently working to develop a screening tool that will help to ensure that cases best suited to this process will be identified and included. System stakeholders continue to meet regularly through the "Tables of 10" and other collaborative meetings and remain committed to permanency for this group of children in long term care. They hope to secure funding in the near future to continue to refine this innovative practice.

For more information about this project, please contact Laura Orlando at [laura.orlando@partnersforourchildren.org](mailto:laura.orlando@partnersforourchildren.org)

### Acknowledgements

*During 2009-10, POC worked with two Washington counties to improve timely permanence for children in the dependency process. Local leadership is a critical part in the process of innovative practice change and we would like to express our gratitude to the Children's Administration Regional and Area Administrators, the Attorney General's Office and the Assistant Attorney Generals and the Court Commissioners in those counties.*

### What Stakeholders Said About CRMs

*"CRMs created a neutral place to talk about things and work things out, instead of in a court room."*

*"The big difference in these meetings is that they have a collaborative feel to them for everyone involved. We collaborate, but usually it's done when the parents are not around like in court in the hallway between meetings. Parents get to see this in the context of the meeting, it's more collegial."*

### Sources

Court Improvement Training Academy, University of Washington School of Law. (2009). Tables of Ten. Retrieved, June 1, 2009 from <http://www.uwcita.org/CITAv1008/tablesoften.html>.

Mallon, G.P. & Leashore, B.R. (2002). Preface to special issue: Contemporary issues in permanency planning. *Child Welfare*, 81(2), 91-99.

Morgan, L.J. (2009). Georgia Permanency Project Report Phase 1: Permanency Roundtables. Retrieved, Sept. 28, 2009, from <http://www.gahsc.org/nm/2009/caseypermroundtables.pdf>.

Partners of Our Children. (2009). Reunification Analysis using CAMIS data for first entries in care from 1998-2008.

Washington State Department of Social and Health Services. (2007). Children's Administration Performance Report. Olympia, WA.

Wulczyn, F. (2004). Family Reunification. *Children, Families, and Foster Care*, 14(1), 95-113.