

Practice Matters

Administrative Review Division

The ARD's **vision** is to create a safe and promising future for children. Our **mission** is to strengthen the communities, families, and systems that work to make that future possible. As a neutral third party, we do this by facilitating reviews, gathering and analyzing data, publishing research, and providing training and technical assistance to effect change in practice, policies, and programs that lead to improved outcomes for Colorado's children.

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Permanency Round Tables: Revisiting Permanency for Colorado Children

Introduction

On June 30, 1980, the United States Congress provided federal support to permanency planning as it enacted PL 96-272, the Adoption Assistance and Child Welfare Act of 1980. The Act mandated a review process for all states receiving federal funds for foster care services and required that permanent plans be developed for all children in foster care. In 1991 the Administrative Review Division (ARD) was created to conduct the foster care reviews for the State of Colorado. Permanency and long term connections remain central to the mission of the ARD. Through the ARD's review process, new and promising practices that improve outcomes for children and youth are brought to the attention of reviewers. This newsletter will highlight the experiences of Denver, Jefferson, and Larimer County human service departments in implementing the Permanency Roundtable Process and fostering permanent connections for all children in foster care.

The Permanency Roundtable (PRT) process was established by Casey Family Programs to assist in establishing permanency for children and youth in the foster care system. Per Casey Family Programs, the goals of the roundtable process are to:

Develop an action plan that will expedite the highest level of permanency; to stimulate thinking and learning about pathways to permanency and to identify and address systemic barriers to expedited permanency. The desired outcomes for children and youth include: Legal Permanency, Improved Permanency Status and a Reduced Level of Restrictiveness of the child's living situation.¹

During the past two years, several Colorado counties have implemented the Permanency Roundtable process as a mechanism to address several concerns, including:

- An increased number of children and youth with an Other Planned Permanent Living Arrangement (OPPLA) goal;
- Children and youth who have been in the custody of the department for several years without movement toward permanency and;
- The need to create stability for children and youth who have experienced multiple changes in placement.

Denver County's other main focus of the PRT process has been to establish permanent connections for developmentally disabled youth.

“A stable placement is not enough. Legal permanency is the goal.”

“The hope is for no one to accept OPPLA as a goal.”

“There is a culture of hope for youth who have been in care for a long time.”

Permanency Roundtables in Colorado

A sizable number of youth without permanent connections are currently in the foster care system in Colorado. In 2008, Denver County began to increase their focus on establishing permanency for children who had been in care more than 24 months. Denver County began working in partnership with Casey Family Programs to implement “Partners for Permanency.” The “Partners for Permanency” project did not include caseworkers, and this lack of caseworker involvement led to the program being unsuccessful. Denver County decided to implement the PRT process in June 2010.

David’s Story:

David has been in foster care in Jefferson County since the age of five. He has had numerous caseworkers, fifteen placements, and multiple school changes. His mother is deceased and had previously cut off all contact with the paternal side of the family. David’s father has a common last name, which made him difficult to locate.*

Concerns regarding youth with Other Planned Permanent Living Arrangement (OPPLA) goals prompted both Jefferson and Larimer Counties to explore

alternative ways to address permanency for children and youth. Both counties implemented PRTs in early 2012 and partnered with Casey Family Programs for training and implementation of PRTs.

Permanency Roundtables maintain a specific structure to ensure success of the process. Traditional PRT members include a facilitator, a scribe, a permanency consultant, the caseworker and the caseworker’s supervisor, and other professionals. The facilitator role is fulfilled by an individual from the permanency sub-committee from the Best Court Practice Team in Jefferson County, while Larimer County has a representative from their

**Note: A pseudonym was used to protect the identity of the youth.*

Resource Unit facilitate the PRTs. Denver County has approximately 43 staff trained to facilitate PRTs, although about a dozen staff consistently participate, and currently there is one half-time employee dedicated to the coordination of PRTs. All three counties regularly invite other child welfare team members to PRTs. Larimer County, for example, includes an internal county expert who supervises a team not regularly involved with the child/youth, the foster care support or kinship caseworker, and external experts. Jefferson County regularly partners with internal and external consultants, including recently retired caseworkers who specialize in permanency and CASA volunteers who assist in data mining.

Each county continues to explore opportunities to engage other professionals in the PRT process, including community partners and the Guardian ad Litem assigned to the youth. Larimer County utilizes existing community partners from Foothills Gateway (which serves people with cognitive disabilities), The Matthews House (which provides services to assist young adults and families in the transition to self-sufficiency), The Larimer Center for Mental Health, and the Larimer County Probation Department.

Outcomes of Permanency Roundtables

Although too early to have significant data from all the counties concerning the outcome of PRTs, there are some examples of success. Denver County, in completing

In file mining, David’s paternal grandmother was found. Internet search tools helped staff reach a bankruptcy attorney who graciously helped Jefferson County find the grandmother. David’s biological father was located and within two days in contact with the caseworker, sending photos and letters for David. David’s sister is in a mutual care placement in an adjoining county, so now the counties are working together to reunite David and his sister with their father.

PRTs for over 100 children and youth, have improved the permanency status for 68% of these children and youth, either through legal permanence or the establishment of permanent adult connections. For the children and youth who did not experience an improvement in their permanency status, 25% remain in care without permanent connections and 7% exited care without permanence.

Despite only recently completing the initial and second PRT meetings for the first group of identified children and youth, both Jefferson and Larimer Counties have already identified several benefits of the process. Larimer County caseworkers reportedly learned of resources available throughout the community. Jefferson County staff experienced a considerable improvement in their diligent search process. It was shared that county caseworkers have been pleasantly surprised at the ideas that have been generated through the PRT meetings, and they are energized to move forward with the new strategies. Some participants have reportedly been humbled and surprised by what children and youth have stated they want their future to look like.

In all three counties, the majority of youth attended their PRT and found it to be a useful and empowering experience. Another surprise benefit of PRTs has been the shared knowledge of the case history. Occasionally, caseworkers may have limited knowledge of the child's history due to the small amount of time they have been involved with the child, and other county staff and community participants have been able to share information regarding extended family members and ideas that the assigned caseworker may not have previously considered. Additionally, the implementation of the PRT process has prompted purposeful and challenging conversations within the counties, including the paradigm shift of not being satisfied with OPPLA as a goal. Implementation of the program has also reinforced the counties' commitment to exhaust all other goals prior to adopting the OPPLA goal.

Denver, Jefferson and Larimer Counties identified culture change as a positive impact of the PRT process. The counties are optimistic that PRTs will continue to evolve to foster permanency and connections for youth. The PRT process has helped create a culture of hope for youth who have been in care for a long time. Families are being reexamined to determine if life circumstances have changed, to see if they can be considered as a permanent connection and/or placement option. The "Right for Kids" ranking places Colorado as the seventh highest performing among the states, considering eleven key child welfare outcomes.² However, out of those outcomes, Colorado ranks 17th in helping teenagers find permanent homes and 25th in helping all kids move into permanent homes. There is room for Colorado to improve in these outcomes related to permanency.

Currently, Jefferson County is in the process of initiating an ICPC to evaluate David's father for the purpose of placement. David has begun to exchange letters and have telephone calls with his father. His father is extremely excited about being considered for placement after so many years. Visits are being scheduled for this summer.

Challenges to Establishing Permanency in Colorado

While the implementation of PRTs can be an important part of finding permanency for children and youth, several barriers continue to exist that prevent some youth from finding a permanent home or connection. For instance, there are a lack of adoptive homes for sibling groups, and sexually abusive youth generally have more challenges in progressing towards permanence. Also, caseworkers can be anxious about PRTs in cases where the child/youth has had significant placement instability but are maintaining in their current placement.

"Connections are valuable to youth and may provide stability if those connections are consistent."

"Success is every child achieving permanency."

"There is an excitement around the PRT process and its potential to achieve permanency for youth."

“If you would have just done this [the PRT process] with me years ago, we wouldn’t be sitting here right now, would we?”

A systemic barrier to achieving permanency for another population of youth, the Children’s Habilitation Residential Program (CHRP) population, is the loss of critical benefits upon leaving the custody of the Department. Some foster families report that the reduced rate of financial reimbursement of an adoption subsidy may prohibit them from moving forward toward adoption. Finally, there are situations in which Termination of Parental Rights has occurred yet youth are committed to achieving legal permanence by returning to their birth family, creating a new set of permanence challenges.

The PRT process can also present challenges to achieving permanency for youth. All three counties initially had concerns regarding an increased workload for caseworkers in conducting PRTs, both in the amount of paperwork required and the additional time spent per case. In Larimer County, a few caseworkers were involved with multiple reviews in a week’s time. This generated a large increase in workload, both in preparing for the meetings and managing the tasks that followed as a result of the PRT process. Denver County caseworkers initially had to complete a 32-page form called a “Case Summary.” It was a requirement for the county to participate in an evaluation study

done by Casey Family Programs, and it generated a significant amount of work and duplication of effort. When the County’s participation in the research study was completed, Denver County discontinued this requirement. Eliminating this excess paperwork has made it easier for caseworkers to incorporate PRTs into daily case work. The flexibility of the PRT process allows for each county to implement changes to manage workload.

PRTs have demonstrated effectiveness in increasing the permanency status for some youth, in addition to establishing/reestablishing lifelong connections. In some cases, PRTs have helped move a case forward that had seen little improvement for some time. An atmosphere of hope for a youth’s future can be created by PRTs. Youth, caseworkers, families, and the child welfare system might all benefit from exploring these important but yet identified connections. A secondary benefit is the potential cost savings to the county/state, as PRTs can result in a move to a less restrictive level of care. The ARD is committed to helping counties find new practices that improve the outcomes for Colorado’s children and PRTs are one innovative and exciting practice for positively impacting permanency.

The county’s efforts resulted in locating family through an unlikely source of information. David now has more opportunities for permanent connections and legal permanency. Through the PRT process, David has found his family, and his life has been forever altered.

Coming up in the next issue of *Practice Matters*:

Enhancing case practice through qualitative reviews

References

- ¹ www.casey.org
- ² <http://rightforkids.org/index.php/>

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