

## From Mission to Action: A Journey to Increase Rates of Child Permanence

by Amelia Franck Meyer, MS, MSW, LISW, APSW

In 2006, 40% of the youth discharged from Anu Family Services' treatment foster care program were discharged to permanent families (reunified with their families or adopted). Although at the time accurate comparison data was not readily available, we knew anecdotally that our success rate for permanence was average or better for our field. At a 2006 leadership retreat, we began the conversation that 40% "success" still meant that 60% (6 of 10) of the children we served were not discharged to permanence. This meant that those children went to a more restrictive setting (juvenile detention, another foster home, etc.), homelessness, or some other non-permanent setting. In effect, 6 in 10 of the children we served left us without going to a permanent home.

It was after this realization of what happened to "the other 6" children that staff at Anu decided that we did not want to be one in a line of many placements that our children experienced. Instead, we recommitted ourselves to *creating permanent connections to loving and stable families*. During that retreat, we set a goal "to be the last placement prior to permanence for 90% of the children we serve." We defined permanence very narrowly and only counted towards our goal those children who were either reunified or adopted after they were discharged from our Treatment Foster Care program. At a time when the children being referred to us were coming with more significant challenges, we knew that a simple statement of commitment would not bring the change we needed, so we applied for and were awarded a 3-year grant from the Otto Bremer Foundation to support our goal. We used that grant to support a research partnership with the University of Minnesota Center for Advanced Studies in Child Welfare (CASCW). During the first year, we asked CASCW to research the factors that promoted placement stabilization. Our intention was to stop placement disruptions long enough to identify permanent resources for our children in out-of-home care.

CASCW completed a literature review on current research which promotes placement stabilization and then used it to identify key practices from the literature that promoted stabilization. CASCW charted all key practices in comparison with what we were doing at Anu. This comparison form is available for use with your agency, along with the full literature review and report, on the CASCW website. Anu then made any practice changes necessary to achieve complete

alignment with the research. Changes in our practice and our culture helped us get to a 49% rate of permanence the following year.

Although we have seen significant increases in the number of children going to permanent homes and families after leaving our care, it became evident early on that we would not see our children discharged to permanence if we did not actively try to

at risk of disruption. During these placement stabilization staffing calls, we provide new ideas or new resources to try to stabilize the child. We also began asking for significant connections and contact information for each child at the time of referral. We made a commitment to connect each child with a significant person in their lives within 24 hours of placement.

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create permanent options for our children. Therefore, in year two of our partnership with CASCW, we implemented a pilot project to use the Hunter College Family Search and Engagement (FSE) model.

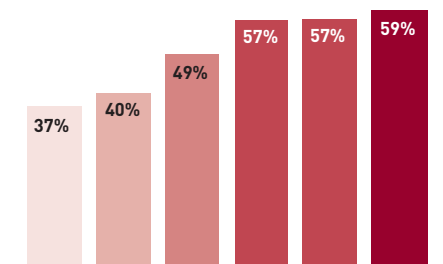
Family Search and Engagement is a model to help social workers identify loving and supportive adult resources for children, both from their past and new connections as well. It's our hope that, with the use of the FSE model, we will be able to increase the number of permanent resources available for children. Our goal is to connect children with those who have cared for them but with whom they have lost contact through out-of-home placement or multiple moves such as: former teachers, neighbors, coaches, foster parents and youth ministers as well as members of their extended family.

We have found that in using the FSE model some youth are not yet ready to connect with permanent relationships. They have suffered so many disappointments and losses, and have such grief over their separation from their loved ones, that they are often not yet ready to open themselves to the risk of reconnections or new relationships. To help children through these challenges, Anu has begun using the 3-5-7 Model by Darla Henry. This model helps children process their grief and loss to be prepared to accept permanent relationships into their lives.

Other changes we have implemented have been to our organizational culture, processes and procedures. We began thinking of unplanned disruptions as announcements that we could have done more. We put in place practices such as on-call log reviews and placement stabilization staffings to allow us to intervene and to quickly team a child who was

In the past three years, we have seen a 19% increase in the number of children who are discharged with a legal commitment from permanent families, and Anu now discharges 59% of children from our treatment foster care program to loving and stable families. If we counted "emotional permanence" or children who were discharged with a sense of emotional connection and commitment, that number would be substantially higher. It is our hope that fully implementing the FSE

**Children Discharged to Permanency**



\*Permanency is Family Reunification or Adoption

and 3-5-7 Models will bring us even closer to our 90% goal. Knowing the impact to each child has created an even greater intensity of commitment to reaching our goal!

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