

***Iowa's Blueprint for
Forever Families
2011***



***“In every conceivable manner, the family is the
link to our past, the bridge to our future.”***

Alex Haley

Sponsors

Children's Justice State Council

The Council is dedicated to improving the lives and future prospects of children who pass through Iowa's dependency courts. Collaboration among courts and others who have a stake in the foster care system is absolutely essential to accomplish far-reaching reforms.

Child Welfare Advisory Committee

The Committee consults with and makes recommendations to the Department of Human Services concerning policy issues related to child welfare.

Acknowledgements

The sponsors want to acknowledge the hard work and commitment of the Permanency Subcommittee of the Child Welfare Advisory Committee, which spearheaded the development of **Iowa's Blueprint for Forever Families**. The Subcommittee, Chaired by Richard Moore, Director of the Child Advocacy Board, and George Belitsos, CEO of Youth and Shelter Services, Inc., appreciates all of the input provided by its members, their colleagues and other stakeholders who reviewed multiple drafts of the final document. Particular thanks are extended to Wendy Rickman, Administrator of the Iowa Department of Human Services' Child and Family Services Division, and all of the DHS staff that contributed data and valuable insights for the **BLUEPRINT**. Appreciation is also extended to Gail Barber, Director of Children's Justice, who coordinated efforts with the Children's Justice State Council. Mary Nelson, former Director of Child Welfare, and Carol Behrer, Director of the Youth Policy Institute of Iowa, played major roles in writing and editing the **BLUEPRINT**. We want to acknowledge the Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative and Casey Family Programs for supporting Iowa's efforts to achieve permanence for all children and youth.

Perhaps most importantly, we want to thank the young people and parents who contributed to the **BLUEPRINT**.

IOWA'S PERMANENCY VISION

“Every child deserves a forever family.”

A forever or permanent family offers safe, stable, and committed parenting, unconditional love and lifelong support, and legal family membership status.

Ideally, permanency is achieved through preserving or reunifying the child's original family. If neither of these is possible due to safety concerns, permanency can also be the result of legal guardianship or adoption by kin or other caring and committed adults.

Principles

Urgency: Permanence is treated with a sense of urgency as if the child were our own or a child of a family member.

Diversity: The culture, race, ethnicity, language, religion and sexual orientation of children, youth and families are respected.

Family and Youth Empowerment: Families and young people are full partners in all decision-making and planning for their futures.

Accountability: Services and supports are strength-based, fair, responsive, accessible, and accountable to children, youth and their families.

Shared Responsibility: Multiple systems (including child welfare, juvenile courts, education, substance abuse, mental health, domestic violence and others) and the community at large work together to identify and support permanent relationships for the child.

“Committed to me is someone who will stick it out through the good and the bad. Committed is the constant reminder of “I’m not going anywhere. I WANT to be here for you.””

[This vision and principles are a condensed version of those adopted by the Child Welfare Advisory Committee and Children’s Justice State Council in 2009.]

PERMANENCE DEFINED

Each year approximately thirty to forty thousand children and youth come to the attention of Iowa's child welfare and juvenile justice systems and, of those, four to five thousand enter foster care to address child safety or public safety. For most, foster care is a short-term placement designed to allow time to address the reason for removal and to receive the support and services necessary for children to return to their family and community.

Unfortunately, too many children and youth remain in foster care too long. Too many youth exit care through emancipation rather than to a permanent family and enduring relationship. Too many young people never realize the security of connections to adults who will be there for a lifetime. When our system fails to find forever families for youth in foster care, long-term outcomes are bleak. A young person's permanency status is inextricably intertwined with their overall well being.

"Permanence is having someone to call to celebrate good news. Someone who can comfort you with no words; just be there. It is never spending a holiday alone."

Iowa has made progress over the last several years to reduce the number of children in out-of-home placement and to improve permanency outcomes. Between fiscal year 2005 and 2009, the number of children entering Iowa's foster care system declined from 6,781 to 4,728¹. Moreover, efforts by the Department of Human Services, Juvenile Courts, providers and community partners have resulted in improved

permanency outcomes for those children who do enter care. Relative placements, one family-one judge, family team meetings, family interaction, family drug courts, parent partners, functional family therapy—are all strategies, among others, that have been implemented with considerable success. Yet more remains to be done to achieve permanence for all children and youth served by Iowa's child welfare and juvenile justice systems.

Everyone agrees permanency is vital for healthy development and well-being of children and youth. But what, exactly, is permanency? There are three critical pieces to the permanency puzzle. In order to truly achieve permanency, all three pieces must be addressed.

- Legal – a legally established relationship (adoption, guardianship, birth family).
- Relational – an emotional attachment between youth, caregivers, and other family and kin.
- Cultural – a continuous connection to family, tradition, race, ethnicity, culture, language and religion²

Young people define permanence in very individualized ways. Permanency is not just a goal established in a youth's plan; nor is it a placement or relationship that lasts only until the youth turns age 18. ***Permanence is about supporting lifelong family connections.***

We encourage all stakeholders to make a commitment to ensure that all children and youth have such connections.

"Permanency is critical for the well being of the youth we serve not only to begin to resolve a current crisis, but to provide meaningful relationships that last a life time."

Iowa Supreme Court Justice Brent Appel

¹ Administration for Children and Families, Foster Care FY 2002 – FY 2009 Entries, Exits, and Numbers of Children in Care on the Last Day of Each Federal Fiscal Year, http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cb/stats_research/afcars/statistics/entryexit2009.htm

² University of Iowa School of Social Work—National Resource Center for Family Centered Practice, "Improving Outcomes for Youth in Transition" Training Program, 2009.

IOWA'S BLUEPRINT FOR FOREVER FAMILIES

This document builds from Iowa's permanency vision – *Every child deserves a forever family* – and foundational principles adopted by the Child Welfare Advisory Committee and Children's Justice Council in 2009. The **BLUEPRINT** offers state and local child welfare and juvenile justice stakeholders a cohesive set of strategies to address the complex issue of permanence.

Achieving permanence for children and youth is not just the responsibility of the Department of Human Services or of the Court alone. It requires an unequivocal commitment from all sectors and everyone working together to ensure that every young person served by Iowa's child welfare and juvenile justice systems leave those systems with safe, loving, and enduring relationships that are intended to last forever.

This document presents a framework for permanency efforts that can be used to guide the work of multiple partners and stakeholders. The framework is organized around five key areas:

1. Family and Youth Engagement
2. Family Preservation
3. Placement and Reunification
4. Adoption and Guardianship
5. Transitioning to Adulthood

For each area, background data is provided for context and recommendations based on programs and practices that work are provided. These content areas are followed by additional recommendations for next steps needed to implement effective permanency efforts statewide, including: achieving race equity and cultural competence; training; engaging additional partners; tracking data, measuring outcomes, and building in accountability.

In some cases, the **BLUEPRINT** highlights existing efforts or strategies that should be continued, strengthened or expanded; in other cases, new policies or practices are identified. Few of the recommendations require significant new resources—but rather offer no-cost or low-cost approaches to embed best permanency practice into our ongoing work within existing resources. It is intended that these recommendations become a catalyst for all partners to contribute to achieving permanence for children and youth.

Using the Blueprint

While the **BLUEPRINT** provides an overview of key issues and recommendations regarding permanence, the real benefit for children and youth involved in Iowa's child welfare and juvenile justice systems will come only when the **BLUEPRINT** is utilized by state and community stakeholders to inform and improve their everyday practice. Individual organizations and sectors, as well as cross-system groups, can use the **BLUEPRINT** to assess their own efforts and identify opportunities to improve. It can also be used to engage and educate new partners to broaden our efforts to achieve permanence for all children and youth. Supplements to the **BLUEPRINT** will be available to provide more specific suggestions and direction to various sectors (e.g., judges, caseworkers, foster parents, etc.).

FAMILY AND YOUTH ENGAGEMENT

Every family and youth should have a voice.

Key Data

- Child and family involvement in the case plan was rated a strength in 49% of the cases. (Iowa's Child and Family Services Review, August 2010).
- 72.3% of children served and 49% of parents were visited during the last month of SFY 2010. (Iowa State Automated Child Welfare Information System (SACWIS))
- 44% of children and families served by DHS had at least one family team meeting during SFY 2010 (SACWIS)

Outcomes improve when youth and their parents are active participants in their own planning and service provision. When parents are empowered, guided, and supported in their parenting efforts, and when youth's opinions are valued and fostered, lines of communication open up and more candid conversations about issues and barriers to safe case closure can be dealt with in a strength-based transparent environment. When families are full partners in the process, when we expect them to participate in their own future, not only do they benefit, the system does as well. Conversations improve when parents and youth are sitting at the planning table, and those conversations will more often lead to workable mutually agreed upon plan.

Recommendations

Implement authentic family and youth engagement through the use of family team meetings, regular face-to-face visits, and youth-centered practice at the individual practice level.

In order to improve permanency outcomes, everyone involved with the family must genuinely engage family members, both immediate and extended, both maternal and paternal, in the process. This must occur not only when it is convenient or

when most parties are in agreement, but when there is conflict, confusion, or uncertainty. In order to engage families in an authentic way, they must be included, informed, and active players in all planning and decisions.

Research supports the use of family team meetings, family group conferencing, and regular face-to-face visits with parents and their children to facilitate a full participatory process in both child welfare and juvenile justice practice. To be effective, **family-led teams must be viewed as the primary vehicle for developing the individual family plan.** Meetings and face-to-face contacts between professionals and the families they serve must be held at regular intervals throughout their involvement with the family. Meetings must be facilitated by knowledgeable, competent persons who adhere to the family team practice standards.

Youth engagement is a relatively recent and significant advancement in the array of family-centered practices that directly affects older youth in care. Youth engagement has been defined as involving young people in the creation of their own destinies, genuinely involving them in planning, and encouraging them to advocate for themselves. This engagement can be enhanced through the use of peer support to assist youth in finding their voice, strong mentoring programs to enhance adult preparation for youth, and meaningful engagement by all court parties to ensure meaningful hearings for youth and their parents. Youth should have access to

CASA volunteers, especially in complicated situations; parents and youth should be provided materials about the process and their rights within the process; and they should have access to legal representation to assist them to better navigate within the system.

Effectively engaging young people in decisions that affect their lives requires that all system partners believe that youth engagement will improve outcomes and that they are skilled in involving youth. Young people should be provided age-appropriate

materials about the process and their rights, and they should have legal representation that helps them determine what they want and how to ask for it.

“One way to ensure youth voice in developing permanency is making sure we are at meetings, assuring that we have a voice, and that we are heard.”

Include parents and youth in child welfare and juvenile justice policy and practice development.

Youth and parents should be included in the development, review and implementation of public child welfare and juvenile justice policy decisions and direction. This can be achieved through the use of satisfaction surveys, periodic focus groups, and through the collaboration of local and state level partners with groups comprised of parents and young people involved in the system.

For young people and parents to confidently contribute to policy and practice development requires that they understand how to strategically use their real-life experiences with child welfare and juvenile justice systems. Training, support, and compensation for their time and efforts must be provided.

FAMILY PRESERVATION

First and foremost, children belong with their birth families.

Except in the most egregious situations, children and youth are best served by preserving and supporting families. Family preservation efforts include short-term, family-based services designed to assist families in crisis by improving parenting and family functioning while keeping children and communities safe. Family preservation efforts recognize that separating children and youth from their families is traumatic for them, often leaving lasting negative effects. These efforts build upon the conviction that many youth can be safely protected and treated within their own homes when parents are provided with services and supports, and are empowered to improve their lives. In juvenile justice, diversion strategies and home-based services recognize that youth can be rehabilitated and communities can be safe without separating youth and their families.

Recommendations

Avoid unnecessary placements through the use of research-based safety and risk assessment tools.

Key Data

- 4,948 families received services in their home from child welfare (average monthly number served/CY09, SACWIS)
- 91% of children do not have a recurrence of abuse within 6 months of a prior incident. (National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System, NCANDS)
- 3,201 youth received services through Juvenile Court Services to reduce recidivism and keep them in their homes. (Criminal and Juvenile Justice Planning, 2009 Delinquency Services Report)
- 73% of youth adjudicated delinquent who participate in the community based programs exit successfully. (Criminal and Juvenile Justice Planning, 2009 Delinquency Services Report)

States differ considerably with respect to both the number of children in foster care and the rate of foster care entry. Nationally, the foster care child entry rate among states in 2007 ranged from 1.5 to 8.5 children per 1,000 children in the population, with a median of 4.5. Iowa's rate of entry was 7.2 children per 1,000.

While the safety of children and the community must remain paramount, strengthening and expanding family preservation efforts by standardizing responses using safety and risk assessment tools to avoid separating children from parents is critical.

Increase use of effective evidence-based family approaches and engagement strategies.

Therapeutic approaches that work with families and children in both child welfare and juvenile justice, such as Functional Family Therapy, Multisystemic Therapy, Aggression Replacement Therapy, Family Interaction, behavioral/cognitive therapy and relapse prevention, and Family Team Decision Making (FTDM) demonstrate effectiveness. Effective programs are rehabilitative and use behavioral intervention techniques within the family and youth's natural environment.

Explore the viability of a differential response system in the child welfare system.

Other mid-Western states have documented success in their child welfare system outcomes through the use of a differentiated response model that better engages families,

and aligns safety and risk factors in a family with a prioritized response.

Continue to support community-based prevention and early intervention service strategies that effectively deter involvement in the child welfare or juvenile justice system.

Resources targeted toward at-risk youth and their families make a difference in the entry rate of those families into the formalized system. To the extent possible, resources should continue to be targeted to a range of prevention and early intervention strategies. This can be strengthened through partnerships and collaboration among multiple systems and stakeholders and citizens.

PLACEMENT AND REUNIFICATION

Regardless of the reason for removal, children are traumatized by removals from their home.

Key Data

- 60.9% of children in out-of-home placement between 12 and 24 months had two or fewer placements in FFY2009. (Iowa CFSR Data Profile, May 2010)
- 77% of children in out-of-home placement were placed within 45 miles of home. (DHS At-a-Glance Report, June 2010)
- As of December 2010, 6,338 children were in foster care. Of those, 2,208 were placed in non-relative foster homes, 1,424 in relative foster care, 985 in group homes, 307 in institutional care, 51 “on the run,” 48 in supervised apartment living, and 1,178 on a trial home visit. (Adoption and Foster Care Analysis Reporting System, AFCARS, December 2010)
- Of all children who exited foster care during SFY2010, 65% exited to reunification. (AFCARS, SFY 2010)

Oftentimes, that trauma can be overwhelming. It is critical, therefore, for everyone involved to engage immediately, adopt a sense of urgency, utilize all services and individuals connected to the family to launch the reunification process. Every effort should be made to minimize trauma to the child/youth while keeping him/her as well as the community safe.

When reunification of the family is not possible, it is critical to ensure that the youth is connected to at least one committed relationship with another loving, caring adult. Efforts should continue to be made to reach out to extended family and/or other non-related adults who will commit to strengthening the safety net for the youth.

Recommendations

Ensure meaningful and constructive family interaction.

The primary purpose of family interaction is to maintain relationships with siblings, parents, family and other individuals, and to reduce the sense of abandonment and loss which children and youth experience at placement.

To be meaningful and beneficial, family interaction must take place as soon as possible after placement, and frequently and regularly thereafter. It should take place in the least restrictive, most homelike setting to meet the youth's needs for safety. It should minimize the harmful effects of family separation as well as nurture and enhance reunification. Family interaction efforts should maintain sufficient contact to address the developmental and/or special needs of the youth and family helping them further progress toward achieving permanency

for the youth. Interactions provide the opportunity for families to maintain relationships, enhance well-being, and are a venue to provide families with the opportunity to learn, practice and demonstrate new behaviors and patterns of interaction. Family interaction can also provide an opportunity for the system to assess parental capacity and needs in the areas of parent training, community resources/referral, and concrete supports.

Expand strategies to search for and engage families.

Ongoing family search and engagement activities, starting at intake and continuing throughout involvement with the family, contribute to fewer placements, keeping siblings together, reducing long-term foster care, and permanency for the youth. Relative support can

also contribute to a faster reunification of the youth with their parents and provide stability for youth to remain in their parental home. As the evaluation of the Families for Iowa's Children (FIC) project identifies effective strategies for searching for and engaging families, these can and should be embedded into daily practice.

Expand opportunities to mentor and support parents.

Mentoring and supporting parents significantly contributes to faster reunification of youth with their parents. These efforts assist parents who have lost the custody of their children in understanding and navigating through the child welfare system. Two projects in Iowa that include a focus on mentoring and supporting birth parents, Parent Partners and Family Drug Courts, are currently being evaluated. Lessons learned from these evaluations should inform expansion of such opportunities to birth parents across the state.

Expand opportunities to support and mentor kin.

The stability of a youth in a relative/kin foster home increases when relative/kin foster parents receive training (such as Kin PS-MAPP) and support to deal with the stressful dynamics of being foster parents, including those that are unique for relative foster parents. Programs that further support and mentor extended family members and kin in their work with child welfare and juvenile justice families should be identified and utilized to aid in reunification efforts.

ADOPTION AND GUARDIANSHIP

Children in out-of-home placement who cannot be reunified need permanency.

Key Data

- Of all children who exited foster care during SFY 2010, 18% exited to adoption and 6% exited to Guardianship. (AFCARS, SFY 2010)
- In SFY 2010, DHS finalized 873 adoptions, down from the 937 adoptions in SFY 2009 (primarily due to a downward trend in foster care). Of children adopted through DHS in SFY 2009, 60% were ages 0 to 5; 29% were 6 to 11; 9% were 12 to 15; and 2% were ages 16 to 18. (DHS SFY 2012 Budget Offer, AFCARS)

Adoption and guardianship are the preferred permanency options as opposed to long-term foster care. Through adoption, children and families have the same rights and responsibilities as if the child were born into the family. The vast majority of adoptions through foster care remain stable and intact over time. All children and youth can be adopted regardless of their age, race, ethnicity, disability, sexual orientation, special need or sibling group size. Foster parents, relatives and matched families have adopted children of all ages and needs.

When individual circumstances determine that adoption is not the best option for a youth or family, guardianship is another avenue to permanency. Guardians have the same legal rights as a parent, but are still under the jurisdiction of the court. Family members and older youth often find guardianship favorable because parental rights do not have to be terminated which allows continued connection to birth parents, when appropriate, and allows the family structure to remain intact.

Placement with relatives is preferred to placement with non-relative caretakers. Placing children and youth with relatives can be a powerful means of achieving permanence and keeping them connected with their birth family, even if they cannot return home to their parents. Similarly, there are many reasons why a relative or another caring adult would want to assume legal guardianship instead of adoption. For example, family guardianship is often appropriate when a family member would like to take legal custody of a youth but does not feel comfortable terminating the parental rights of the youth's parent(s)—often out of love, respect, or hope that that person will experience change.

Recommendations

Improve all facets of the concurrent planning process.

Concurrent planning begins at intake and continues through safe case closure for both child welfare and juvenile justice children and youth. The development and progression of a concurrent plan for every youth is one of the most critical elements of the permanency efforts being made on behalf of the family. All professionals should be re-trained on the elements and importance of concurrent planning.

Expand opportunities to support guardianship.

When relatives are unable to meet the basic needs of children in the child welfare or juvenile justice systems, a guardianship arrangement may provide the support necessary to ensure successful permanency for the youth. Yet under the current systems, families becoming guardians receive less support than if the youth remained in foster care or was adopted. The federal Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoption Act provides federal funding to states to implement a subsidized guardianship program. Subsidized guardianship would provide a viable permanency option especially for older youth who do not want to be adopted but need the permanency of a family who is legally responsible for them. Iowa should continue to explore this option.

Improve efforts to connect families to appropriate post-adoption services.

Families who are eligible to receive an adoption subsidy can also receive post-adoption supports free of charge. Services can be provided in the family's home and are available as long as the family needs the service. Support groups are available for adoptive families whether they are eligible for a subsidy or not, and the Iowa Foster and Adoptive Parents Association offers free training and support to adoptive families regardless of their eligibility for a subsidy. It is important, however, to recognize all families, adoptive or not, utilize informal supports and services in their communities. For adoptive families, it is even more important for them to be connected with these available resources, and efforts should focus on ensuring those connections are in place especially for families who are not eligible for state-funded services.

“Ask my opinion or feelings. Believe what I am saying to be true. Really consider and take seriously what I’m saying to you.”

TRANSITIONING TO ADULTHOOD

It is never too late to achieve permanence.

Key Data

- As of December 10, 2010, 21% of youth in care are age 16 or older; of those, 31% have long-term foster care as a permanency goal. (AFCARS, December 2010)
- 443 young people “aged out” of foster care during SFY 2010 (AFCARS, SFY 2010)
- An average of 450 youth per month is served in Iowa’s Aftercare and Preparation for Adult Living (PAL) program. (PAL program statistics SFY 2010, Aftercare program statistic SFY 2010)

Older youth face a unique set of challenges and risks as they move into adulthood. When youth age-out of foster care they often lack the financial, emotional, educational, and protective support typically provided to young people in permanent or intact families. As a result, they are extremely vulnerable to poverty, homelessness, unemployment, sexual exploitation and other victimization, and other poor outcomes. Those who leave care at age 18 face deeper challenges than those who remain in care longer.³ While young adults are increasingly taking advantage of voluntary services available to those who age out of Iowa’s foster care system, permanence remains a vital and critical need for these young adults.

Recommendations

Integrate permanence with preparation by involving youth in their plan from intake through safe case closure.

While adolescence is a time for developing age-appropriate autonomy and skills to be independent, strong family ties and connections to caring adults are still vital. In fact, permanency is a necessary foundation for successful preparation for adulthood. Our child welfare and juvenile justice systems must respond to both needs simultaneously. Efforts to achieve permanence for even the oldest youth in

care must continue, through ongoing discussion with youth and work with birth families, by establishing or maintaining healthy relationships with relatives (including siblings) and fictive kin, and by engaging in aggressive family finding efforts with youth who have lost connections to birth family. In addition, when a youth's permanency goal is APPLA, there needs to be frequent and diligent review to determine whether the goal could and should be changed to another more permanent goal, such as return home, adoption or guardianship, and to ensure that the youth's needs for permanent family connections are being met.

At the same time, attention must be given to preparing young people to live independently by assuring that they have normal growing up experiences, such as getting a drivers license, holding a part-time job, applying to college, and opening a bank account – experiences that young people in intact families routinely navigate with the help of their parents.

“Trust is so important. When we open up and make ourselves vulnerable, we have to have the safety of knowing that the individual we are letting in is safe. We have to know that we are still loved despite our past and our imperfectness.”

³ Chapin Hall Midwest Evaluation of the Adult Functioning of Former Foster Youth

Implement youth-driven transition planning.

In order for young people to be listened to, to be informed, to be respected, and to exert control over their life, young people need to lead the development of their planning, including permanency planning and transition planning that addresses education and employment goals. Just like their counterparts outside the foster care community whose parents help support their transition, these youth need a plan for education, employment, housing, health insurance, and adult connections and other supports to help them succeed.

Young people need to be full partners and leaders in understanding their rights and responsibilities and in making decisions affecting their own lives. Developing a transition plan in partnership with a wide array of adults from various public and private systems is important, but most importantly, young people need to lead the process of making decisions on issues that affect them in order to support their successful transition to adulthood.

The Fostering Connections Act requires that a youth-directed transition plan be developed with each youth at least 90 days before a young person exits care. Selected communities have tested the Iowa Youth Dream Team Model as well as benchmark hearings as a way to engage youth in directing their transition plan. Such models create circles of formal and informal supports, focus on strengths and interests of the young person, establish roles and commitments of team members, and empower the young person to work toward their individual goals.

“Not everyone is the same. Every youth’s opinions and feelings should be taken seriously and considered to do what is best for that person specifically. Please stop trying to work with the youth as if they were all made from the same mold!”

While youth-driven and adult-nurtured teaming processes can be time-intensive, especially initially, the teaming process is critical to re-connecting youth with the people within their own natural networks of family members and other significant adults who know and care about them. It may take time to find and engage family members, and may take even more time to re-build relationships that have been allowed to lapse. However, identifying potential team members throughout adolescence and early adulthood can be a significant help in supporting the young person's permanence.

Iowa needs to incorporate features of youth-centered planning into the development of their plan with all youth in care, especially beginning at age 16.

Extend support beyond age 18.

Ensure that comprehensive, continuous and collaborative services for youth and families are available up to and beyond age 18. Participation in voluntary services among young adults who have aged out of foster care continues to increase and such services need to be adequately funded to avoid waiting lists. Extending formal foster care to age 21 is also important, both because of the support it can bring to young people and the additional federal resources it could leverage. In this area as in all others, young people should be heavily involved in the design of services impacting their permanency.

WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

“If we wait for a youth to get better or to be stable or to resolve birth family issues or to be excited about adoption or to learn to attach or to stop cutting or to get school under control or to stabilize on meds or to complete treatment or to pay off restitution or to stop sexualized behavior or to be nice to pets or to be nice to little kids or to stop hoarding food or to start eating balanced meals or to stop smoking pot or to be grateful... we will never begin permanency efforts”

(Excerpt from an informational pamphlet on transitioning kids in the state of Minnesota).

This **BLUEPRINT** is designed as foundational for all systems partners, families, and young people to assure a forever family for every child and youth. The real benefit for these children and youth will come only when the **BLUEPRINT** is utilized by all state and community stakeholders to inform and improve their everyday practice. Individual organizations and sectors, as well as cross-system groups, need to use the **BLUEPRINT** to assess their own efforts and identify opportunities to improve. It can also be used to engage and educate new partners to broaden our efforts to achieve permanence for all children and youth.

Putting the recommendations in this **BLUEPRINT** into action will require concerted effort by multiple systems and partners, and to ensure these actions are focused, coordinated, and effective, it is critical to address the following areas:

Race Equity—Disproportionality and Cultural Competency

Key Data

- African American and American Indian children and youth receive family-centered services at a rate that is approximately 3 times higher than the rate at which White children and youth receive services (SFY 2010 Family Centered Services Data, U.S. Census 2009 population estimates)
- African American and American Indian children and youth are in foster care at a rate that is approximately 4 times higher than the rate at which White children and youth are found in foster care (Sept, 2010 Foster Care population statistics, U.S. Census 2009 population estimates)

We cannot successfully address permanency in this state without addressing disproportionality. Iowa has been aware of this issue for several years and both the child welfare and the juvenile justice systems are working to address the issue with some success. In order to fully achieve permanency for all youth, Iowa must achieve race equity for all youth.

Currently, efforts are underway in to reduce disproportionality and desperate outcomes in the Courts Catalyzing Change site(s); Iowa Breakthrough Series Collaborative sites; Georgetown Breakthrough Series Collaborative; and the Juvenile delinquency Disproportionate Minority Contact (DMC) initiative. Lessons learned from these efforts and those of other communities should be applied in all practice.

The strategies outlined in this document give us a roadmap to follow. Specifically:

- Youth and their families must be actively involved in the creation of and progression of their plan. This plan must be individualized and recognize cultural differences.
- Everyone in the child welfare and juvenile justice systems must continue to demand accurate, timely data that includes race and ethnicity information. That data must be

analyzed and acted upon using a race equity lens or frame of reference.

- Everyone in the child welfare and juvenile justice systems must work to ensure there is an array of culturally appropriate service options for youth and families.
- Everyone in the child welfare and juvenile justice systems must provide services in a culturally competent manner.
- Youth, families, and professionals of color must be engaged in all policy and practice development, and ensure that all decision-making groups include members that are representative of the racial and ethnic populations we serve.

“The system has spent too long trying to work with parents and youth from different backgrounds and upbringings all the same with no separation or concern about their uniqueness or how to work with them. This has to stop!”

Training

Family connections and permanency must be included in basic and ongoing training for everyone who has a connection to the child welfare and juvenile justice systems (for example, DHS and private agency workers, juvenile court officers (JCOs), attorneys, judges, Court Appointed Special Advocate [CASA] volunteers, foster care review board, foster parents, etc.). This training should focus on the specific roles each party can play in helping children and youth achieve permanency, as well as evidence-based best practice strategies that consistently produce better results. Supplements to this **BLUEPRINT** can be used as part of this training.

Further, opportunities for interdisciplinary training need to be created so parties understand each others’ roles, hear the same material, understand how their roles work together, and strengthen collaborative partnerships. Learning from one another and sharing “lessons learned” builds an environment in which positive outcomes for children and families are possible. Finally, all training must build cultural competence.

Engaging Additional Partners

The child welfare and juvenile court systems cannot achieve permanency for every child and youth without the help and support of other systems and the community at large. Community Partnerships for Protecting Children and other strategies to reach out to and engage substance abuse, mental health, education, domestic violence, and the medical community are critical to achieving permanency for our youth. These efforts increase awareness of the vital importance of permanency for children and youth, and help to integrate the wide range of services children, youth and families need with permanency goals. Additional supplements to the **BLUEPRINT** should be developed to inform these audiences of their role in achieving permanency.

Tracking Data, Measuring Outcomes, and Building Accountability

Iowa’s child welfare and juvenile justice systems need to use data and research as our roadmap for improving outcomes for youth and families. The roadmap includes a common vision—*every child deserves a forever family*—that is measured in the same way by everyone involved. Impactful common measures, of both the service delivery process and the results they produce, need to be identified and consistently applied. These measures are essential to

monitoring performance, holding each other accountable, understanding what leads to better results, and making the case for investing in new and promising approaches.

Data needs to be routinely collected, reviewed, analyzed and shared with practitioners, stakeholders, and the community. Special attention must be paid to ensuring data is available in both the child welfare and juvenile justice systems by race and ethnicity.

Gathering data begins to build accountability, gives context to the family and system “story,” and informs practice. Reviewing and analyzing the data provides information and knowledge regarding the strengths and challenges of the child welfare and juvenile justice systems. The process of gathering data, reviewing, analyzing and sharing the data is an ongoing, cyclical activity.

CONCLUSION

The future of our children depends on your action today.

In short, it is time for our Court, our DHS office, our private agency, our community to affirm our commitment to better permanency outcomes for our youth. Begin by selecting something concrete from this **BLUEPRINT** and its supplements, agree on one or two strategies, and commit to measuring your success.