

Oregon Permanency Roundtables

Executive Summary, 2010 (*draft*)

Background

In 2009, Oregon launched the *Safe and Equitable Foster Care Reduction* efforts as a partnership between the Oregon Department of Human Services, Oregon Commission on Children and Families, and Casey Family Programs due to Oregon's high rates of children in the foster care system. Oregon has struggled with high rates of foster care placement when compared to national standards. The national rate of children in out of home placement is 6.3 children per 1000 children; while Oregon's rate was 10.1 per 1,000 children in 2008 and 9.7 per 1,000 children in 2009. In 2010, the percent of children in Oregon foster care have a primary plan of long-term foster care or Another Planned Permanent Living Arrangement (APPLA) has ranged from 19% - 21%. Despite the state's commitment to permanency planning, 75.1 percent of those children have been in care for three or more years, and 68% have been in foster care five years or longer. Additionally, the Disproportionality Decision Point Analysis (2009) shows that long-term foster care was the permanency plan of record for more American Indian/Alaskan Native and Black children than White children and they were more likely to remain in foster care 4 or more years. Oregon must do better, as children are best served when they are able to grow up within their own families or extended kin networks. For this reason, Oregon determined that implementing Permanency Roundtables as a pilot project would be a good strategy aimed at increasing the number of children in long-term foster care receiving legal permanent and/or increasing permanent connections.

Oregon's History and Data

Oregon has a long history, pre-dating ASFA (Adoptions and Safe Families Act), which considered Permanent Foster Care as a legally sufficient permanency plan. Over the past several years, the department has made significant progress towards policy and practice improvements, which incorporate Permanent Foster Care as the least permanent permanency option under Another Planned Permanent Living Arrangement (APPLA). This has been a significant cultural shift for both department staff as well as community partners.

Prior to the Permanency Roundtables, there were some common misconceptions about the children in Oregon who are on an APPLA plan. Many staff and partners believed that children in an APPLA plan have permanency through Permanent Foster Care, live with a relative, or are a Developmental Disabilities (DD) placement. Analysis has dispelled these myths. As of February, 2011, 1,762 children have a permanency plan of APPLA. Only 22.9% of these children are in a Permanent Foster Care placement, 10.2% are in a relative placement, and 25% are receiving services from Developmental Disabilities. Analysis also shows that children in Permanent Foster Care are no more permanent or have placement stability than children in non-Permanent Foster Care. This means Oregon has a great deal of work to do to help children receive legal permanency and shorter stays in foster care.

Goals and Outcomes of Permanency Roundtables

1. Expedite safe legal permanency and permanent connections for children remaining in foster care for the longest periods of time.
2. Identify systematic barriers that exist which promote children remaining in long-term foster care without achieving legal permanency.
3. Staff training and development to the values of legal permanency and permanent connections.
4. Incorporate the use of *Cultural Guides* for children of color.
5. Create an evaluation plan to track both quantitative and qualitative outcomes from the Permanency Roundtables.

Children and Case Selection

Oregon's eight lead counties identified as pilot participants in the statewide *Safe and Equitable Foster Care Reduction* were invited to use the Permanency Roundtables as one such strategy. This invitation was accepted, voluntarily, in all eight counties. Two counties invited neighboring counties, within their District (SDA) to also participate in their Permanency Roundtables. The county participants included; Coos, Curry, Deschutes, Jackson, Josephine, Malheur, Marion, Multnomah, Tillamook, and Washington counties.

Counties were encouraged to select long-term foster care (APPLA) cases based on the following criteria:

- Children of color
- Children in foster care for the longest period of time
- Young children designated as APPLA

Counties were allowed some flexibility in case selection to ensure buy-in and staffing accommodations. *A statewide total of 274 cases and 378 children received Permanency Roundtables.*

Permanency Roundtable Staffing At A Glance

A Permanency Roundtable is a professional case consultation which is structured, in-depth, non-blaming, and relentless in the pursuit of legal permanency for a child. This case staffing is structured to assist the caseworker and supervisor with creative, out-of-the-box ideas to help move the case towards legal and emotional permanency for the child. At the end of each Permanency Roundtable, a case specific *Action Plan* is developed with identified work efforts and timeline goals specified. At the same time, systematic barriers and themes are identified to help department administrators with policy and practice improvements system-wide.

Permanency Roundtables are centered on five key questions pertaining to legal permanency:

- What will it take?
- What can we try that has been tried before?

- What can we try that has never been tried?
- How many things can we try concurrently?
- How can we engage the youth in planning for permanence?

Permanency Roundtables in Oregon consisted of a Casey Permanency Consultant, DHS Master Practitioner, Cultural Guide (cases with children of color), Neutral Facilitator, caseworker, and supervisor. Community partners were not invited to attend the Permanency Roundtables, with the exception of inviting the Tribe to participate on ICWA cases as well as Developmental Disability caseworkers on co-case managed cases.

Due to the high rates of over representation of children of color in Oregon’s foster care system, the department decided to utilize the concept of cultural guides. Local offices were responsible for identifying and inviting cultural guides to be a part of the Permanency Roundtable process.

A total of 65 people were trained to perform the Master Practitioner, Neutral Facilitator, or Cultural Guide role in the Permanency Roundtables. Many Roundtable members served on several different county Permanency Roundtables in a variety of roles.

Preparation and Training

In preparation for the Permanency Roundtables, training was made available to staff to prepare for the case consultations. The *Permanency Values* training was available caseworkers, supervisors, program managers, Tribes, and community partners interested in understanding values behind the Permanency Roundtables, as well as the process and preparation necessary for the tables to be successful. These were day-long trainings that occurred in each county before the Roundtables were scheduled. This training was available to as many people as wanted to participate. Some *Values* sessions had as many as 100 participants, while other sessions had as few as 10 participants, depending on the size of the community.

The Permanency Roundtable “*Skills*” training was a separate day- long training required for anybody who would be acting in an official capacity as a roundtable member. A total of 65 staff and community partners received the skills training, which then allowed them to act as a Master Practitioner, Neutral Facilitator, or Cultural Guide.

Systematic Barriers to Legal Permanency in Oregon

Closing each day of Roundtables in every county was a debriefing session to discuss what went well, what could be improved, and to identify themes and systematic barriers. Although there were slight differences county to county, the systematic barriers and themes identified below were universal across the state, as to why children in Oregon do not obtain legal permanency:

- 1. Monetary and Service Benefits (real or perceived)**
 - a. Developmental Disabilities services/payment would be decreased if legal permanency was obtained.
 - b. Eligibility for Chaffee/ILP/Scholarships
 - c. Guardianship/Adoption Assistance ending at 18.

- d. Non IV-E eligibility prevents ability to receive Guardianship Assistance.
 - e. Foster Care Payments significantly higher than AA or GA.
- 2. Value of Placement Stability over Legal Permanency**
- a. Permanent Foster Care is considered legal permanency in Oregon.
 - b. Fear of “Rocking the Boat” and placement stability.
 - c. Community Partners advocating for Permanent Foster Care over legal permanency (CASA, children’s attorneys, foster parents).
 - d. Value of legal permanency not well understood. Placement equals Permanency.
 - e. Agency Values/Priorities are at conflict on cross-system children (DD, OYA, Mental Health).
- 3. Teen workers not understanding legal permanency and how to move towards more permanent options**
- a. Teen workers are not trained on process of obtaining legal permanency.
 - b. Reunification is not actively pursued or Conditions for Return Identified.
 - c. Once PFC is designated, Courts do not actively pursue the compelling reasons why it would not be in the best interests of the *child* or *young adult* to return home, be placed for adoption, or be placed with a guardian.
 - d. Caseworkers are not trained about how to have permanency conversations with children/youth in their own language to understand why the child might not be interested in a more legal permanency plan.
 - e. Teen workers not prioritized for Freeing & Placing Training.
 - f. Adult adoption resources are scarce in Oregon.
- 4. Engagement of Parents and Relatives**
- a. Lack of search and engagement with fathers.
 - b. Agency overly-reliant on letters to fathers and relatives versus engagement (workload).
 - c. Long waitlists for Family Finding in branches piloting a Family Finding Program
 - d. Relative Searches happen in beginning of case but do not seem to get updated throughout the case.
 - e. Certification Standards are sometimes a barrier to relative placements.

Themes

- 1. Long-Term Foster Care Cases**
- a. Caseworkers have not read the entire file.
 - b. Oral history of the case becomes fact, even if it is not always true (Urban Myths)
 - c. Many workers cannot tell you why the child was removed from the home or other critical case history information.
- 2. Community Partners have strong influence over case direction**
- a. Need training on importance of legal permanency.
 - b. Often not supportive of looking at reunification again.
 - c. Caseworkers feel powerless about their recommendations.
- 3. Reunification**
- a. Parents currently parenting children without the involvement of DHS, yet safety threats have not been reassessed in years to determine if reunification is a possibility for children in CW custody.
 - b. Conditions for Return are very generic on APPLA cases.

4. Native American and ICWA cases

- a. Many cases continue to be coded incorrectly.
- b. Native cases that do not qualify as ICWA, the importance of cultural connection is not as prioritized.
- c. Strong need for better engagement and communication with Tribes.

5. High Needs Children in Rural Counties

- a. Often placed along the I-5 corridor, making Face to Face contact more difficult
- b. Visitation with relatives is more difficult due to distance.
- c. Courtesy Worker supervision creates more people on the case/communication issues.

Evaluation

Oregon did not receive formal evaluation through Casey Family Programs as a part of the Permanency Roundtable pilot. The Department will track the following quantitative measures at quarterly intervals for children receiving Permanency Roundtables:

- Permanency Plan changes
- Ethnicity of children receiving Permanency Roundtables
- Permanency Plan at case closure, for children aging out of foster care
- Relative Placements

Additionally, the following measures are being recorded for baseline data of the children receiving Permanency Roundtables.

- Ethnicity of children receiving Permanency Roundtables
- Age at which APPLA was established
- Cases co-managed between Child Welfare and Developmental Disabilities
- Overall statewide APPLA and Permanent Foster Care rates

There are a number of qualitative measures that are more difficult to track in our current Information System, but are important to recognize.

- Many workers stated that Permanency Roundtables helped them understand the importance of legal permanency and will apply this to future cases they will be managing.
- Supervisors valued this process as an important tool to assist them in clinical supervision.
- Our Information System does not allow us to easily track Well-Being outcomes that may result from the Roundtables such as parent engagement, relative connections, and the use of Permanency Pacts.
- Many children who received Permanency Roundtables are youth who are ages 18 – 20 years old, and have significantly more limited legal permanency options.
- Increased support and connection between Administrative Central Office and Field staff.

Possible Solutions

- Statewide workgroup between Child Welfare and Developmental Disabilities to align systems coordination.
- Extend Adoption Assistance and Guardianship Assistance to age 21.
- Convene a multi-disciplinary workgroup focused on systematic strategies to assist children achieve legal and emotional permanency.
- Investigate options for opening educational/ILP services beyond foster care eligibility.
- Increase training to staff and community partners around the long-term benefits of legal permanency.
- Increase engagement and relationships with Oregon Tribes and communities of color
- Partner with Foster Club and enhance use of Permanency Pacts.
- Engage the voice of youth.
- Training and practice improvements around engaging fathers.
- Increase use of Family Finding, Mobility Mapping, and relative connections.
- Better understanding of child and family specific services available in the community.

Oregon will continue to assess and evaluate efficacy of Permanency Roundtables to determine whether or not to continue implementation on a statewide basis. At the very least, systematic barriers can be addressed to help make legal permanency a more viable option for Oregon's children in foster care.