

permanency reintegration outcomes

Permanency Outcomes for Youth with
Complex Mental Health Needs Served by the
**Child Protective Services
Reintegration Project**

Phase II Evaluation Report

July 2011

Executive Summary

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Statement of the Issue

A number of state and national efforts are underway to safely reduce the number of children in out-of-home care and expedite permanency for children currently in the system. Permanency has been defined as “an enduring family relationship that is safe and meant to last a lifetime; offers the legal right and social status of full family membership; provides for physical, emotional, social, cognitive, and spiritual well-being; and assures lifelong connections to extended family, siblings, other significant adults, family history, traditions, race and ethnic heritage, culture, religion, and language.”¹ As child welfare agencies succeed in preventing and reducing the need for out-of-home care, more innovative and intensive services are warranted for those families and children whose needs make permanency a more difficult goal to achieve.

The Program Model

The goal of the Child Protective Services Reintegration Pilot Project (Reintegration Project) in Travis County, Texas, is to reunify youth ages 5 to 17 who have significant mental and behavioral disorders and who reside in therapeutic foster care or residential treatment facilities with caregivers. The term reintegration is used to capture the dynamics of moving from an institutional or group setting to a home-based setting within a community and is used interchangeably with reunification. This evaluation report highlights the project and the outcomes of those youth served between program inception (December 2007) and the end of the evaluation period (August 31, 2010).

Critical program elements include:

- Collaboration of Reintegration Project staff and Child Protective Services (CPS) case workers.
- Acceptance by child welfare and other legal parties that youth with complex mental health needs can live in their home community with a family member.
- Importance of planning and preparing for reintegration 60 to 90 days prior to placing the youth in the home.
- Assessment and capacity building of the receiving caregiver.
- Dedicated staff to allow for significantly more family engagement.
- Availability of flexible funding to meet the concrete needs of families and for non-traditional services.
- Engagement and support of the youth for the transition.
- Individualized reintegration preparation that gives access to both traditional and non-traditional services for both the caregiver and youth.
- A service period that is defined by the needs of the youth and caregiver.
- Use of community resources to support the youth upon reintegration.
- Use of the wraparound process to facilitate and sustain the reintegration.
- Increased tolerance of both the caregiver and the system of the youth’s predictable “missteps” upon reintegration.
- Engagement of the appropriate school system to develop innovative planning for the transitioning youth.

¹ Frey, L.L., Greenblatt, S. B., Brown, J. (2005). A call to action: An integrated approach to youth permanency and preparation for adulthood. New Haven, CT: Casey Family Services.

Tracking Status in the Program: The Outcomes

Since program inception through the end of the evaluation period (December 2007 to August 2010), 32 youth in Travis County have been enrolled in the program. More than half (18) of the youth's cases have been closed. Of these 18 youth, 50 percent (9) had their cases successfully closed with a stable placement. The other 50 percent (9) had their cases closed without successful reunification – five during the reintegration preparation phase and four with placement disruptions after reunification. This 50 percent successful reunification rate is quite striking because it is comparable to the reunification rate for the foster care population nationally and slightly higher than the reunification rate (44%) for the foster care population ages 5 to 17 in Travis County.

These findings demonstrate that with the appropriate combination, intensity, and duration of services, youth who would otherwise face significant barriers in achieving reunification and likely age out of foster care in institutional settings may be able to live with their families in the community.

Furthermore, a cost analysis demonstrates that the program has the capacity to achieve significant cost savings for CPS. For each youth who otherwise would be in a residential treatment center if not for the Reintegration Project, savings to child welfare will be realized after 87 days of a sustained placement in the home. Compared to youth who otherwise would be in group care or therapeutic foster care, savings start to accrue after 125 days.

Stated differently, after six months of a sustained placement in the community, the CPS reintegration project is 52 percent less expensive than residential treatment centers and 31 percent less expensive than group care or therapeutic foster care. Savings are significantly greater for youth who reintegrate into the community from more intensive levels of care and for those whose placements in the community endure for longer periods of time. Comprehensive federal finance reform, if enacted, could allow child welfare agencies that experience these savings to reinvest them into prevention, permanency and other community services that reduce the need for foster care.

Implications

The child welfare field needs more information about successful, cost-effective programs that can help youth who otherwise would face significant hurdles to achieving permanency. The Reintegration Project is one such model that demonstrates promising permanency outcomes for youth and potential savings to the child welfare system.



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Casey Family Programs

P 800.228.3559

P 206.282.7300

F 206.282.3555

www.casey.org

contactus@casey.org