Permanency for Children in DCYF Care

**DEFINITION**

*Permanency for children in DCYF care* is the percentage of children in out-of-home care who transition to a permanent living arrangement through reunification, adoption, or guardianship. Data are for all children under age 18 who entered out-of-home placement with the Rhode Island Department of Children, Youth and Families (DCYF) during a 12-month period.

**SIGNIFICANCE**

Children who are removed from their families often suffer trauma leading into removal. This trauma compounds when children remain in foster care for years and are moved to different placements. Multiple, prolonged, and unstable placements can negatively affect children’s academic achievement, mental health, ability to develop healthy connections, and future earnings. Many of these factors can also affect these children’s likelihood of reaching permanency.

Planning for permanency begins with increasing placement stability so children are living in safe, caring foster families that can support them in exiting to permanency as soon as possible. Strategies to improve permanency include prioritizing kinship care, placement matching to ensure that first placements are successful, improving supports for children and foster families, and increasing caseworker training and retention efforts.

Reunification with parents is the most common permanency outcome. When reunification is not possible, child welfare agencies focus on placing children in another permanent family through adoption or guardianship, a legal arrangement where an adult is named a child’s caregiver and given custody and legal authority to make decisions about the child often without terminating parental rights.

Children and youth who live with families while in the child welfare system are better prepared to thrive in permanent homes. To promote permanency through placements with family members, federal law requires states to notify relatives when a child is placed in foster care, provides funding for states offering kinship guardianship assistance, provides incentive payments for adoptions of older children and children with special needs, and requires that states inform families about the availability of the federal adoption tax credit.

Older youth who age out of foster care are at risk for low educational attainment, homelessness, unemployment, and unintended pregnancy. Extending foster care to age 21 helps youth in foster care transition to independent living with better outcomes into adulthood.

Of the 1,368 Rhode Island children in the FY 2018 entry cohort, 34% (469) of children in out-of-home placement in Rhode Island exited foster care to permanency (reunification, guardianship, living with other relatives, or adoption) within 12 months of removal. In the FY 2018 entry cohort, 47% of children under age six, 22% of children ages six to 11, and 31% of children ages 12 and older achieved permanency within 12 months.

Among the 469 Rhode Island children who achieved permanency within 12 months, 83% lived in one out-of-home placement, 11% lived in two placements, and 6% had three or more placements.

**Reunification, Entry Cohort FY 2018**

Among the 469 Rhode Island children who achieved permanency within 12 months, 89% achieved permanency through reunification with their family of origin within 12 months of entering out-of-home placement.

Poverty, parental mental health issues, substance use, and domestic violence are leading contributors to neglect. Achieving successful reunification requires access to substance abuse and mental health treatment, as well as interventions designed to improve the economic status of families.
Extending Foster Care to Age 21

Youth who exit foster care to adulthood without permanency through adoption, guardianship, or reunification are considered to have "aged out" of foster care. It is crucial that youth continue to receive supports to achieve permanency, including help locating relatives, ongoing visits with family, youth voice in permanency planning, and supports for caregivers.²⁷,²⁸

In 2018, Rhode Island established the Voluntary Extension of Care (VEC) program, allowing youth in foster care to voluntarily extend their support services until age 21. The goal of the VEC program, administered through the Youth Development Services (YDS) division, is to support youth in transitioning to independence by providing an opportunity to begin making life decisions about housing, education, employment, and social activities while providing support for decision-making and when challenges arise.²⁹

As of October 31, 2019, of the 184 young people assigned to the YDS, 42% (78) had approved court petitions securing enrollment in the VEC program.³⁰

As the VEC program is implemented, it is important that Rhode Island continues to track and publicly report the number of youth eligible for VEC, the number who enroll, and their educational, employment, and housing outcomes.

References


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