

## Relative permanency services: Reducing time in foster care

In response to the increase in foster care placements with relatives in recent years, and with a goal of reducing the amount of time children spend in temporary foster care, the Minnesota Department of Human Services has expanded efforts to engage, support, and work with relatives and kin of children under state or Tribal guardianship. Contracted agencies assist with home study services for identified relatives and kin, including outreach to assist in the licensing application process. If a child is placed in a relative's home, contracted agencies provide placement services until reunification or finalization. Relative concurrent permanency planning focuses on children who enter foster care where caseworkers vigorously pursue family reunification while also developing alternative permanency plans if safe reunification is not achievable within legal timelines. By planning concurrently early on, rather than sequentially, temporary foster care placements can be shortened, and children and youth can thrive in safe, stable, permanent families.

### Children need stability

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Because all children need stable, loving, permanent families for healthy growth and development, the number of children requiring out-of-home care and the number of months children spend in care are important measures. On any given day, approximately 6,750 children and youth are in foster care in Minnesota. In most cases, the uncertainty and unpredictability of lengthy foster care placements do not promote children's healthy growth and development.

### Relative concurrent permanency planning requires collaboration

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Relative concurrent permanency planning requires child welfare agencies, community resources and the court system to work together with children's birth parents, extended families, foster parents and children, when appropriate, from the beginning of a foster care placement. In a relative concurrent permanency plan, everyone involved works with the birth parents toward reunification, while also securing a commitment from foster parents that they are willing to make a permanent commitment to children through adoption or transfer of permanent legal and physical custody, if reunification with birth parents is not possible. Together, everyone works toward:

- Achieving safety, timely permanency and well-being goals for children
- Reducing the number of moves and length of stay for children in foster care
- Minimizing the negative emotional impact of separation and loss on children
- Supporting continuity in children's family, culture, school and community relationships.

The department contracts with private child-placing agencies to provide relative concurrent permanency planning services for children under state guardianship or Tribal jurisdiction or in out-of-home care. If requested by a county or Tribal child welfare agency, these private agencies are available to provide services for children in foster care and their families and kin who care for them by:

- Educating prospective parents about concurrent planning, reunification and adoption
- Supporting and engaging relatives and kin through outreach
- Completing and updating home studies
- Providing placement support for children in relative and kin foster homes.

## **Timely permanency requires best practices**

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Relative concurrent permanency planning involves using family engagement, relative searches, targeted case practice and legal strategies to achieve timely permanency. Practices in Minnesota include:

- Encouraging frequent parent-child visits from the moment children are placed in foster care
- Providing intensive services for birth parents, focusing on parental ability and willingness to make changes, and giving family reunification every chance to work within clear timelines
- Informing birth parents early on about the importance of their involvement and actions in planning for the return of their children, and disclosure about the legal consequences if they do not prepare for children to return to their care in a safe, timely way
- Identifying absent birth parents and extended family members and kin early on, involving them in case planning and visitation with children
- Encouraging all family members and foster parents to work as collaborators, not adversaries, as they develop and implement a timely permanency plan
- Convening Family Group Decision Making meetings, which bring families together with the support of professionals and community resources to plan for the safety, permanency and well-being of children
- Recruiting, training and retaining relative and nonrelative foster families.

## **Children's Justice Initiative supports permanency planning**

The department and the Minnesota Supreme Court are partners in the statewide Children's Justice Initiative. This initiative has several objectives that reinforce relative concurrent permanency planning, including:

- Providing training and ongoing technical assistance regarding permanency laws and relative concurrent permanency planning best practices
- Improving the process of juvenile foster care cases so courts make timely decisions about permanency
- Collecting and analyzing data related to timely permanency for children.



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