

OBJECTIVES AND ACTION STEPS TOWARD ACHIEVING PERMANENCY

The best interest of a child requires that he or she has a safe, permanent, secure, and nurturing home for optimal psychological and physical development. From the moment a child enters out of home care, potential paths to the achievement of permanency should be a caseworker's priority. The Illinois Department of Children and Family Services recognize four permanency goals: 1) return home, 2) adoption, 3) subsidized guardianship, and 4) independence for youth 16 and older. A permanency goal should be established and worked toward starting on the day that a child enters substitute care. In the event that the primary permanency goal cannot be achieved, an alternative plan should be established that is worked on concurrently. In order to establish and work toward permanency, a worker must engage the family to develop a plan to eradicate problems/issues so that the child can safely return home or to another permanent arrangement. Universal activities that contribute to securing a permanent living arrangement for the child include:

- Development and participation in family meetings, service planning, and concurrent planning;
- Identification of safe and appropriate foster homes that are willing to provide a permanent home for the child;
- Preparation for, attendance at, and participation in administrative case reviews, court hearings, and permanency hearings;
- Preparation for termination of Department services and aftercare.

Listed below are basic activities that are common to all child cases entering care regardless of the permanency goal:

- **Initial Family Meeting** – Occurs within 45 days of the temporary custody hearing. The purpose of the initial family meeting is to share information among all participants, review the initial and comprehensive assessments, develop the initial service plan, determine the services that need to be put in place, and discuss the permanency goal.
- **Comprehensive Assessment** – A thorough assessment that is completed as described in DCFS Rule 315.100.
- **Diligent Search** - The worker must make reasonable efforts to ensure that both parents are aware of their child's placement and are given genuine opportunities to achieve reunification. Through this search, extended family or other placement resources may be identified.
- **Initial Service Planning**- A case service plan must be developed 30 days after the temporary custody hearing. This case review is done with the family and approved by the worker's supervisor. The service plan is a dynamic document that changes as information is learned about the child and family and the child and family progress through services. The plan should consist of concrete services that will be offered to the child and family. Goals should be identified for addressing minimum parenting standards. Services should be put in place to ensure the child's safety and expeditiously move toward a permanent living arrangement.
- **Permanency Goal Selection**- Although the initial permanency goal for almost all children entering care is return home, it is important to conduct concurrent planning. In the event that reunification is ruled out as a viable option, concurrent planning will help the child expeditiously move to an alternative permanent living arrangement.

EXAMPLES OF OBJECTIVES FOR PERMANENCY GOALS

Once information has been obtained about the child and family, it is important to establish a viable permanency goal. The worker should immediately begin to work toward this goal. Every permanency goal can be broken into objectives and action steps. The objectives are the goals that must be established to meet the stated permanency goal. The action steps are concrete tasks that must be completed to achieve the objectives.

Listed below is a list of permanency goals and some of the common objectives that must be met in order to achieve the goal. This is not an exhaustive list and the objectives stated are not linear. All cases are unique and therefore require the development of objectives that are specific to their needs and issues. Each child's situation should be examined on an individual basis in order to establish appropriate objectives and action steps.

I. **RETURN HOME** - First, and preferred of the permanency options

A. Visitation – This is the cornerstone activity used to ensure that family relationships are maintained and strengthened. Without consistent visitation, return home is unlikely. Recommendations for changes in visitation are critical decisions, requiring supervisory oversight. The categories for visitation are listed below: *(Moving from one category to another requires court approval.)*

- 1. Supervised Visits.** Supervised visits provide workers with an opportunity to assess parents' consistency as well as the safety and well-being of the children in the presence of their parents. The worker has an opportunity to assess family relationships and determine parental strengths as well as areas that need to be improved. The worker also has the opportunity to model appropriate interactions and bonding activities with the child.
- 2. Unsupervised Day Visits.** Once a determination of safety, well-being and consistency are established, unsupervised visits are granted. Unsupervised visits offer the family an opportunity to spend time together in private. Parents have a heightened level of responsibility in the care of their children.
- 3. Unsupervised Overnight Visits.** When parents have consistently shown the ability to care for their children, unsupervised overnight visits are often granted. These visits are usually done when a child is approaching return home. These visits are monitored through contact with the child and parent before and after the visit, discussion with the foster parent on the child's reactions after the visit, and unannounced visits to the parent's home during a scheduled visit.

As visitation progresses, all parties (ie. worker, parent, GAL, public defender, supervisor, therapist) are involved in the recommendation and assessment of the progress of the family toward reunification. The level of the visitation and the length of time at each level depend largely on the parents' ability to demonstrate that they can keep the child safe, that they have made reasonable progress toward correcting the conditions that brought the child into care, and that they can adhere to all orders related to visitation.

B. Compliance with Services Specified in the Service Plan- In addition to visitation, a parent's compliance with services recommended in the service plan is a fundamental aspect of return home. It is essential for the staff involved with the family to identify the reasons the child(ren) was brought into the system and the areas that need to be corrected to ensure the child's safety in the home. The

family should be involved with determining these services or at a minimum be fully informed of the requests that are being asked of them in order to have their child(ren) returned home. The worker must identify specific services and the plan to obtain these services. The area of need that is being addressed should be listed as the objective. The specific services to address these needs should be listed as the action steps.

- C. **Fitness** – In parts of Illinois, the Judge may have to declare the parent's ability to meet minimum parenting standards.

II. Adoption - Adoption is considered the most secure option for children when return home is not feasible. Although this option is often pursued concurrently with return home, work toward this goal usually begins when the parents have shown little or no interest in correcting the conditions that lead to the removal of their child.

- A. **Prescreening.** This step is taken to determine if a change in goal to adoption is appropriate. This process will review services that have been offered, attempts to locate or involve parents, service outcomes, and the putative father registry (Cook County only). The prescreening is a paper review of the facts by the court to determine whether everything is in order to proceed with Legal Screening.
- B. **Legal Screening.** This is an official screening of a case prepared for adoption. It is the worker's responsibility to answer questions about the history and chronology of events in the case. Termination of parental rights may be pursued once the case passes legal screening.
- C. **Termination of Parental Rights.** In order for a child to be adopted, parental rights must be terminated. If a parent voluntarily surrenders their rights, this can be done at any time. If the court terminates parental rights, the case must first go through legal screening.
 - 1. **Specific Consent.** The parent specifically states who they want to adopt their child. If the adoption petition has not been filed within one year of the parent signing the specific consent, the parent can go to court and file a motion to have it rendered invalid. If the parent does not do this in court, it will remain a specific consent.
 - 2. **Parental Surrender of Rights.** In many circumstances the biological or legal parent may decide to voluntarily surrender their rights but they do not identify a specific person as the adoptive parent.
 - 3. **Court Termination of Parental Rights.** The court determines that the parent is not able to adequately care for his/her child and terminates parental rights, freeing the child for adoption.
- D. **Identification of an Adoptive Family**
 - 1. **Consideration of the Current Caregiver.** Worker explores the interest of current caregiver. The exploration should begin at time of placement, if appropriate, or as the return home goal begins to become doubtful. All resources, including extended family, should be carefully considered. If the caregiver does not intend to adopt, they should sign the 1443 form indicating such.
 - 2. **Adoption Listing.** If no adoptive resource is found through examination of resources connected to the family or at the agency, the child should be listed with AICI and national listing services. The child and current foster family should be informed of this listing and prepped on meeting potential adoptive families.

3. **Child Input.** The concerns and wishes of children should be heard and respected at every age. Children 12 years and older should be asked if they would consent in writing to being adoption.
 4. **Full Disclosure.** Once a potential adoptive placement has been identified, a meeting should occur with all parties involved with the care of the child and the prospective adoptive parents. The adoptive parents should be provided with full disclosure of all the child's needs and the services that need to be put in place in order to ensure a successful placement.
 5. **Adoptive Family Assessment.** A full assessment of the adoptive home must be completed that recommends the family as an adoptive resource.
 6. **Preparation of Child and Adoptive Family.** The child, based on age appropriateness, must be informed of the potential adoption and be given information about the prospective adoptive parents in advance of meeting them. If the child is not currently living in the adoptive parent's home, visits should be conducted prior to the child moving into the home. These visits should occur after the prospective adoptive parents have expressed a strong desire to adopt the child.
- E. Completion of the Adoption Subsidy.** All children one year and older are eligible for a subsidy in Illinois. The subsidy requires that specific physical, emotional and/or mental disabilities are identified in the subsidy so that services can be included in the subsidy.
1. **Child Assessment.** A complete assessment of the child must be conducted so that all of the service needs are identified. These needs will be disclosed with the prospective adoptive parents and clearly stated in the subsidy packet.
 2. **Child Summary.** A child summary must be completed for the subsidy that provides a detailed description of the child's special needs and the reasons that brought him/her into care. It is essential to include all current or anticipated needs in the subsidy.
 3. **Adoption Subsidy Packet Approval.** This packet must be explained to the prospective adoptive parents. Once the adoptive parents have signed the subsidy, it must be approved by DCFS.
- F. Court Approval.**
1. **Selection of Attorney/Court Appearance** – The family selects an attorney and proceeds to legal processes. The Department has a list of attorneys who have completed the training and will accept the DCFS payment.
 2. **Interim Order-** The child and adoptive parents must attend family court to get this interim order. The adoption is not finalized until the court gives the final order.
 3. **Final Order-** The final order solidifies the adoption and closes the case from DCFS. The adoptive parents are sent court documents along with a new birth certificate.
- G. Life Book Completion-** Every child should be given a life book. This book can be created in cooperation with the foster parent, residential staff, and/or the biological parent. The life book should provide information about the child's family and placements where he/she has lived. The life book should also document major life events for the child.
- H. Post Adoption/Guardianship Services** – Families who adopt should be made aware of the services that can be accessed through the post adoption/guardianship unit. DCFS provides a handbook on post adoption/guardianship services. This book should be given to the adoptive parents for future reference.

- I. **Search Issues** – Families and children should be made aware of search options available in the event that the child wants to locate his/her biological parents in the future.

III. SUBSIDIZED GUARDIANSHIP Pursued when return home and adoption have been ruled-out, subsidized guardianship is an excellent permanency alternative for older children and for relatives who don't want to alter existing family relationships. Subsidized Guardianship does not require termination of parental rights and is therefore a permanency alternative that preserves existing family dynamics.

A. Determination of Eligibility

- 1. **One year in custody of the State**
- 2. **One year with potential guardian**
- 3. **DCFS Approval that the child is not in the Control Group**
- 4. **Clinical appropriateness of placement**

B. Legal Screening. This is an official screening of a case prepared for subsidized guardianship. It is the worker's responsibility to answer questions about the history and chronology of events in the case. This step ensures that the child is legally appropriate for subsidized guardianship.

C. Preparation of Family for Transfer of Guardianship – The family must be prepared to take on full responsibility of the child without support from the agency. The child's needs are discussed and services are put in place to meet these needs.

D. Completion of the Subsidy. All children one year and older are eligible for a subsidy in Illinois. The subsidy requires that specific needs and services of the child be identified so that they can be accounted for in the subsidy.

- 1. **Child Assessment.** A complete assessment of the child must be conducted so that all of the service needs are identified. These needs will be disclosed with the prospective guardians and clearly stated in the subsidy packet.
- 2. **Child Summary.** A child summary must be completed for the subsidy that provides a detailed description of the child's special needs and the reasons that brought him/her into care. It is essential to include all current or anticipated needs in the subsidy.
- 3. **Subsidy Packet Approval.** This packet must be explained to the prospective guardians. Once the prospective guardian has signed the subsidy, it must be approved by DCFS.

E. Transfer of Guardianship – Court proceeding transferring guardianship from the Department to the Individual.

F. Post Adoption/Guardianship Services – Families who obtain guardianship should be made aware of the services that can be accessed through the post adoption/guardianship unit.

IV. INDEPENDENCE FOR YOUTH 16 AND OLDER - This option should be chosen carefully and only after all attempts have been exhausted to achieve reunification, adoption, or guardianship. When these permanency goals have been ruled out, Independence should be used to assure that the youth has a clear plan that includes education, self-care skills, work, housing, and a money management plan. It is also

important to ensure that the youth has relationships established with adults who are willing to provide on-going social support.

A. Determine Eligibility (need more eligibility)

1. Youth is 16 years of Age
2. Rule Out Return Home, Adoption, and Subsidized Guardianship

B. Assessment of Youth Readiness for Independence – Including, but not limited to the Daniel Memorial Assessment.

C. Education or other Job Preparation – Including the child, school personnel, counselors, and caregivers, develop an academic or vocational path. The plan might include high school graduation, GED, Job Corps, Americorp, College, Vocational School or Employment.

D. Money Management – Demonstration of sound money management. Begin a savings plan from summer jobs or part time employment.

E. Secure Housing – Discussions should take place with the caregiver and the youth on all living arrangement options, including living with the current caregiver with independent services. ILO living arrangements require approval from DCFS through a specified review process. The steps for this process are listed below:

1. **Identify an appropriate ILO provider.** An ILO provider that matches the child's needs and has an opening must be identified and invited to participate in the staffing.
2. **Schedule staffing.** A staffing must be held with the youth, ILO provider and other involved parties.
3. **Obtain DCFS approval.** The DCFS Regional Clinical Manager must approve the ILO placement before the child can be moved.