



IN SEARCH OF A FOREVER HOME: RAISING THE STANDARDS FOR OUR KIDS

CREATING PERMANENCY IN FOSTER CARE

Starting at age 4, a little girl from Minnesota was moved back and forth between foster care and her mother. She was 10 when her mother gave up her parental rights. In three homes, she said she was told she would be adopted, only to have those hopes dashed. Since leaving her first foster home, she went back into the foster care system and estimates she lived in at least eight homes and treatment facilities in four years. She now lives in a transitional housing facility in St. Paul, where she wonders what life might have been like if she had a stable family.¹³

-A true story of one of the thousands of foster children in Minnesota.

The Problem

There are currently 12,167 children in foster care in Minnesota and 32% experienced multiple placements in 2014.⁸ Many children are entering foster care due to concerns of child behavior, parental chemical use, or allegations of maltreatment. After an often unexpected separation from their family, children are then expected to adapt to a new foster family with a new set of family norms and rules.³ Many children are moved between multiple foster homes, or are returned to their caregivers only to be placed back in foster care at a later time.

In the wake of media reports revealing stories of child mortality due to abuse and neglect, Governor Dayton issued an executive order for a Task Force to examine pre-court protections protocols, screening, family assessment, resources to provide adequate services, and supervisory oversight to the child protection system. What was left out of the executive order was what happens to children following pre-court protection and long-term impacts of children within Minnesota's child welfare system.⁹

The policy recommendations are not endorsed by Minnesota State University, Mankato.

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Governor's Task Force on the Protection of Children

"While the Governor's Executive Order directed the Task Force to focus on the pre-court side of child protection, we cannot close our eyes to the needs of children who are removed from their homes and placed in care."⁹

"...best practice protocols for removing children from their home must be developed in a manner that proactively attends to and reduces the child's trauma of separation from persons, places and things that are important to them."⁹

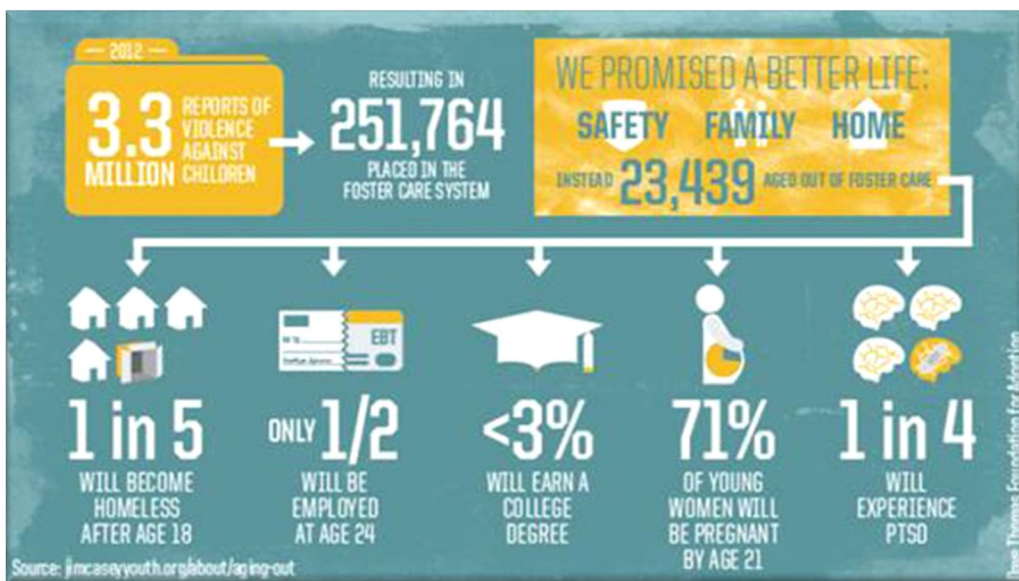
Impact of Placement Instability

When children experience multiple placements and a lack of stability, they are less likely to show academic achievement, have poorer socioemotional health, and have a more difficult time developing secure attachments.¹⁵ In addition, children who experience multiple foster care placements are more likely to experience unemployment, experience homelessness, and be involved with the criminal justice system.³

The emotional consequences of multiple placements can be harmful at any age, and when children are prematurely returned to their biological parents this often results in the child being returned to foster care. Separations from the primary caregiver between 6 months and 3 years of age are more likely to end in emotional disturbances, especially if prompted by family discord and disruption.^{3, 15} Children need continuity with their primary attachment caregiver and a sense of permanence that is accomplished when placements are stable.³

A negative cycle of exposure to multiple caregivers may result in the development of an insecure attachment with long-term consequences, stemming into adulthood. Children with attachment disorders and the inability to trust and love often have lifelong emotional challenges.¹⁵

The Cost of Doing Nothing



This figure depicts the latest national statistics from the Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System data.

Source: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Administration on Children, Youth and Families, Children's Bureau. (2015). *The Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System report, 2015*.

The goal of foster care is for children to find permanency with families. When children are unable to be safely reunited with families or adopted, they have a higher probability of facing long-term impacts, such as homelessness, unemployment, lower educational attainment, young parenthood, and mental health concerns, as illustrated above.¹⁸ However, these costs go beyond the individual.

As the old saying goes, it takes a village to raise a child. When a child experiences multiple out-of-home placements, the village comes in the form of law enforcement, social workers, county attorneys, medical personnel, educators, etc. This involvement leads to greater costs due to increased hospitalizations, protective holds, court hearings, legal fees, more restrictive settings, etc.¹⁴ When a child experiences multiple placements, the costs associated with placing a child reoccur or are exacerbated.¹⁶

Current Foster Care Process

Minnesota child welfare services, programs, and foster care are administered by county personnel and overseen by the Department of Human Services in Minnesota. This differs from centralized systems utilized in thirty-nine other states, including the District of Columbia.¹¹ In Minnesota, when an out-of-home placement is required to ensure the safety of the child, the county or a private agency contracted with the county will place the child in a family foster home.^{4,6} In accordance with Minnesota Statute, the child placing agency will seek placement with a relative to the child by blood, marriage, or adoption, or with someone who is an important friend whom the child has resided or had significant contact with. If a relative or a significant family friend is unable to be established for placement, the child placing agency will seek placement with family foster homes to meet the child's individualized needs.² Prior to placement, the child placing agency is required to ensure the family foster home has met requirements for licensing. To become a licensed foster care provider in Minnesota, you must complete several steps prior to the placement of a child.

1 Complete an application and fact sheet

2 Initiate a background study

3 Open home for visit and study

4 Receive foster care license

5 Participate in training

Foster Care Training Requirements

- ◆ A six-hour orientation¹
- ◆ A two hour training regarding mental health
 - ◇ Covering the causes, symptoms and key warning signs of mental health disorders, cultural considerations, and effective approaches for responding to child's behaviors.¹
- ◆ A three hour training to safely transport children under the age of nine.¹
- ◆ Nonrelative foster parents are required to complete the six-hour orientation prior to the placement of a child in their residence, while relative foster parents have thirty days from placement of child to complete the required training.⁷

While foster parents are licensed, they are required to complete:

- ◆ A minimum of twelve hours of training per year and are able to choose from 26 training areas.⁷

Barriers to Achieving Placement Stability

- ◆ Forty percent of families leave foster parenting because of inadequate agency support.¹⁷
- ◆ Children are placed in emergency placements as initial or temporary placement after disruptions occur.
- ◆ There is a lack of sufficient services for foster parents to prevent placement disruptions.
- ◆ Placement decisions are often made based on what is available rather than what is best for a child.⁵
- ◆ There is a scarcity of appropriate placement options for children with developmental disabilities or behavioral problems.¹⁰
- ◆ There is a shortage of culturally-diverse foster homes.⁵

Recommendations

Governor Dayton's Task Force aimed to extinguish child mortality due to abuse and neglect and improve investigative procedures to provide safety and well-being to children. Through the executive order, the Department of Human Services (DHS) has taken steps to improve screening procedures, differential response, racial equity and disparity reduction, training, oversight, transparency, and adequacy of resources.⁹ Increased training has been provided to county personnel to improve competency of such matters; however, there is a lack of training for foster family homes providing the daily services to children. With the impacts on mental health due to trauma and multiple placements, it is imperative mental health training be increased for foster families providing a safe space for these children to ensure the child's long-term success. The Minnesota Legislature introduced H.F. 1412 / S.F. 2081, in the 2017-18 session. If enacted, provisions are aimed at improving the foster care system, including ensuring that placements are trauma-informed and family-centered.

Ways to Increase Permanency

1. Ask the Governor to reconvene the Task Force on the Protection of Children and form a workgroup to review the programs and policies supporting foster care placement stability.
2. Work with DHS and the legislature to enact policy changes that would increase training for foster parents to address the unique mental health concerns children experience in out-of-home placement.¹⁹ Share ideas about how to effectively recruit foster families and place children with the family of best fit.^{17,10}
3. Share ideas about how to effectively recruit foster families and place children with the family of best fit.^{17,10}

WHAT YOU CAN DO

SUPPORT: Support policy changes promoting permanency in foster care.

ADVOCATE: Talk to your friends, family, colleagues, and community members about the importance of the long-term well-being of children in foster care.

CONTACT: Call the Governor and your state representatives asking them to support H.F. 1412 / S. F. 2081 and other foster care programs and policies supporting foster care placement stability, including enhanced foster parent training.



Copies of this brief can be accessed by calling the Department of Social Work at 507-389-6504 or going to: <http://sbs.mnsu.edu/socialwork/policybriefs.html>

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