



Not too late: Effects of a diligent recruitment program for hard to place youth



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ABSTRACT

Among child welfare professionals there is agreement on the negative consequences for youth who age out of foster care without an attachment to a caring adult. There is a particularly challenging sub-population of youth in foster care at highest risk for this scenario: special-needs youth who reside in a congregate care setting and who have been freed for adoption. This paper details the “Parent for Every Child” initiative (PFEC), a federally funded diligent recruitment program which targeted special needs youth who resided in congregate care settings and who had been freed for adoption. PFEC had two primary objectives: 1) identify effective recruitment strategies for matching caring adults with youth in need of permanence and (2) improve permanency outcomes for youth in the target population, inclusive of both legal and relational permanence. The methods used for studying the initiative are described as well as the study’s randomly assigned participants, inclusive of both intervention and control groups. Findings related to the initiative’s main goals are presented with respect to: the various recruitment strategies employed by project staff and staff working in the control condition; the extent to which those efforts yielded “matches” between youth in need and potential resource families; and, the extent to which youth enrolled in the PFEC project had better permanency outcomes compared to youth in the control group. The limitations of the study are discussed as well as promising directions for future research in this area.

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1. Introduction

Youth who age out of foster care are at heightened risk of various negative outcomes, such as unemployment, homelessness, lower education levels and higher levels of criminal justice involvement (Courtney, Dworsky, Lee, & Raap, 2009; McMillen & Tucker, 1999; Osgood, Foster, & Courtney, 2010). Research suggests that youth with special needs, such as pronounced physical, mental or educational deficits, will likely encounter even more pronounced struggles as they transition to adulthood (Cameto, 2005; Lehman, Hewitt, Bullis, Rinkin, & Castellanos, 2002).

There is a particularly challenging sub-population of youth in foster care at highest risk for this scenario: youth who are, at once, described as having special-needs (serious behavioral issues, disabilities, or other diagnosed conditions that require special care), who reside in a congregate care setting, and who have been freed for adoption.

Indeed, data indicate that youth aging out of foster care often come from congregate care facilities (Osgood, Foster, Flanagan, & Gretchen, 2005). Of the nearly 400,000 youth in foster care in the US at the end

of fiscal year 2012, about 15% were residing in a congregate care setting (US Department of Health and Human Services, 2012). Findings from previous research suggest that child welfare workers may expend less effort recruiting potential adoptive resources for particular subsets of children, such as youth with disabilities and older youth; this is due, in part, to workers’ concerns around the actual adoptability of these youth (Avery, 2000).

Further, research has suggested a disconnect between the characteristics of children that available foster families are looking to adopt (White, younger children) and the pool of foster children in need of an adoptive family (older children of color, with a long history of placement, often with disabilities) (Hollingsworth, 1998). However, some research suggests there is an untapped pool of families who may be willing to care for older youth with special needs and that targeted recruitment efforts are needed to identify them (Hollingsworth, 1998; Helm, Peltier, & Scovotti, 2006; Cox, Orme, & Rhodes, 2003). Still, relatively little is known about the most successful strategies for boosting the recruitment and retention of foster parents who would be willing to care for harder-to-place youth (Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption, 2007; Helm et al., 2006).

In recent years the conversation about permanency has expanded, largely in response to findings that a supportive relationship with a caring adult – even absent legal adoption – positively influences both the

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short and long-term well-being of youth (Beam, Chen, & Greenberger, 2002; Samuels, 2008). “Relational permanency,” as it is known, involves the establishment of a lifelong connection to a caring adult, without legal certification. The value of helping youth connect to a committed adult has growing practice and policy relevance, in light of recent findings that the relationship itself – regardless of its legal standing – may be one factor that helps reduce the risk of poor outcomes for aging-out youth (Cushing, Samuels, & Kerman, 2014).

2. Parent for every child: overview

A Parent for Every Child (PFEC) was a federally funded diligent recruitment program that targeted special needs youth who resided in congregate care settings and who had been freed for adoption. In this context, the term “special needs” is meant to encompass youth who have physical, emotional and/or behavioral disabilities that require a higher level of care, such as what would be offered in a congregate care setting. PFEC set out to do two things for this group: 1) identify effective recruitment strategies for matching caring adults with youth in need of permanence and (2) improve permanency outcomes for youth in the target population, inclusive of both legal and relational permanence. Relational permanence was operationalized through the establishment of what is referred to as either a “commitment contract” or “permanency pact.” These are documents that, while not legally binding, serve as testimony to the committed relationship that has developed between a young person and a caring adult. Commitment contracts and permanency pacts were not designed specifically for the purpose of the PFEC initiative; rather, they are tools that had been available to caseworkers in New York State for several years at the time the PFEC initiative launched.

The theory of change underlying PFEC held that through diligent recruitment efforts a pool of eligible families would be established, from which caring adults could be connected to youth in need of permanence. The program also emphasized individualized casework, with a focus on helping youth and families develop sustainable relationships. With respect to diligent recruitment, PFEC caseworkers used a variety of strategies, the choice of which was based on an individualized assessment of the youth:

Family search and engagement: Caseworkers work to locate family members (or non-family members who have some connection to the child) to solicit their interest in establishing a more permanent connection to the child. Note that by design, this method was given specific emphasis by PFEC caseworkers.

Adoption Chronicles videos: Caseworkers post personalized videos of each child on the Adoption Chronicles website.

Internet photo listings: Caseworkers place children's pictures on a website in order to provide information to the public about the youth's availability for adoption and their various needs.

Targeted recruitment: Caseworkers reach out to individuals who have experience with special needs youth (e.g., nurses, social workers, parents of other special needs youth).

Table 1
Sample sizes, by cohort assignment.

	Intervention	Control	Total
Cohort 1: November 2009	40	39	79
Cohort 2: November 2010	13	12	25
Cohort 3: April 2011	14	12	26
Cohort 4: October 2011	21	26	47
Total	88	89	177

Table 2
Characteristics of Youth at Enrollment in PFEC, by Group Assignment.

	Intervention		Control	
	Count	Percent	Count	Percent
Age				
Under 9 years	0	0%	1	1%
9–12 years	4	5%	5	6%
13–15 years	15	17%	9	10%
16–18 years	39	44%	44	49%
Over 18	30	34%	30	34%
Total	88	100%	89	100%
Race				
African American	48	55%	42	47%
White	23	26%	20	22%
Hispanic	13	15%	22	25%
Other	4	4%	5	5%
Total	88	100%	89	100%
Gender				
Male	66	75%	54	61%
Female	22	25%	35	39%
Total	88	100%	89	100%
System with physical care				
Child welfare	37	42%	42	47%
Mental health	32	37%	30	34%
Developmental disabilities	16	18%	14	16%
Juvenile justice	3	3%	3	3%
Total	88	100%	89	100%
Type of setting				
Congregate care (i.e.: group home/residence)	52	59%	60	67%
Institutional setting	22	25%	16	18%
Family setting	9	10%	6	7%
Other (i.e.: hospital, runaway, detention)	5	6%	7	8%
Total	88	100%	89	100%
Years freed for adoption				
0–2 years	12	14%	11	12%
3–5 years	28	33%	30	34%
6–10 years	34	38%	32	36%
11–14 years	12	13%	14	16%
15–17 years	2	2%	2	2%
Total	88	100%	89	100%
Years in care				
0–3 years	7	8%	3	3%
4–6 years	17	19%	21	24%
7–9 years	27	31%	18	20%
10–14 years	22	25%	28	31%
15–17 years	9	10%	13	15%
More than 17 years	6	7%	6	7%
Total	88	100%	89	100%
Permanency planning goal				
Adoption	26	29%	24	27%
Adult residential care	22	25%	20	23%
Independent living/another planned living arrangement (APLA)	39	45%	44	49%
Discharge to relative/guardian	1	1%	1	1%
Total	88	100%	89	100%

Table 3
Youth participation in recruitment activities, by group assignment.

	Intervention		Control	
	Count (n = 88)	Percent (100%)	Count (n = 89)	Percent (100%)
Internet photo listing	32	36%	31	35%
Family search and engagement	29	33%	27	30%
Record mining ^a	39	44%	–	–
Targeted recruitment	28	31%	9	10%
Adoption chronicles	26	29%	2	2%
General recruitment	25	28%	14	16%
Adoption/permanency panels	16	18%	23	26%
Media resources	9	10%	4	4%
Adoption exchange	6	7%	5	6%
Family finding	9	10%	2	2%

^a Reviewing the case record for family members and/or other potential resources was a preliminary step in family search efforts. The extent to which this work was done on behalf of youth in the control group was not asked, and as such, is unknown.

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