



# FOSTERING SUCCESSFUL YOUTH TRANSITIONS IN PENNSYLVANIA

Laying the Groundwork for Change  
through Law and Policy Reform

Juvenile Law Center

Fighting for the rights  
and well-being of youth



# FOSTERING SUCCESSFUL YOUTH TRANSITIONS IN PENNSYLVANIA

## Laying the Groundwork for Change through Law and Policy Reform

This FAQ is part of a series of resources on fostering successful transitions, made in collaboration with Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children. Visit [www.jlc.org/resources](http://www.jlc.org/resources) for related resources in this series.

Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children (PPC) is a strong, effective and trusted voice to improve the health, education and well-being of children and youth in the commonwealth. Since 1992 its public policy victories have helped countless children learn, thrive and succeed, regardless of circumstances. PPC is statewide, independent, non-partisan and non-profit. Learn more at [papartnerships.org](http://papartnerships.org).

Juvenile Law Center advocates for rights, dignity, equity and opportunity for youth in the child welfare and justice systems. We strive to ensure that laws, policies, and practices affecting youth advance racial and economic equity and are rooted in research, consistent with children's unique developmental characteristics, and reflective of international human rights values. For more information about Juvenile Law Center's work, visit [www.jlc.org](http://www.jlc.org).

© 2019 All rights reserved. Part or all of this publication may be reproduced if credited to Juvenile Law Center and Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children. Download at [www.jlc.org](http://www.jlc.org).

Cover Image: [Pennsylvania State Capitol, Harrisburg, Pennsylvania](https://www.flickr.com/photos/michael180/10000000000/) by User:Michael180, CC 2.5.

## **WHAT DOES “AGING OUT” MEAN?**

Aging out refers to the time when a young adult leaves the child welfare system without being returned home or being placed with family through adoption or guardianship. When a youth ages out they are being discharged on their own.

## **HOW DOES AGING OUT WITHOUT FINDING PERMANENCY IMPACT ADULT OUTCOMES? WHY IS THAT A PROBLEM?**

Youth need the support of family, community, resources, and opportunities to grow into thriving and successful adults. Youth receive significant emotional and financial support from family as they enter adulthood, and most do not make this transition until their mid-twenties.

Family support helps youth set and meet their goals, and provides a safety net when they face challenges. Family provides guidance, support, nurture, and unconditional love. It also provides connections to resources and people that are valuable to young adults who are finding their way in the world.

When youth age out on their own, they often do not have connections to people and resources to be successful—putting them at high risk for poor outcomes like homelessness, reliance on public benefits, and entering the criminal justice system. Aging out creates substantial barriers to success for young people and results in costly outcomes for society.

## **WHAT IS PERMANENCY PLANNING? WHY IS IT IMPORTANT?**

Permanency means family or the establishment of nurturing, long-lasting family relationships that endure throughout an individual’s life time. Family is central to healthy child and adolescent development, and young people greatly rely on the moral and financial support of family as they transition into adulthood.

The goal of the child welfare system is to provide a child with permanency by returning them home or establishing a new family for the child. This obligation lasts until the child exits the system.

The hierarchy of permanency plans is:

- reunification,
- adoption,
- guardianship,
- placement with a relative, and
- another planned permanent living arrangement (APPLA).

# TRANSITION AGE YOUTH

in Pennsylvania

## THE FACTS

33% of PA's  
foster youth are  
transition age  
youth



47% of transition age  
youth are in group  
homes or institutions

49% age out of care,  
instead of being  
connected to family

25% of transition age youth  
have been in 2+ placements  
while in care

42% of have been  
in 3+ placements



## BY AGE 21...



37% experience  
homelessness or  
unstable housing

Just 44% of  
transition age  
youth have full  
or part-time  
employment



Only 75% earn a  
GED or high  
school diploma,  
compared to 92%  
of their peers

**WE HAVE THE TOOLS TO  
CHANGE THE STORY FOR  
TRANSITION AGE YOUTH.**

APPLA stands for “Another Planned Permanent Living Arrangement.” It is the least preferred permanency plan. APPLA has been overused for older youth and usually means youth will age out without achieving permanency.

Recent changes in federal and state law should greatly reduce the use of APPLA and increase chances for permanency. However, positive results are yet to be seen, and APPLA remains a short hand for aging out. 42 Pa. C.S.A. 6351 (f.1)(5).

Permanency Planning begins as soon as a child enters the foster care system and is the process by which services and supports are selected and provided to help re-establish family connections or establish new ones. Children find permanency through the establishment of strong, long-lasting relationships with people who play the role of parents. Usually these relationships are formalized through law, such as adoption or guardianship.

Permanency is also enhanced by extended family and a strong support network that can be provided by mentors, kin, and even peers. This is sometimes referred to as “relational permanency.”

## **WHAT IS TRANSITION TO ADULTHOOD PLANNING? WHY IS IT IMPORTANT?**

Transition to adulthood planning is the planning for service delivery and supports that will aid youth in acquiring the skills and competencies to prepare them for adulthood. This can include:

- providing support around education and higher education planning;
- life skills instruction, support, and practice;
- budgeting and financial planning; and
- self care.

This planning should be driven by the youth, involve real world practice, and include developing goals and monitoring outcomes.

Transition to adulthood planning must begin at age 14—at the latest—and should continue throughout the life of the case. 42 Pa. C.S.A. 6351 (f)(8); Juvenile Court Rules 1608 (D)(k).

Transition Planning should also complement Permanency Planning. Like Permanency Planning, Transition Planning is important because it guides service delivery and helps establish accountability. The law requires that the youth have a high quality transition plan, that the court make findings that this plan exists, and that the youth is making progress to meet his or her goals. 42 Pa. C.S.A. 6351 (f)(8), (f)(8.2); Juvenile Court Rules 1631 (E)(2).

Before a young person leaves the child welfare system at age 18 or older, they must also have a transition plan that ensures their needs are met and that they are able to thrive as adults. Under Pennsylvania law, the court should not discharge a youth

without a transition/discharge plan that includes specifics in the following areas:

- housing,
- income,
- education and training goals,
- employment,
- health insurance and any continued health or behavioral health needs,
- vital documents, and
- proof of former foster care status.

## **HOW ARE PERMANENCY SERVICES PROVIDED IN PA? WHAT IS THE STATEWIDE ADOPTION AND PERMANENCY NETWORK (SWAN)?**

The purpose of the child welfare system is to return youth home or place them with family, and the law does require that reasonable efforts are made to finalize—or achieve—a permanency plan. However, the law does not mandate specific permanency services.

County child welfare agencies provide permanency services in many ways, and good casework is one of the most powerful supports for permanency. For example, most cases have the goal of reunification, and county agencies work hard to provide services to the youth and family to support reunification.

An important way Pennsylvania provides services to help children and youth achieve permanency is through [SWAN](#) and their contracted agencies throughout the state. The services provided include: child profile, child preparation, child-specific recruitment, family profile, child placement, adoption finalization, and post-permanency services. These services help find and support permanency resources, including kin, in addition to supporting youth so they can be open to and prepared for permanency.

Family finding is another example of a permanency service that is required annually under state law. Behavioral health services to help youth deal with loss and trauma so that they can prepare for permanency can also be considered permanency services.

Older youth are the least likely age group to be placed in family settings. Youth of color are the least likely of all youth to be placed in family settings.

Keeping Kids in Families: Trends in U.S. Foster Care Placement (Annie E. Casey Foundation 2019).



## ARE OLDER YOUTH RECEIVING PERMANENCY SERVICES?

Youth of all ages should receive permanency services, but it is not clear that older youth are receiving services with the same intensity as younger children. This puts them at a severe disadvantage for finding family. Older youth are eligible for SWAN services, but many are not receiving them.

For example, it was reported that of the youth who were age 16 or older and had a permanency plan of APPLA, only 7.3% received a child profile, 6.5% received child preparation, and 3.7% received child specific recruitment. [Report of the Recommendations of the APPLA Workgroup to the General Assembly 20](#) (PA Department of Human Services April 2016).

Feedback from youth reveals similar patterns indicating that finding family is not prioritized as youth get older. Why this occurs is not completely clear, but misconceptions that youth do not want permanency and decisions to focus solely on preparing youth for adulthood are partly responsible.

No matter the reason, this trend must change: youth **do** want permanency and need family, as well as skills, to make a successful transition to adulthood.

## WHAT DO YOUTH AND YOUNG ADULTS RECOMMEND TO IMPROVE THEIR CHANCES FOR PERMANENCY?

Youth want permanency. They need the system to respect their existing family ties and understand the impact of their experiences on their ability to trust and be ready to connect with caring adults.

[Youth Fostering Change](#), one of Juvenile Law Center's advocacy programs for youth with child welfare experience, recommend the following in their publication, *Tools for Success*:

1. **Communicate and explain the importance of permanency to youth in terms that make sense to them.** Youth cannot be invested in plans they do not understand and are not active participants in creating.
2. **Facilitate placement stability.** Multiple placements and being in placements where youth feel unsafe or unwelcome prevent youth from connecting with their community and developing lasting bonds.
3. **Cultivate youth's connections with kin, and take the family finding requirements seriously.** Youth care about and feel connected with their family, even if they cannot return home. Failing to acknowledge or cultivate these connections leave youth with too much to deal with on their own and may block opportunities for healing.

4. **Focus on relational and legal permanency.** Youth want relationships they can count on. Legal ties are important, but the strength and enduring nature of a lasting connection is paramount.
5. **Make sure youth have transition plans in place that connect them to services, resources, and people.** It's difficult for youth to focus on permanency when they are worried about their future or aging out. Poor Transition Planning can interfere with permanency, while excellent Transition Planning always includes Permanency Planning.

## WHAT CHANGES IN LAW AND POLICY WILL PROMOTE PERMANENCY FOR OLDER YOUTH?

While there are portions of existing law that offer powerful tools for achieving permanency for older youth, Pennsylvania lacks both specificity in its mandates and accountability in the delivery of services and outcomes. To prioritize achieving permanency and family for older youth, laws and policies must be clear about expectations, and there must be accountability.

We recommend five actions Pennsylvania can take to show that all youth deserve family:

### I. Increase the number of family and kin able to provide permanency and support to youth by creating more accountability in finding family.

- Amend the law and provide guidance to require that the child welfare agency explain family finding to youth and engage them throughout the process.
- Provide guidance to set standards for family finding to ensure that state-of-the-art technology is used and the highest standards of practice are set.

### II. Increase the capacity of caregivers and kin to provide lasting permanency by enhancing support to relatives, kin, and all permanency resources.

- Continue to invest state funds in a kinship navigator program and implement evidence-based programs so the state can maximize its use of federal funds.



- Invest state funds in providing kinship care subsidies to unlicensed kin.
- Re-enact provisions of Act 80 to provide adoption and guardianship subsidies until age 21 for youth who are adopted or enter guardianships at age 13 or older.
- Take the option under the Family First Prevention and Services Act to extend Chafee aftercare services to youth until age 23, and extend eligibility for the Education and Training Grant until age 26.
- Amend the state IV-E plan so that IV-E funds can be used to provide adoption subsidies to families until age 21 to youth who have disabilities or special needs. This option is permissible under 42 U.S.C.A. 673 (a)(4)(A).

**III. Ensure effective permanency services are provided to older youth by amending the law to require that agencies document and the court make findings as to the specific permanency services that are provided to older youth in the following areas:**

- Identifying permanency resources
- Preparing youth for permanency
- Strengthening identified supportive connections and permanency resources
- Maintaining and strengthening sibling connections

**IV. Provide system accountability and successful transitions to adulthood for older youth by amending the law to ensure that transition/discharge planning requirements are being followed and to prohibit the discharge of older youth from the child welfare system into homelessness.**

V. Ensure system accountability and successful transitions for older youth by amending the law to require the reporting of data related to permanency and older youth outcomes to the legislature, and impose consequences when outcomes do not reach established standards. Collection of data and outcomes should include the number of transition aged youth who leave the child welfare system and who:

- Have the permanency plan of APPLA
- Have achieved family-based permanency plans
- Have a high quality transition plan
- Have stable housing and income
- Have at least one supportive adult connection
- Have been enrolled in Medicaid as a former foster youth
- Have their vital documents