

THE Porch Light Project

Forever Family For Every Child



Maximizing “Fostering Connections” to Benefit Pennsylvania Youth

Winter 2012

Gary and Susan of Adams County have been foster parents to 14-year-old Michael since he was 12. Financial concerns have prevented them from providing a permanent home for Michael through adoption or legal guardianship.

“I’m disabled and my wife works hard to help us make ends meet,” Gary explained. “If we stay on as foster parents and Michael goes on to college, the state will allow him to stay in our home as a foster care child until age 21 and provide us continued resources to help with the costs of raising him. Were we to adopt him or become his legal guardian, the financial support we receive will end at age 18. It’s not fair to Michael or to us to adopt him or become his legal guardian if we can’t provide for him the way we can now.”

Gary and Susan have been foster parents for many years and have faced this circumstance in the past. They want to become Michael’s legal guardian and he would like them to do so. Michael feels so strongly that he recently wrote the court a letter asking for its help.

“Michael, like any child, wants a permanent family to call his own. That’s something we

would like to give him if we could afford to do so and we believe many other foster parents feel the same way,” Gary said.

Youth in foster care need the lifelong support of a permanent family — permanency — to guide them through the milestones and challenges of adulthood. Many adults remember calling their parents when they got their first job or needed someone to co-sign their first lease. For youth who fail to find a permanent home through adoption or guardianship, these basic emotional and financial supports often do not exist.

Unfortunately, although many youth want to join a permanent family, existing Pennsylvania public policy creates a financial disincentive for parents who want to create a permanent family through adoption or guardianship. While foster parents can receive a monthly stipend until a foster youth in their care turns 21, similar financial assistance for adoption or guardianship subsidy ends at 18. This funding disparity discourages foster parents and other caring adults from providing permanent homes to youth.

Pennsylvania can eliminate this financial disincentive and, in turn, increase the number of children who benefit from a permanent family. The commonwealth also can do more to increase support to youth in foster care, who are more likely than their peers to drop out of high school, experience homelessness, be arrested and battle mental health challenges such as depression and substance abuse.^{i, ii}

Pennsylvania has an unprecedented opportunity to increase the number of youth in permanent families and extend support to those still in foster care while saving millions of dollars in state and county resources. This opportunity is particularly historic given the bleak economic environment at the state and national levels.



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**Gary and Susan, Adams County,
foster parents to 14-year-old Michael**

AN UNPRECEDENTED OPPORTUNITY

The Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008 (Fostering Connections) provides federal funding for state strategies that help youth enter permanent families and/or receive additional support in foster care. Specifically, by providing states federal funding support, Fostering Connections encourages states to:

- Extend adoption and guardianship subsidies until age 21
- Expand eligibility criteria for youth who can remain in foster care until age 21
- Allow youth to re-enter foster care between ages 18 and 21

The Fostering Connections youth provisions must be implemented as a package rather than individually. Therefore, Pennsylvania cannot receive maximum federal reimbursement for extending foster care placement unless it also extends adoption and guardianship subsidies to age 21.

Incorporating these provisions will require state statutory and regulatory changes.

Pennsylvania is primed to incorporate the Fostering Connections youth provisions due to its long-standing support of youth. The commonwealth currently offers a subsidized guardianship program for youth ages 0-17 that can be expanded to age 21. Pennsylvania’s Juvenile Act already allows foster care to be extended to age 21 for youth who are finishing their high school diploma, enrolled in post-secondary education or undergoing medical treatment. These criteria match three of the five options allowed by Fostering Connections, which also encourages support for youth working at least 80 hours per month or enrolled in job training.

If Pennsylvania makes no changes to its current practice, the state and its counties will spend more than \$219 million in FY 2012-13 for adoption and guardianship subsidies and extension of foster care placement. This includes \$50 million to extend foster care services to age 21 that will yield less than \$2 million in federal financial participation.

However, if Pennsylvania implements all policy options of Fostering Connections — including extending adoption and guardianship subsidies, extending foster care services to age 21 and allowing youth to re-enter foster care until age 21 — and if it realizes the expected reduction in foster care placement, the state and its counties will save more than \$5.5 million in FY 2012-13 and \$26.3 million in FY 2016-17. Pennsylvania’s reduced investment will yield \$15.7 million in additional federal support in the next fiscal year alone.



A WIN-WIN FOR PENNSYLVANIA

Full implementation of Fostering Connections will maximize federal financial support and generate state and county savings, while achieving better outcomes for youth as the state better serves children and families.

Extending Adoption and Guardianship Subsidies to 21

Extending adoption and guardianship subsidies to 21 will correct Pennsylvania's financial disincentive to permanency. The need for this change is evident in the data.

Of the more than 2,300 children adopted from foster care in Pennsylvania in 2010, only 9 percent were ages 13 and older. Less than 40 percent of the 900 children who attained permanency through legal guardianship that year were 13 and older, even though teenagers represented half the children in foster care.

A permanent family achieved through adoption or guardianship can provide youth with critically important ongoing relationships and support. Such support is linked to increased high school graduation rates, college enrollment, self-esteem and physical and mental health.^{iii, iv}

Increased exits to permanent homes also will result in fewer costs at the state and county levels. Nearly half of Pennsylvania youth in foster care are placed in congregate settings such as group homes and institutions. In 2010, congregate care cost an average of nearly \$62,000 per youth — almost 10 times the cost of an average annual adoption or guardianship subsidy of about \$6,700.

Expanding Foster Care to 21 and Allowing for Re-Entry

Foster care cannot substitute for a permanent family, but it can provide critical supports to promote youth success during the transition to adulthood. Research shows that nearly half of former foster youth haven't found a job four years after leaving the system.^v Even those youth who are able to find and keep a steady job consistently earn less than their peers and are more likely to live below the federal poverty line.^{vi} At the same time, Pennsylvania is experiencing a significant gap between the large number of jobs requiring an industry credential and limited applicants with the appropriate training.^{vii}

Allowing youth to remain in foster care to 21 while working or engaged in job training improves the likelihood that they will become self-sufficient adults.

An ongoing study of youth aging out of foster care in Illinois, Iowa and Wisconsin finds that foster youth who remain in

state care through age 21 have improved prospects such as increased college enrollment, higher earnings, delayed pregnancies and improved housing stability.^{viii, ix} Similarly, allowing youth to re-enter foster care between 18 and 21 reduces their risk of joblessness, homelessness or incarceration. Nearly 40 percent of all young adults who leave home between the ages of 18 and 24 later return home for financial reasons.^x Allowing re-entry gives older foster youth a similar fallback plan if they face unexpected challenges.

Pennsylvania should implement the Fostering Connections options to help nearly 1,200 more youth achieve permanency by FY 2016-17 through adoption or legal guardianship and to help youth who stay in care until 21 successfully transition to adulthood — all while reducing taxpayer costs.



“Releasing youth in foster care into the world on their 18th birthday too often sends the message that they are alone. If we expect teenagers who have suffered from abuse and neglect to become self-sufficient adults, we should ensure they have some form of guidance or support along the way. Implementing Fostering Connections would support youth to age 21 — including those who wish to enter the work force or attain relevant job training.”

— Marc Cherna, Director, Allegheny County Department of Human Services



By implementing Fostering Connections, Pennsylvania can help more youth achieve permanency through adoption or legal guardianship and help those who stay in foster care until age 21 successfully transition to adulthood — all while decreasing costs to the commonwealth and its counties.

A TIME FOR ACTION

The Fostering Connections youth provisions provide a unique opportunity for Pennsylvania to decrease state and county expenses while increasing the number of youth who find permanent families through adoption and guardianship and further supporting youth transitioning to adulthood. The commonwealth should act now to make the necessary statutory and regulatory changes that will help improve child and family outcomes while saving the state, its counties and taxpayers millions of dollars.

HOW WE ANALYZED FOSTERING CONNECTIONS

Juvenile
Law
Center
www.jlc.org


Pennsylvania
Partnerships for Children
www.papartnerships.org

Juvenile Law Center (JLC) and Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children (PPC) partnered to analyze the effects of full implementation of Fostering Connections. As part of this collaborative process, JLC and PPC arranged for a fiscal impact analysis conducted by The Finance Project, a national non-profit research, technical assistance and consulting firm with expertise on the topic.

JLC and PPC convened a diverse statewide taskforce to inform and guide the development of The Finance Project's analysis. The taskforce included leadership of the Department of Public Welfare — Office of Children, Youth and Families, Hornby Zeller Associates, five county children and youth administrators and their fiscal staffs (Adams, Allegheny, Philadelphia, Venango and York), appropriations staff from each legislative caucus, private providers of child welfare services including adoption agencies, county and provider associations, legal advocates, resource family representatives, youth and alumni of foster care, and others. The involvement of the department and counties was important in building the methodology used to collect, validate and analyze survey data that helped determine fiscal impact.

The list of citations used in this report can be found at www.porchlightproject.org.



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