

CWAC – July 17, 2015

Present: Carl Ayers, Alex Kamberis, Denise Dickerson, Deborah Eves, Sheila Crossen-Powell, Nicole Shipp, Lisa Linthicum, Amy Rice, Ericca Facetti, Abigail Schreiner, Lori Battin, Laura Ash Bracky, Lauren Weidner, Sharon Richardson, David Bringman, Kristin Tadlock-Bell, Katherine Lawson, Deborah Pryor, Chauncey Strong, Latanya Hairston, Traci Jones, Adalay Wilson, Nannette Bowler, Bragail Williams-Brown, Angela Bell, Carol Wilson, B. Lafayette-Brooks, Robin Ely, Allyson Roberts, Joni Baldwin, Jennifer Jones, Melissa O’Neill, Kiva Rogers, Tamara Temoney, Jill Forbes, Judy Gundy, Rita Katzman, Anne Kisor, Pam Fisher, Shannon Brabham, Leah Mills, Paige McCleary, John Dougherty, Phyllis Sanders, Bill Lieb, Sarah Groom, Denise Gallop, Heather Crutchfield, Donald Kirtland, Emily Womble, Vicky Muensterman, Karen Slate, Jon Martz, Patricia Popp

Carl Ayers, Director for the Division of Family Services, began the meeting by welcoming the group. A large part of the agenda was dedicated to reviewing preliminary findings from research and information from focus groups gathered for a report to the General Assembly which addresses 1) outcomes for youth who age out of foster care in Virginia in comparison to the general public 2) the adequacy of the services currently available to youth who age out of foster care and 3) barriers to achieving adoption/permanency for youth in foster care. Traci Jones, Adoption Program Manager, and Em Parente, Foster Care Program Manager, presented information to the group.

Ms. Jones presented data on efforts to increase adoptions of children from youth in foster care. In 2013, the former administration implemented the Va Adopts Campaign. This initiative resulted in development of three (3) adoption contracts specifically designed to increase adoptions for Virginia’s foster care youth. Those contracts are:

- Child Specific Recruitment using Extreme Recruitment® Model
- Resource Family Recruitment
- Post Adoption Services and Supports

Ms. Jones presented data on progress made through those contracts. She also provided demographic data on the 797 youth that were eligible for adoption in state fiscal year 2014. Ms. Jones highlighted barriers, gathered during focus group sessions, to adopting children from foster care. The barriers can be categorized into four (4) areas. The first is “family issues” and examples include few adoptive families, families are less likely to want to adopt older youth or children with special needs, families report the process is too difficult, some families want adoption assistance but may not get it, and some families would like to keep a child but not adopt. The second area is “local department process” and examples include lack of understanding of/refusal to work with the grant contractors, high turnover of local department staff, issues of travel/time out of the office if an adoptive family is not located in the same area, and some local departments do not provide adoption services for youth over the age of 18. The third area is “stall to finalization” and examples include cases are handled on a case by case, locality by locality basis with little standardization, the judicial appeals processes can be slowed by individual parents and other family members, and there is more incentive to keep a child in foster care than to adopt. The fourth area is “local department culture” and examples include contentious relationships

between family and the department, frequent staff turnover without immediate training, and some localities do not make adoption a priority.

The group was given an opportunity to provide further input. Comments from the group are:

- There is a need for local departments to contract with providers to “mandate” that there are homes available in the areas where children are being removed
- Juvenile and Domestic Relations Court not being a court of record is a barrier
- Current placement of children should be added to the demographic information in the presentation
- There is a need for more data sharing across state agencies.

Ms. Parente continued to the presentation, focusing on youth aging out of foster care. Using information from the National Youth in Transition Database (NYTD), Ms. Parente highlighted outcome data including number of youth serviced, educational levels, employment, incarceration, homelessness, had a child, Medicaid coverage, among other outcomes. VDSS has developed a study cohort of youth who exited foster care with a reason of emancipation and turned 18 years old while in foster care. The dates of birth for this cohort range from 7/1/1989 – 6/30/1994. None of the people in the study are receiving any services through the foster care system. The study has looked at the gender, race, legal basis for entry into care, and the length of stay in foster care.

The next steps will be to match employment, education, benefits, health care access, and criminal justice system data for members of this cohort. The Virginia Employment Commission has agreed to provide aggregate report on employment and wage history and is currently working with VDSS to work through the technical/security issues. The Virginia Department of Education has agreed to provide a report on secondary and post-secondary educational attainment. Staff will match cohort members to data sets for Medicaid, TANF, and SNAP for the last three years. If there are matches, staff will determine how long benefits were received. The Department of Medical Assistance Services will use Medicaid data to address health care coverage and may be able to provide information about medication and services received. The Department of Corrections has agreed to provide an aggregate report for the cohort.

Ms. Parente reviewed quotes gathered from youth that participated in the focus groups. The youth that participated were asked to tell legislators what is important for them to know about youth in and aging out of foster care. The youth were also asked to give suggestions for a label that would describe extending foster care to age 21. There were about 11 suggestions presented and staff will narrow the choices down to three (3) and ask the youth to choose the name from the shortened list.

Ms. Parente summarized the stakeholder input into seven (7) themes and recommendations. They are

1. Older youth take risks and can't hear options/expectations until they are ready. They need ability to fail and try again.
2. Young adults need continued financial, social and emotional support.
3. Existing IL funding sources not adequate.

4. Youth need someone to turn to for information and support.
5. Youth are better off in a family setting.
6. Youth aging out need to be able to afford housing.
7. Youth need opportunities/support for post-secondary education & work.

The preliminary recommendation for the report will be to extend foster care to age 21. VDSS will offer programming which recognizes the developmental challenges of the 18-21 age group and the societal shift moving the age of independence to the early twenties. Extending foster care could counter the cumulative effects of trauma and instability with financial, social, and emotional support to age 21 and promote permanent relationships by improving lasting connections and providing opportunities for youth to live with a family. Extending foster care to 21 will offset the impact of decreasing funding for Independent Living Services (e.g. Chafee grant reductions) by utilizing federal IV-E funding through Fostering Connections for room and board and could provide youth 18-21 with the means to access and afford safe, stable housing. This extension would maximize opportunities and support for post-secondary education and employment for youth in this age range.

Another recommendation will also be to develop a kinship program which supports relative placement as an alternative to foster care or as a permanency option for youth in foster care. This would create kinship care/subsidized guardianship in Virginia to increase relative placements. Work will need to be done around amending conditions in which placement with relatives is prevented by barrier crime rules.

Comments from the group include:

- Comments from the youth speak to the lack of youth engagement.
- There is a significant issue around undocumented children and use of resources for these youth. These youth are willing to continue services however there is no funding.
- We need to find a way to help General Assembly members understand that the trauma that youth have experienced affect the way they make decisions.
- How much of the report will be focused on those youth that will be transitioning to adult services, not living independently? There is a lack of resources for adults, waiting list for waivers, and waiting list for other supports. This report needs to include that information

There was one question from the group.

Question: Is the age range 18 – 21 meaning until 22?

Answer: No, the cutoff is 21 because that is what the federal regulation says.

After a break, Mr. Ayers reviewed the recommendation to include sub-committees as part of the CWAC structure. Between the May and July meeting, an email was sent to CWAC members asking them to indicate if they agreed with the recommendation. It was a unanimous decision with no opposition to creating subcommittees. Committee members were also asked to indicate which sub-committees they were interested in working with and if they were interested in being a co-chair. The majority of people that responded they were interested in the permanency and QA sub-committees. By the next CWAC meeting, Mr. Ayers would like all sub-committees to meet, create a charter, and begin planning what

they will be focused on. He requested the sub-committees keep in mind the goals of the Three Branch group. He also reminded the group that youth voice, input from foster parents, and other stakeholders is necessary and should be kept in mind when scheduling meetings.

Mr. Ayers discussed several legislative proposals that the Division of Family Services is requesting approval to submit. One proposal is extending foster care to 21. Similar legislation made it out of both houses of the General Assembly last year but was removed from the budget. This year, a phased in option will be proposed. The extension will happen over 3 years (1st year is 18 year olds, 2nd year 18, 19, 3rd 18,19, 20).

There are several changes to Code that need to occur as a result of the Preventing Sex Trafficking and Strengthening Families Act that went into effect in September 2014. Virginia must limit the foster care goals of APPLA and Permanent Foster Care to youth age 16 or older. There is no grandfathering with this goal so if the Code changes, youth that are under 16 years old will have to change their foster care goals at the next permanency planning hearing. There needs to be a definition for sibling. Currently there is a definition for birth sibling; however, that definition does not include multiple sibling relationship. This is needed because there is a requirement to notify parents of birth siblings of a child's removal. Virginia must run credit reports on children age 14 and older. The current requirement is 16 and older.

A third proposal will be a "clean-up" bill for foster care variances. Currently regulation states the Commissioner has final say in granting variances however the Code says that decision lies with the local board of social services.

The meeting ended at 1:00. The next CWAC meeting will be on September 18 from 10:00 – 1:00.