

Permanency Matters:

June 2018

Reunification



PRESENTED BY

DFS Division of
Family Services

A DIVISION OF



VIRGINIA DEPARTMENT OF
SOCIAL SERVICES

Introduction

Welcome to the first edition of the Virginia Department of Social Services *Permanency Matters* e-newsletter! This periodic publication will highlight permanency components such as reunification, adoption, kinship and other key topics. We hope this resource will provide helpful information about best practices and current events. We also hope to create a forum for showcasing and celebrating Virginia's dedication to permanency and child welfare.

We welcome any contributions from youth and families, local departments of social services (LDSS), private providers, and other partners who have stories and practice examples to share. Our next edition of *Permanency Matters* will highlight kinship care. [Let us know](#) what your agency is doing to promote permanency!

Director's Note



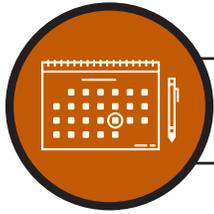
When a child has to be removed from their home, every effort is made to return that child to their family of origin as expeditiously as possible with supports in place to ensure the child is safe and the situation which led to the child being removed is remedied. This process is known as reunification. Nationally, the majority of children who enter out-of-home care are subsequently reunified with their family of origin. In Virginia, we have work to do in this area to get closer to the national average. In 2017, a total of 2,660 children entered foster care in the Commonwealth and

713 children and youth were successfully reunified with their families of origin. Child welfare agencies in Virginia implement strategies that build upon the strengths of the family and ensure that concerns are addressed. Through the *Permanency Matters* newsletters, we will highlight the innovative work our LDSS are doing to achieve permanency for our children and youth. Additionally, we want to continue asking the question: *How can Virginia improve in these realms?*

-Carl Ayers, Director, Division of Family Services

Reunification

In This Issue:



Upcoming Training/Events

Children's Bureau Birth Parent National Network Webinar
Virginia Learning Center courses



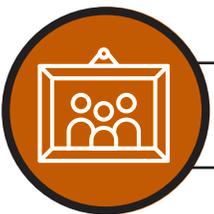
Virginia Reunification Statistics

KidsCount data
Foster care re-entry rates



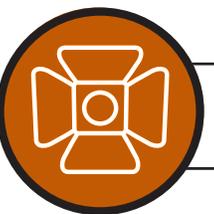
Governor's Proclamation

Family Reunification Month



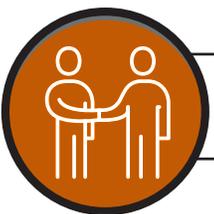
Family Spotlight

The Gunnings, a foster family in Richmond, VA, describe their experiences and explore the challenges and joys of helping families achieve reunification.



Virginia Practice Model Spotlight

The relationship between foster parents and families of origin can significantly impact the overall course of a child's out-of-home placement.



Partnering With Parents

For children in out-of-home care, consistent, quality family visits are critical for promoting reunification.

Upcoming Training/Events

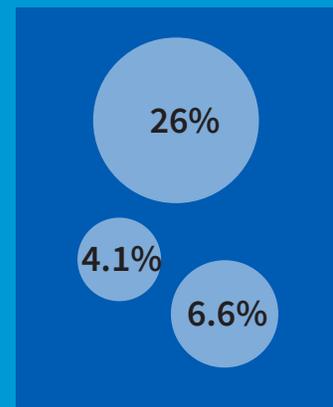
- Children's Bureau Birth Parent National Network webinar on June 28, 2018. Register [here](#).
- [Virginia Learning Center](#) Courses:
 - » CWS3021: Promoting Birth and Foster Family Partnerships
 - » CWS3041: Working with Children in Placement
 - » CWS3071: Concurrent Permanency Planning
 - » CWS3081: Promoting Family Reunification
 - » CWS4020: Engaging Families and Building Trust-Based Relationships
 - » FAMSC0021: VDSS Family Preservation and Support Programs
- [Achieving Permanency Through Reunification Training - Annie E. Casey Foundation](#)

Virginia Reunification Statistics

KidsCount data from 2016 shows that 26% of Virginia's children discharged from care were reunified with their families of origin.

Virginia's foster care re-entry rates are low. Only 4.1% of children re-enter foster care within the initial 12 months of a prior episode; and only 6.6% re-enter more than 12 months after a prior episode

(<https://cwoutcomes.acf.hhs.gov/cwodatasite/fourTwo/index>).



2,660

In 2017, **2,660 children** entered foster care in Virginia.



713

In the same year, **713 children and youth** in Virginia were successfully reunified with their families.

Governor Ralph Northam issued a [2018 Proclamation declaring June as Family Reunification Month](#). Virginia's Proclamation is also featured on the national [American Bar Association's](#) website!

Governor's Proclamation

Family Reunification Month

6/1/2018

WHEREAS, foster care is intended to be a temporary intervention for children who need the safety and security of an out-of-home placement; and

WHEREAS, 2,660 children entered foster care in Virginia in 2017; and

WHEREAS, many families receiving foster care services are faced with challenges in overcoming trauma and meeting day-to-day needs; and

WHEREAS, the Virginia Children's Service Practice Model states that all children and youth deserve to be safe; children do best when raised in families; and all children and youth deserve and need a permanent family; and

WHEREAS, there were 713 children and youth in foster care in Virginia who were successfully reunified with their families in 2017; and

WHEREAS, for most children in foster care, reunification with their family is their best option for a permanent and loving home; and

WHEREAS, all children need the care, love, security, and stability of family unity, including parents, siblings, grandparents and other extended family members to provide a solid foundation for personal growth, development, and maturity; and

WHEREAS, reunification takes work, commitment, and investment of time and resources by parents, family members, family service specialists, foster parents, service providers, attorneys, courts and the community; and

WHEREAS, the accomplishments of families who overcome an array of challenges to reunify safely and successfully should be supported and celebrated;

NOW, THEREFORE, I, Ralph S. Northam, do hereby recognize June 2018 as FAMILY REUNIFICATION MONTH in our COMMONWEALTH OF VIRGINIA, and I call this observance to the attention of all our citizens.



A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Ralph S. Northam".

Family Spotlight



The Gunnings, a foster family in Richmond, VA, had just opened their home to a foster child. “Very honestly, one of the things I personally was very worried about was working with the birth family,” Leila Gunning said, “because you hear some of the stories behind why the child is coming into care.”

The Gunnings’ LDSS foster care caseworker worked quickly to coordinate an initial meeting with the child’s birth parents. “I was really grateful that the initial meeting was organized straightaway,” said Mrs. Gunning. “These visits helped us realize that these people wanted to be the best parents they could, which inspired [us] to really fight for reunification.”

This first contact encouraged positive engagement and understanding for both the birth and foster parents. The Gunnings developed a deep sense of empathy and commitment to the child and her family, and the child’s birth mother became more comfortable as she got to know her child’s foster family. The Gunnings saw the child’s birth mother as a vulnerable individual with a sincere desire to improve her parenting skills, and they wanted to help her gain the practical knowledge, support network, and resources necessary to become the mother she wanted to be.

The Gunnings and the birth mother began participating in regular weekly meetings. As they provided love, stability, and care for their foster child, the Gunnings sometimes

Spotlight

“ WE DID NOT EXPECT TO BE SO TREMENDOUSLY INSPIRED BY THE STRENGTH AND PERSEVERANCE OF THE BIOLOGICAL PARENTS WE COLLABORATED WITH.”



struggled with the dual roles of foster family life. While they cared deeply about their foster child, the Gunnings recognized that the ultimate goal of reunification required connecting with the child’s birth mother as well. Foster care trainings helped the Gunnings understand reunification as a priority, and they were aware that their work and care would ultimately facilitate the child’s return to her birth mother. The foster and birth families worked collaboratively to bolster the birth mother’s support network, parenting skills, and housing situation.

After seven weeks in foster care, the child was reunited with her birth mother. At reunification, the Gunnings offered their contact information to the birth mother in case she ever wanted to reach out. She did so that same evening. Following the child’s return to her family home, the Gunnings and the birth mother stayed in touch, and the Gunnings helped her find a job and connect with community resources. Drawing from the inspiration of this family’s reunification story, the Gunnings worked to build Patty’s Hope, a nonprofit organization dedicated to promoting safe housing, trauma recovery, life skills, and community engagement for biological mothers in the Richmond area.

Leila Gunning applauds birth mothers and LDSS workers for their reunification and engagement efforts. Recognizing the challenges and joys of foster parenthood, Mrs. Gunning emphasizes the ways in which foster parents can help birth mothers develop the skills and resources necessary for successful reunification. “You’re walking into a unique dual role,” said Mrs. Gunning. “As you’re fostering this child, consider that the child’s birth mother can actually get the support she needs from a variety of places—and even feel supported and loved by you, and end up in a healthy place where the child can come home.”

What can foster parents do to support reunification?

- Speak positively about the child’s return home.
- Help plan the child’s return home.
- Include the birth parents in farewell activities.
- Provide respite care for the birth parents.
- Serve as a part of the birth family’s support network after the child returns home.

(Sources: [VDSS Child & Family Services Manual](#); [National Resource Center for Diligent Recruitment, 2018](#))

What can case workers do to support reunification?

- Support **family engagement** in shared parenting early on in the case and whenever possible.
- Collaborate with the child, family members and community partners to facilitate **concurrent planning**.
- Conduct **comprehensive child and family assessments** to address potential barriers to reunification.
- **Maintain family and cultural connections**, including frequent visits among family members and with the worker.
- Connect families to **evidence-based services**, including post-reunification supports.
- Give foster parents concrete ideas for helping children make the transition home.
- Seek specialized **training and educational opportunities**. Studies show that caseworkers with social work education and specialized training in child welfare competencies are better able to facilitate permanency for children (*Leung & Willis, 2012; National Center for Youth Law, 2007*).

(Sources: [VDSS Child & Family Services Manual](#); [Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2017](#))

Virginia Practice Model Spotlight

The relationship between foster parents and families of origin can significantly impact the overall course of a child's out-of-home placement. It is therefore critical for workers to promote positive, collaborative family relationships by adopting a teaming approach. Research has shown that children return home sooner, have more stable placements, experience more positive emotional development, and enjoy greater academic success when contacts between birth and foster parents are planned through collaborative, child-focused coordination efforts.

Bridging the Gap (BTG) is a Northern Virginia foster care and adoption initiative. Area private providers and LDSS have partnered to implement the BTG practice model. Using a collaborative public-private cross-jurisdictional approach, this model focuses on building and maintaining relationships and communication between the birth and foster families involved in a youth's life, or between foster and adoptive families. BTG's goal is to support family reunification or an alternative permanency plan.

Some of Virginia's LDSS are using BTG to help build important relationships. The Shenandoah Valley Department of Social Services Resource Home and Adoption Unit, for example, offers trainings to educate foster parents and workers about the BTG model. Lauren Wimer, a Shenandoah Valley Senior Family Services Specialist, has used BTG as part of her efforts to promote family reunification. "The BTG model provides an opportunity to break down barriers between parties," said Ms. Wimer, adding that it also helps biological parents build support systems and strengthen interpersonal connections.

"Often, biological parents struggle to find natural supports that encourage them in the reunification process," observed Ms. Wimer. "When biological parents feel supported and feel that the team wants them to be successful, they are more likely to achieve reunification."

Icebreaker Meetings

A child's entry into foster care is often characterized by significant trauma and a sense of dislocation. To minimize these effects, workers should encourage birth and foster families to engage in positive, collaborative communications as all parties work toward successful reunification. The BTG model calls for the use of icebreaker meetings, which can help facilitate these important connections. These meetings can encourage the development of positive rapport and ongoing relationships between birth and foster parents, allowing new caregivers to learn about a child's habits, strengths, and needs. Icebreaker meetings help initiate the positive communication between birth and foster families that is often necessary for successful reunification. As child welfare workers address the myriad logistical, administrative, and legal issues that surround a child's entry into foster care, icebreaker meetings give workers a chance to focus on relationship-building. Parents, caregivers, and caseworkers focus on the child's comfort, needs, and best interests during these meetings, which can positively impact the child's self-esteem and well-being.

Relationships can be a key resilience factor for children, birth and foster parents, and caseworkers as they navigate a challenging new set of circumstances involving complex issues. When planning

an icebreaker meeting, workers should coordinate with all parties to review expectations, scheduling and logistics, and meeting agendas. Through careful and collaborative planning, workers can ensure that meetings are positive, meaningful, and consistently focused on the child's best interests.

The collaborative interagency approach of BTG creates a unified practice vision for improving communication and promoting family reunification. LDSS workers, private providers, and family members work together to maintain a continuum of contact between birth parents and foster parents that benefits all parties. BTG reduces discord between families, facilitates smoother visitations, enhances the child's self-esteem, and eases the child's transition home or to another permanent placement.

To learn more about Bridging the Gap, please contact Chauncey Strong at chaunceystrong78@gmail.com. For more information on icebreaker meetings, visit the [Annie E. Casey Foundation's Resources for Holding Icebreaker Meetings Between Birth and Foster Parents](#).

For children in out-of-home care, consistent, quality family visits are critical for promoting reunification.

Partnering with Parents

For children in out-of-home care, consistent, quality family visits are critical for promoting reunification. Parent-child visits help maintain family attachments, reduce the child's experience of trauma and loss, and may result in shorter foster care placement. Visits may also significantly increase the likelihood of family reunification. A study investigating factors impacting reunification for children aged 12 and younger found that the odds of reunification increased tenfold for foster children who were visited frequently by their birth mothers ([Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2011](#)).

Whenever possible, the first family visit should occur within 48 hours of a child's initial removal from the home. Siblings should be included in as many visits as possible. The worker can help ensure safe, successful visits by assisting families with scheduling and transportation logistics, promoting communication between foster and birth parents, and proactively discussing anxieties,

barriers, and parenting issues with both foster and birth parents. Such discussions may take place during child and family team meetings, which should include both the birth and foster families. Regular child and family team meetings are a key part of collaborative efforts toward successful reunification.

Parent-child visits create opportunities for birth parents to learn new skills, particularly with the implementation of [visit coaching](#). Parent visitation—reframed as “parenting time” by a 2017 General Assembly law—can help support the quality of parent/child interactions. Parenting time helps promote active parental engagement in decision making and normal activities with their children, like attending medical and dental appointments, helping with homework, and other routine interactive opportunities (Virginia HB 271: <http://lis.virginia.gov/cgi-bin/legp604.exe?161+sum+HB271>)

Partnering

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With special thanks to:

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Pete and Leila Gunning



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