

Strengthening Families and Communities

*A Call to
Action:*

An Integrated Approach to Youth Permanency and Preparation for Adulthood



Casey Family Services

The Casey Center for Effective Child Welfare Practice, in collaboration with California Permanency for Youth Project, Casey Family Programs, and the Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative, Inc.



A Call to Action: An Integrated Approach to Youth Permanency and Preparation for Adulthood

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Introduction

Casey Family Services and the Annie E. Casey Foundation, in collaboration with California Permanency for Youth Project, Casey Family Programs and the Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative, Inc. acknowledge a shared commitment to comprehensive positive outcomes for all children and youth in foster care. Together we have initiated this ***Call to Action: An Integrated Approach to Youth Permanency and Preparation for Adulthood*** to address the complex needs unique to adolescents in foster care.

Collectively, we are committed to preserving and supporting permanency in a youth's family of origin whenever that can be safe and secure. For those youth who must enter foster care, it is our commitment that they exit the system as part of a safe and permanent family, while benefiting from the most strategic preparation for adulthood and the most customized network of community connections and supports for a successful future. Thus, it is our hope that every youth served by the child welfare system today – and in the future – will benefit from an integrated and collaborative approach to achieving family permanency and comprehensive preparation for adulthood.

While acknowledging that this complex topic cannot be completely covered in this brief publication, it is our collective hope that states, counties, tribal communities, courts, legislatures, agency professionals, parents, youth and advocates will find this ***Call to Action*** a compelling guide to re-thinking, re-imagining and re-forming an integrated youth-serving child welfare system.

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Getting Us on the Same Page: Understanding the Need for Change

The Problem

“Aging out” without a permanent family and/or adequate preparation for adulthood is a crisis. It is a personal injury to each and every youth in care and a public emergency for our national child welfare system.

“Each year, as many as 25,000 teenagers ‘age out’ of foster care, usually when they turn eighteen. For most of their lives, a government agency has made every important decision for them. Suddenly they are entirely alone, with no one to count on.”¹ Exiting the system as an older adolescent by “aging out” without a permanent family is correlated with a range of deleterious outcomes as a young adult such as early pregnancy or parenthood, criminal involvement, homelessness, lack of employment or dropping out of high school.²



Martha Shirk and Gary Stangler described this situation in their book, *On Their Own: What Happens to Youth Who Age Out of the Foster Care System*:

“The reality is that young people who leave foster care at age eighteen are no more ready to become independent than our own children. In fact, most are probably less ready. Many youth in foster care do not benefit from normal growing-up experiences, such as holding down a part-time job, watching a parent balance a checkbook or learning the meaning of household responsibility by performing daily chores. Without basic life skills, youth who leave foster care often have difficulty negotiating more complex tasks like finding safe housing, getting and keeping a steady job, staying healthy and avoiding financial or legal trouble. Too few undertake the education and training necessary to compete in today’s economy. In fact, four years after leaving care, only one in five former foster youth is fully self-supporting.”³

To “age out” of the foster care system means youths are discharged to “self” rather than to a family they can count on and call their own. While displaying remarkable resilience, resourcefulness, courage and determination, the majority of youth “aging out” have neither the safety and security of a family, nor the skills and resources necessary for adulthood. Thus, they are not adequately equipped for life’s responsibilities and they lack an essential network of relationships and resources to rely on when the going gets tough.

“Aging out” has become an unintended casualty of well-meaning permanency law, policy and practice. Too many youth continue to grow up with no place to go.

Robert, age 13 and
Deanna, age 11

After three years in foster care, Robert and Deanna were referred for youth permanency planning services. Their birth parents had a history of substance abuse, incarceration and homelessness. At the time of referral, both parents were in treatment programs. Having informally cared for them at times during their childhood, their maternal grandmother was included on the planning team and agreed to take legal guardianship with subsidy. As permanency team planning continued, Robert's and Deanna's birth parents demonstrated significant gains in recovery, located stable housing and secured jobs. They very much wanted their children to return home full-time. When their grandmother's poor health resulted in an extended hospital stay, Robert's and Deanna's birth parents moved into her home and assumed primary parenting of the children, with the support of social services. Once the grandmother was discharged from the hospital, the birth parents continued to parent the children in her home. It became very clear to the planning team that since coming into state custody, Robert's and Deanna's developmental needs had changed and they no longer required the same level of care and supervision. Once their grandmother had recovered more fully, Robert and Deanna were successfully transitioned back to live with their birth parents. Their grandmother supported the team's permanency plan of reunification and remained closely involved, once again resuming the role of grandparent rather than primary caregiver.

The Rationale for Change

Regardless of age, race or cultural background, special need or complex circumstances, all youth need and deserve a family to count on for a lifetime, and all youth need and deserve to be adequately prepared to face the adult world. For youth growing up in family foster care or congregate care settings, it is the moral responsibility, ethical obligation and legal mandate of the child welfare system to make sure they have both.

When youth grow up within a family, that *family* is the major vehicle for preparing them for the world of adulthood. For better or worse, the values, skills, challenges and opportunities that shape and define adulthood are woven into the very fabric of their everyday family lives. Through family relationships and experiences they discover what it means to learn, love and live. Their path to being prepared for adulthood is "permanency."

Not so for many of our youth growing up in the foster care system.

For youth in foster care, an artificial line is all too often drawn between those who get "permanency" services and those who get "preparation for adulthood."⁴ The system is compartmentalized for youth in a way that precludes holistic attention to the range of their needs.

A youth's service plan goal of "independent living" or "another planned permanent living arrangement" (previously known as "long-term foster care") reflects one or more of these four basic sets of circumstances:

1. the youth can not not be safely reunited with his or her birth family,
2. recruitment of an adoptive or guardian family has not been successful,
3. a decision is made that adoption or guardianship is incompatible with a youth's age, special need or complex circumstances, and/or
4. a youth says "no" to reunification, adoption or guardianship.

A service plan goal of "independent living" or "another planned permanent living arrangement" does not mean a youth no longer needs family permanency, but that the system does not succeed in achieving it for or with them. All too often youth with a goal of independent living do not have a concurrent plan for permanent family relationships, and youth with a goal of alternative planned permanent living arrangement (APPLA) may have the commitment of a permanent *place*, but not a permanent *person*. Consequently these youth lose out on two fronts: they will more than likely "age out" of the system without a permanent family, *and* be launched into adulthood unprepared and unsupported to successfully meet its challenges.

The Context and Language of Change

“Permanency” is a term that requires consistency not only in how it is implemented, but also in how it is interpreted and understood.

While permanency planning was initially intended as a process to limit entry into and time spent in out-of-home placement, achieving “permanency” is not the same as having a permanent plan, a permanency planning process, a permanency goal or a permanent placement. According to literature prevalent in the field of permanency planning today, achieving “permanency” means having an enduring family relationship that

- is safe and meant to last a lifetime;
- offers the legal rights and social status of full family membership;
- provides for physical, emotional, social, cognitive and spiritual well-being; and
- assures lifelong connections to extended family, siblings, other significant adults, family history and traditions, race and ethnic heritage, culture, religion and language.⁵

Over the past four years, the California Permanency for Youth Project has hosted national youth permanency convenings where participants (including child welfare professionals, advocates, youth and young adults who have experienced the foster care system) reached collective agreement about the specific elements of permanency that are important to older youth. Those elements include:

- the involvement of the youth as a participant or leader in the process;
- a permanent connection with at least one committed adult who provides a safe, stable and secure parenting relationship, love, unconditional commitment, lifelong support, a legal relationship if possible; and
- the opportunity to maintain contacts with important persons, including siblings.⁶

“Permanency” outcomes span a wide range of relationships and must be individualized.

In weighing the pros and cons of any permanency situation, it cannot be emphasized enough that when working with older youth in foster care, customized outcomes must be the rule. A “one-size-fits-all” philosophy is entirely inadequate.

Youth involvement in permanency planning and decision-making is absolutely essential. Planning must genuinely be guided by each youth’s wishes, hopes and dreams and must respectfully honor their feelings about past and current relationships. The involvement of caring adults in permanency planning and decision-making is also essential. The process must include those adults who represent the role of the state as custodial agent (acting *in loco parentis*), those adults who know the youth best and care about them the most, as well as those adults who can contribute to creative problem-solving and a successful permanency outcome. A partnership is crucial, and active and meaningful participation of each partner is critical.

In achieving any of the permanency outcomes, the objective is the optimal balance of physical, emotional/relational, legal and cultural dimensions of permanency within every child’s and youth’s array of relationships.

- Physical permanency relates to a safe and stable living environment.
- Emotional/relational permanency relates to the primary attachments, family and other significant relationships that offer trust and reciprocity.
- Legal permanency relates to the rights and benefits of a secure legal and social family status.
- Cultural permanency relates to a continuous connection to family, tradition, race, ethnicity, culture, language and religion.

While some older youth report that they have found satisfying emotional permanence through relationships without a legal status, other youth report that they have only truly felt secure when a committed emotional relationship was legalized through adoption. The particular dynamic mix of all dimensions of permanency that best suits each older youth in care can only be realized as a result of a truly collaborative and totally customized planning process.



All youth need and deserve an opportunity to achieve permanency and can benefit from a comprehensive exploration of the options. However, all too often some specialized populations of youth are excluded from these efforts. For example, youth in group homes, youth who are parenting, lesbian/gay/bisexual/transgender/questioning youth, youth with serious mental health needs and youth with cognitive limitations and/or serious medical/physical challenges need to be fully engaged.

The following considerations about permanency outcomes offer additional guidance for collaborative and customized permanency planning that includes youth and adults:

- Safe, stable and secure permanency with a youth's family of origin is a priority.
- Family preservation, reunification, adoption and legal guardianship are permanency outcomes that offer a secure legal status and the full legal rights and benefits of family membership.
- When permanency with a youth's family of origin can not be achieved, adoption or legal guardianship should be explored with both relatives and non-relatives. This could include adults known to a youth from within his or her network of significant relationships or previously unknown adults.
- When a legal permanency outcome can not be achieved, a plan of alternative planned permanent living arrangement (APPLA) can be made more secure by assuring the permanent commitment of a *person* (not merely a *place to live*) and reinforcing that relationship with rituals, ceremonies, a legal name change, inclusion in a family's legal will and/or other symbols of "belonging" or "claiming."
- In some circumstances, permanent kinship placement, informal adoption and customary adoption (such as those found in some African American and Native American communities) may best honor a youth's emotional attachments as well as preserve continuity of connections to family, culture, ethnicity, religion and language.

"Preparation for adulthood" is a phrase that clarifies and normalizes the distinct dimension of child welfare practice aimed at strengthening the present and future well-being of youth in foster care.

Terms like "transition," "emancipation" and "independent living" have historically been common language used to describe a youth's passage from state custody to self-support after age 18. Such terms perpetuate a limited view of child welfare practice related to youth in care by focusing on the *event* of transitioning or emancipating, rather than the *process* of being prepared for it. Such terms all too often prompt us to ask questions such as:

- "Where will he live?"
- "Where will she go to school or work?"
- "How will he get there?"
- "How will she support herself?"

The answers to those questions are often more indicative of short-term changes in a youth's temporary circumstances than long-term outcomes associated with a youth's ongoing well-being.

The phrase "preparation for adulthood" offers an alternative to the common language of the past and more readily guides us to considering the opportunities, skills and resources necessary to be successful in the adult world. The phrase "preparation for adulthood" prompts thoughtful and thorough planning that includes but is not limited to questions such as:

- Has he had consistent and nurturing parenting that provided the opportunity to develop strong personal values, a solid sense of integrity, a positive sense of self, an extended network of family support and the capacity to build and maintain healthy relationships?
- Has there been consistent stability, quality and opportunity in her education over the past 18 years to adequately prepare her for college or a vocational program?

Wanda, age 32

Wanda came into care at age six, with five subsequent residential placements and five foster families. After dropping out of high school, she “aged out” of the foster care system at 18. She experienced multiple psychiatric hospitalizations in different states and survived many nights homeless on the streets. She was adopted at age 20 by her former social worker. Wanda now lives in a mental health group home, after serving five years in prison, and is taking psychotropic medication and participating in counseling. She works part-time as a hostess and spends time with new friends in her group home. Through the rough years of young adulthood, her only consistent advocate was her adoptive mother. If they had not had a legal family relationship, Wanda’s adoptive mother would not have had the right or legal standing to be included in psychiatric inpatient consultations, discussions with prison staff, mental health department eligibility appeals, private courtroom sessions and access to Wanda’s public defender regarding her legal case. Wanda would have had no one to effectively advocate for her when she could not advocate for herself.

- What job opportunities and job skills training has he had or will he need that will prepare him to get and keep a job, develop a career path and assure sufficient income?
- Has she had the opportunity over time to see the importance and learn the discipline of saving and budgeting money?
- Has he had broad exposure and equal access to community experiences and opportunities that will maximize his network of relationships and resources?

“Preparation for adulthood” outcomes have definable and achievable dimensions.

Comprehensive “preparation for adulthood” is a conscious, purposeful and collaborative process which must be systematic, developmentally appropriate and continuous. In assuring that youth in care are successful in adulthood, the following outcomes are desired:⁷

- *Employment:* Young people generate a sufficient income to support themselves by obtaining and retaining steady employment leading to a viable career path.
- *Education:* Young people acquire sufficient education, training and opportunities that provide them with choices to pursue post-secondary education and/or the means to obtain and retain steady employment.
- *Housing:* Young people have access to safe, stable, appropriate, affordable housing in the community that is near public transportation, work or school.
- *Life Skills:* Young people demonstrate mastery of basic study skills, work skills, money management, social development, self-care and practical daily living skills.
- *Personal and Community Engagement:* Young people have in place supportive relationships, are able to access services in the community to achieve their personal goals and are supported in their efforts to contribute to the civic life of their communities.
- *Personal and Cultural Identity:* Young people demonstrate a healthy sense of ethnic or cultural identity, personal identity (including sexual orientation and gender identity) and spiritual identity.
- *Physical and Mental Health:* Young people have sufficient and affordable health insurance for both physical and mental health.
- *Legal Information and Documents:* Young people have the skills, information and assistance to access essential legal documents pertaining to their personal, family, medical and educational histories.

Tyrone, age 15

Tyrone had lived in a residential program for two years when he was referred to a youth permanency initiative. In his early years, he was raised in a multi-generational household. When his mother died and his grandparents were unable to continue raising him, an uncle stepped forward as a kinship caregiver. This placement disrupted within two years because of discord between Tyrone and his younger cousin. When the youth permanency worker explored his network of relationships, Tyrone revealed that a maternal aunt and her husband regularly visited with him at the program. Although they had expressed interest in him in the past, they were never formally explored for placement. Still, they continued their informal contact with him on weekends. Ultimately through a youth-centered teaming process Tyrone, his family members and professionals designed a permanent plan identifying his uncle and aunt as his permanent family. He moved in and a legal guardianship is in process.

The Promise of Change

Despite the unprecedented number of older youth exiting the foster care system on their own, experience has taught us more about an integrated approach to youth permanency and preparation for adulthood than we have institutionalized. Over the past three decades, innovative youth permanency practices within the special needs adoption and intensive family preservation/reunification movements have resulted in successful reunification, adoption and guardianship outcomes for older youth in care. In recent years, additional innovative youth permanency practices have achieved increasing national visibility through expanded implementation and evaluation. These practices have facilitated family permanency outcomes for older youth in family foster care and congregate care who had previously “said no” to family, or who were thought to be “too old,” “too troubled” or “not ready” for a family (see Model Programs booklet cited in endnote).⁸

Equally, systematic and comprehensive efforts to prepare older youth in care for adulthood have long been championed by many foster care, independent living and adolescent service providers. These professionals have been determined to raise the bar on stability for youth who had not only been historically subjected to multiple moves and relationship disruptions, but also chronically ill-prepared to face adulthood. In recent years, practices focused on preparing youth for adulthood have been further concretized, systematized, expanded and evaluated (see selected resources cited in endnote).⁹

Child welfare reforms of the 1980’s and 1990’s made significant attempts to prevent entry of children and youth into care, decrease time spent in out-of-home placement, increase adoptions and expand support to older youth in care through the legislated mandates found in the Adoption Assistance and Child Welfare Act of 1980, the Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997 and the (Chafee) Foster Care Independence Act of 1999. Each of these pieces of legislation missed the opportunity to comprehensively define permanency, institutionalize and incentivize the full continuum of permanency outcomes *and* integrate the currently parallel tracks of services to youth in out-of-home care. This ***Call to Action*** holds the promise for change that blends the compartmentalized youth-serving system, and makes a commitment to achieve the best of both “permanency” and “preparation” for each and every youth in foster care.

Getting to the Heart of the Matter: Integrating Our Work

Guiding Principles of Change

The following principles are essential to a holistic and integrated approach to serving youth in care:

1. Embrace sound definitions of permanency and preparation for adulthood and a comprehensive approach to integrated outcomes.

- An integrated and strategic approach to planning for permanency and preparation for adulthood must be guided by a sound understanding of both dimensions. It must begin at the point of system entry, remain continuous until system exit and change dynamically and strategically according to developmental age and need.
- At its best, a permanent family relationship enriched by community-based supports serves as the foundation for comprehensive preparation for adulthood within a “real world” context.

2. Blend youth-related policies and practices in the process of integrating customized permanency outcomes and comprehensive preparation for adulthood.

- Strategic systems integration is essential. Elements must include funding streams, systemic policies, case practice guidelines and tools, as well as social work roles and functions that address youth “permanency” and “preparation for adulthood.”
- The collective voice and active leadership of youth, parents and families is essential in guiding this systemic process of integration.

3. Be youth-centered, family-focused and collaborative in customized planning and decision-making.

- An integrated and customized planning process must be guided by a comprehensive assessment of each youth’s individualized need for safety, permanency and well-being. It must include proactive and strategic casework that shares thorough information about the options for both permanency and preparation for adulthood:
 - > exploring youth’s feelings and fears about family relationships and hopes for the future,
 - > honoring a youth’s wishes,
 - > giving youth support in moving forward, and
 - > providing clarification of systemic procedures (court hearings, planning meetings, agency documents, etc.).
- An integrated and customized planning process for each youth must include participation by the youth, parents, family members, other significant adults and professionals who have a commitment and contribution to a successful outcome.

4. Insure comprehensive, continuous, customized and collaborative services for youth and families.

- Provide and/or promote a customized service array that will support secure family permanency and comprehensive preparation for adulthood regardless of whether a youth’s goal is reunification, adoption, guardianship, alternate planned permanent living arrangement or independent living.
- Assure that developmentally appropriate, holistic and individualized *youth-centered, family-focused* and *community-based* services are available and accessible (both prior to and after achieving a permanency outcome) to:
 - > maximize the success of a youth’s integrated plan for permanency and preparation for adulthood, and
 - > strengthen the capacity of parents, family members and significant adults to sustain permanent family commitments to youth over time and expand their role in preparing youth for adulthood.

5. Promote a vision of shared responsibility for change.

- Raise public awareness, collective understanding of and community support for responding to a youth’s comprehensive needs for family permanency and preparation for adulthood.
- Engage strategic community partners with potential to provide opportunities for expanded youth involvement, engagement, development and leadership within the community.





Practice Approach to Change

Lessons learned from innovative youth permanency and preparation for adulthood initiatives have shown that the use of collaborative team planning and decision-making provides a powerful practice tool to integrate outcomes in permanency and preparation for adulthood. There are several critical dimensions of such an inclusive process.¹⁰

- 1. Partner with youth as the central player in their own integrated planning process, engaging them in identifying essential team members that include:**
 - parent(s), family members and other adults significant in a youth's life, both past and present (including birth, foster, respite and adoptive parents; siblings; grandparents and other relatives; godparents; family friends; teachers; coaches; mentors; neighbors; former social workers or child care staff, etc.);
 - adults in the process of being recruited and prepared as potential permanent parent(s), if any;
 - child welfare staff and other professionals in a position of decision-making power (social workers, attorneys, residential staff, therapists, etc.);
 - professionals or individuals from the local community able to assist in or provide expanded opportunities or resources.

- 2. Include parents, family members, caregivers, significant adults, professionals and community members in the team process for what they *can* contribute, rather than excluding them for what they *can not* contribute.**
 - Even when such individuals are not interested in or appropriate for placement of the youth, their participation in *planning* is important.

- 3. Explore each adult's level of commitment to a youth over time:**
 - as a permanent parent, permanent extended family member or "lifelong connection"; or
 - as a time-limited resource and support.

- 4. Engage youth in a collaborative casework process that prepares them to actively and meaningfully participate in team planning:**
 - by providing full information about permanency options, engaging in strategic "permanency conversations" and thoroughly processing the pros and cons of permanency decisions;
 - by providing full information about the dimensions of comprehensive preparation for adulthood and a realistic understanding of the resources, relationships, supports and skills that will maximize success;
 - by empowering them to build and sustain mutually satisfying relationships with the adults on their planning team (parent(s), family members, other significant adults and/or professional connections).

- 5. Develop a youth-centered, family-focused integrated plan that addresses the following critical dimensions:**
 - *Safety* – how physical safety and psychological safety will be achieved and sustained over time, and how and when a safety plan will be developed and implemented;
 - *Permanence* – how the most secure and lasting commitment by a permanent parent will be achieved and sustained over time; how enduring connections to birth parents, siblings, extended family members, other significant adults, race, ethnicity, culture, religion and language will be achieved and sustained over time;
 - *Well-being* – how optimal outcomes related to health, mental health, education, vocation, employment/career, housing, identity, life skills and community engagement will be achieved and sustained over time.



Annie, age 20

Four years ago, Annie was referred to a youth permanency initiative and matched with two families that were willing to make a commitment to be “connected for life.” Beth and her husband have two daughters older than Annie; Savannah and her partner have two daughters younger than Annie. Annie proudly says she’s the middle child in her family. Over time, Annie has come to identify Beth more as “mom” and Savannah more as a “special friend.” She will officially join Beth’s family in an upcoming commitment ceremony, including a legal name change. Savannah and her family will celebrate with them. Annie lives in an adult group home, where she works part-time as a receptionist. Her passion is Shakespeare, whom she quoted when asked her feelings about permanent families for older teens: “...tis the stuff that dreams are made of.”

6. Facilitate an ongoing collaborative team planning process to:

- insure a safe and secure family permanency outcome and monitor progress toward comprehensive preparation for adulthood;
- enhance the network of formal and informal post-permanency supports and services necessary beyond exit from the system; and
- strengthen relationships among team members functioning as the “safety net” of adults committed to supporting a youth into adulthood.



Malik, age 16

Malik has lived in an adolescent shelter for the past two years and is participating in an innovative youth permanency initiative. He recently identified a mentor, his friend's father and a shelter care staff person to be part of his youth-centered permanency team. He is considering inviting his adoptive parents to join, even though they went through adoption "dissolution" some time ago. A single parent was recently identified as a possible permanent family for Malik. She could only consider making a commitment if weekend respite were provided. Malik has already been spending alternate weekends with his mentor and his friend's family. They agreed, during the team process, that these week-end "respite" visits would continue no matter where he lived. As a result of the team meetings, the mentor also agreed to transport and supervise sibling visits with Malik and his brother. The friend's father is also assisting Malik with career exploration and applying for a part-time job.

Getting On With It: Knowing We're Making a Difference

Indicators of Change

In a child welfare system that prioritizes an integrated approach to achieving family permanency *and* comprehensive preparation for adulthood for all youth in care, the following results will be visible.

Youth will:

- Have the family-focused and community-based opportunities, resources, skills and supports to sustain lifelong family relationships (that offer a sense of belonging, emotional support, full legal and social status, and connection to race, ethnicity, culture, religion and language) *and* achieve comprehensive preparation for adulthood;
- Have access to full information regarding personal, family, medical and educational histories and legal documents required to obtain essential benefits and privileges;
- Be actively engaged in individual planning and become increasingly responsible in decision-making;
- Be prepared for and supported in providing leadership for system change;
- Be educated and ready to learn;
- Be employed and ready for career;
- Be embraced by family and ready for relationships;
- Be connected with significant adults, peers, and services;
- Be housed safely;
- Be healthy and well;
- Be hopeful, confident and ready to navigate life.¹¹

Parent(s), family members and other significant adults in a youth's life will:

- Understand a youth's comprehensive and individualized needs for "permanency" and "preparation for adulthood," be actively engaged in meeting those needs and supported in making a lasting or lifelong commitment;
- Be meaningfully included in joint planning and decision-making with youth and professionals, as well as in collective leadership for system change.

The system will:

- Act with urgency to assure a safe, secure and legally permanent family as early in life as possible, as well as comprehensive and continuous preparation for adulthood for each youth in care;
- Engage and support families as the primary vehicle to preparing youth for adulthood;
- Strategically blend funding, policy and practice in achieving optimal integrated outcomes for youth related to safety, family permanency and well-being (health, mental health, education, employment, housing, identity, life skills and community engagement).

- Prioritize consumer participation and empower youth, parent(s) and family members to provide leadership in decision-making, implementation and evaluation;
- Assure *all* youth equal, adequate and accessible family-focused and community-based post-permanency resources and supports (regardless of whether they exit the system to reunification, adoption, legal guardianship, an alternative planned permanent living arrangement or independent living);
- Seek out and support strategic public, private, corporate and community partnerships and resources that enhance opportunities and promote successful outcomes for youth.

Conclusion

Consider how far we have come. And consider how much further we can go. We can not change the past, but we can shape the future. “Aging out” is preventable; permanency is achievable. “Lack of preparation for adulthood” is avoidable; a comprehensive approach is essential. “Compartmentalization of services to youth” is correctable; an integrated system design, blended funding streams, synchronized policies, strategic case practice, meaningful consumer involvement and collaborative planning are critical.

Consider this the only *call to action* we need. And remember the wisdom of Jim Casey, the founder of United Parcel Service and the Annie E. Casey Foundation,

“Determined people working together can do anything.”

Endnotes

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