

**Families for Teens:
Foster Care Recruitment and Support in Allegheny County**



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¹ For purposes of this report, the definition of foster care includes placement in a family-based setting with family or close family friends (kinship care) as well as placement with a foster family previously unknown to the youth.

Foster homes¹ have long offered Allegheny County children and youth a chance to live in a stable family environment until they are either able to return home or move into a safe, permanent home. This system has worked well for many children, particularly those who are young and without complex needs. Unfortunately, for a variety of real and perceived reasons, adolescents and teenagers are much less likely to find a home with a foster family.

This range of strategies was designed in the hope that taking a comprehensive approach to improving public awareness, practice and recruitment will significantly increase the chances of finding nurturing homes for teens like 15-year-old Anijah, who, in one early Youth Speakers Bureau writing assignment, expressed this simple plea: **“I want the right to be loved no matter what.”**

Instead, nearly one in three of these older youth have had to cope with the turbulence of life in the child welfare system in congregate care and group settings, usually outside of their home neighborhoods, where they are supervised and supported by professional, around-the-clock staff. Studies suggest that spending the teen years in such group settings can lead to more developmental issues than spending those years as a member of a stable and nurturing foster home.

In an effort to improve opportunities and outcomes for older youth in out-of-home care, the Allegheny County Department of Human Services (DHS) launched Families for Teens in October of 2013, with support from the Administration for Children and Families of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. The Families for Teens initiative is designed to expand foster care opportunities for older youth in foster care and decrease the number who must depend upon placement in group and/or congregate care. Strategies include stronger partnerships with providers of foster care services; a parent support network that offers help and guidance on fostering teens from experienced foster care parents; an advisory council of foster parents to inform policy and practice; and a marketing campaign to convince more families to open their doors to teens entering placement. A Youth Speakers Bureau was also created to give teens a voice by helping them articulate and share their placement experiences through the written and spoken word.

OVER-RELIANCE ON CONGREGATE CARE

Allegheny County, like most of the country, has experienced a recent decline in the number of children in out-of-home placement. Children aged 14 and older are no exception. Since 2010, the number of adolescents and teens in care has dropped from more than 730 to fewer than 460. Still, adolescents and teens consistently account for 36 percent of all placements.

And where they are placed is a lingering concern. The percentage of older youth placed in congregate care settings has risen over the past five years. In 2015, about 33 percent of children 14 and older in out-of-home placements were in group homes or other congregate care settings throughout Allegheny County. This is an increase from 2010, when 28 percent of teens in placement were living in group or congregate settings.

Allegheny County's performance in this area compares unfavorably with both statewide and national data. For example, nationally in 2012, an average of 16 percent of all children in placement lived in congregate care settings; during the same time period, the average across Pennsylvania was 24 percent. The Pittsburgh metropolitan area was among the regions that most heavily relied on placing teens in congregate care, exceeding the national average as well as the rates recorded in major metro areas such as Cleveland, Chicago, New York, Baltimore and Washington, D.C.

Data also show that foster care and other out-of-home placement are experienced by a disproportionate number of African American children. In Allegheny County, 61 percent of youth age 14 through 17 who entered placement in 2014 were African American, even though African Americans of this age make up only 19 percent of youth in the population as a whole.

Such trends are particularly important in light of research suggesting that placing children in congregate care presents greater risks to their life outcomes. Group settings deny children the experience of being part of a family and — particularly for those who have been abused and neglected — an understanding of what it means to be part of a safe and supportive home. Staff turnover rates can be high. And such living arrangements offer children fewer opportunities to make healthy attachments to parental figures and to peers who are coping well, who don't have behavioral or emotional problems, and who can provide support and model positive behavior.

Group settings tend to increase the risk of developing physical, emotional and behavioral problems that contribute to poor outcomes. One study, for example, found that children face a higher risk of being maltreated in a group setting than in foster care.² Another found that children in congregate care are almost two and a half times more likely to be arrested than those in foster care.³ Children in congregate care are also less likely to find a placement that provides a permanent home.

Congregate care is also expensive. In Allegheny County, in fiscal year 2012–13, the average cost of caring for a child in foster care was \$56.11 per day whereas the per-diem cost of caring for a child in congregate care was \$277.10.

² Euser, S.; Alink, L. R. A.; Tharner, A.; van IJzendoorn, M. H.; and Bakermans-Kranenburg, M. J. (2013). The prevalence of child sexual abuse in out-of-home care: A comparison between abuse in residential and in foster care. *Child Maltreatment*, 18, 221–231.

³ Ryan, J. P.; Marshall, J.; Herz, D.; and Hernandez, P. (2008). Juvenile delinquency in child welfare: Investigating group home effects. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 30, 1088–1099.

Allegheny County’s over-reliance on congregate care, despite the strong reasons for avoiding its use whenever possible, does not reflect the needs of youth entering placement or a commitment to group care as a model. Quite the opposite is true. Instead, it is the result of a shortage of family-based settings willing to serve teens and other youth with special needs.

GAPS IN SERVICE IDENTIFIED

Although placement in a family setting is preferable to congregate care, placing youth with relatives or close family friends goes even further in helping to reduce the trauma of being removed from their biological family. In Allegheny County, priority is given to placing children in a kinship care setting. However, DHS has been more successful in achieving this goal with younger children. As Table 1 shows, while 35 percent of older youth in placement were in kinship care, almost as many youth were in a congregate care setting.

TABLE 1: Placement Settings of Allegheny County Children Age 14 and Above, August 2015 (N = 364)

PLACEMENT SETTING	NUMBER OF CHILDREN (14+)	PERCENT OF CHILDREN (14+)
Non-Kinship Foster Care	72	20%
Kinship Foster Care	129	35%
Group Homes	115	32%
Residential Treatment Facility / Alternative Treatment	10	3%
Independent Living	38	10%
Total	364	100%

Understanding the factors contributing to this high percentage of older children in group settings, and finding ways to reduce the percentage, became the focus of Families for Teens.

DHS analyzed placement data gathered through its Best Interest Placement Tool,⁴ a decision-support tool used to identify placements that best meet the needs of an individual child. The analysis, which examined 2015 data, revealed that the county foster care network was unable to meet existing placement needs, particularly for adolescents. This is because of the significant mismatch between the number of foster families willing and able to care for adolescents and the number of adolescents in need of foster families. Only 129 foster home beds were available for 211 adolescents age 14 and over in non-kinship settings,⁵ meaning that the foster care network was unable to provide homes for more than 40 percent of the adolescents and teens who entered placement.

The service gap was not consistent across all county neighborhoods, as the analysis identified some neighborhoods with an adequate supply of appropriate foster care options. In most cases, however, the demand for foster homes for older youth exceeded the supply, sometimes significantly.

⁴ The Best Interest Placement Tool provides a data-based method for child welfare caseworkers to identify out-of-home placements that are in a child’s best interest. The tool utilizes a number of measures to determine the best placement option, including age, gender, sibling status, connections to community, maintaining school stability, and physical and/or behavioral needs.

⁵ A number of these foster homes serve multiple age groups, so that some of the 129 beds may be taken by younger (or older) children and youth.

RECRUITMENT AND REFORM

Over the past few years, as DHS has reformed its practice model, enhanced its client and family engagement efforts, and restructured the way in which placement decisions are made, it has become ever clearer that increasing the number and quality of foster care options is critical to the success of its efforts to improve placement experiences for all children. An inadequate network of foster home options, for example, is an obstacle to realizing the potential of the Best Interest Placement Tool. “There aren’t many places that have similar tools. But what we heard from the few that do, and what we anticipated ourselves, is that we’ll find that the matching successfully identifies the most appropriate and desirable placement, but that type of placement is not available within the existing resource family network,” said Emily Kulick, manager of external partnerships in the DHS Office of Data Analysis, Research and Evaluation.

The limited availability of foster families has also hurt efforts to ensure school and community stability for children in care, Kulick said. “Disruptive school changes proximate to a placement have declined significantly over a 10-year period. But for teens and those in congregate care, the rate of school change is still very high. We’ve improved placement stability for a lot of children, but improving stability for teens remains a challenge — because they are going into group care settings instead of family settings close to their home and school of origin.”

FAMILIES FOR TEENS

Data suggest that there are more than enough beds throughout the foster care network to accommodate every child who isn’t placed with a relative — there just aren’t enough families willing to accept teens. In fact, there is a surplus of beds for children in every age group except those age 14 through 17.

Investigating reasons for the shortage of foster care for teens, through an analysis of data and input from DHS staff, provider agencies, foster parents and the teens themselves, revealed the need to improve recruiting practices, knowledge about teens in placement, and support for families who accept them into their homes. There was also a clear tendency, among foster parents, provider agencies and DHS staff alike, to see teens as difficult to successfully care for in a family setting.

“I don’t think it should be difficult to find homes for adolescents,” said Twanda Clark, a DHS training specialist with Families for Teens who previously worked for a New York City agency that recruited foster families for older children. “We have to change the perspectives of provider agencies, of everyone, and buy into the fact that permanency is a real and necessary option for teens. And as we dive into that work, we’re going to see that recruitment isn’t the challenge. There will be enough families. The challenge will be supporting families once the youth are in the homes.”

Families for Teens utilizes a range of strategies to improve foster home options for teens entering placement:

- Collaboration between DHS and foster care provider agencies
- Teen-specific training and support for foster families with teens
- Engaging families in policy and practice development
- Opportunities for teens to share their experiences with stakeholders
- A marketing plan to raise public awareness and attract foster families

Collaboration

Strengthening the relationship between DHS and the nonprofit agencies that provide foster care services is particularly important, because DHS does not directly recruit and supervise foster homes. It relies instead on a network of private homes recruited, managed and trained by these agencies.

“There hadn’t been regular conversation between DHS and our providers about working with foster parents. We felt we had to make a space for that conversation to happen,” said Katherine Stoehr, manager of program operations for the DHS Office of Children, Youth and Families.

In 2014, DHS began meeting monthly with provider agencies to develop partnerships focused on improving outcomes of teens in placement and promoting consistency in practice across the network. DHS also used these meetings as an opportunity to learn about the needs and challenges of the foster families. In one session, for example, experienced provider agencies offered their thoughts about the proposed marketing and recruitment plan and the firm hired to develop the campaign.

Training and Support for Foster Families

An assessment of training across the foster care system indicated an absence of information and guidance specific to adolescents and teenagers. DHS was confident that this could be addressed by revising the content of existing training and increasing the ways in which the content was delivered. “Provider agencies didn’t get a lot of information about adolescents in their training. There was not a lot of talk about adolescent behavior or about working with that population,” Clark said. “That’s when they need training. You need support when the child is in your home.”

And foster families tend to receive little training after a child is placed with them. In some cases, dodging disruptive issues can be as simple as knowing what to look for. “The point is to get ahead of emerging behavior patterns,” said Stoehr. “Typically in foster care, we say to the family, ‘How is it going?’ They say ‘Fine’ and we say, ‘See you next month.’ We are not asking sophisticated enough questions to see if something is brewing. A few months later, after a problem has escalated, the foster parent says, ‘I can’t take it anymore’ and we have to move the child. If we ask productive questions, we might see that a problem is bubbling and intervene to avoid it.”

It was also determined that other stakeholders, including DHS staff and the courts, could benefit from a better understanding of the impact of the developmental issues of adolescence on the family as well as the impact of out-of-home placement — and decisions made — on these developmental issues.

“Caseworkers are influential,” said Clark. “I found that our caseworkers want to make a difference. But they need to believe and understand that teens have a fundamental right to achieving permanency or having a forever home.”

Focus on Helping Families

Families for Teens creates a framework of support for families fostering adolescents in order to help them meet everyday challenges, better understand the children in their care, learn from peers who have walked in their shoes, and contribute to improving policy and practice.

“The fact that our support partners have that experience is helpful to the foster families,” said Hank Lipinski, Allegheny Family Network’s director of development and supervisor of that agency’s work with the Families for Teens initiative.

Lipinski and his wife have fostered 23 children (and adopted 13 of them) since the early 1970s.

A primary component of this framework is the **Resource Parent Support Partners** program, a peer network created to provide advice, referrals and other support designed to help families navigate the child welfare system and deal with issues that arise with fostering children in their teens. In addition, the **Foster Parent Advisory Council** was recruited from foster families of teens; the council’s role is to participate in improving policy and practice. Both Resource Parent Support Partners and the Foster Parent Advisory Council are managed by a provider agency experienced in supporting parents and caregivers.

Resource Parent Support Partners are foster parents with a successful track record of fostering older youth. The program has the capacity to serve 30 families at a time, families who are struggling with issues both typical of raising teenagers — such as identity and accepting rules of behavior — and specific to dealing with teens in placement. During the program’s early months, families most frequently needed help with navigating the court hearing process, obtaining services for their child, and working with the school system to develop individual education plans.

The Foster Parent Advisory Council began regular monthly meetings in January 2015, providing a forum for sharing knowledge and experience, and contributing to making the child welfare system more responsive to teens in placement and the families who care for them. Other council activities have included recommending the development of a resource manual for foster parents, working with DHS to conduct a survey of foster parents to inform future council priorities, informing the development of a marketing plan to improve foster parent recruitment, and providing input into the development of a Request for Proposals for specialized training and support for foster families with teens.

Opportunities for Teens

Out of the shadows

Families for Teens places a strong emphasis on involving teens themselves in the process of improving their placement options, well-being and outcomes. The chief vehicle for giving them a voice is the Youth Speakers Bureau, which is designed to help them share their experiences and insights into life as a foster child through writing and public speaking.

The Youth Speakers Bureau is a voluntary activity for teens who meet regularly to discuss their writing and speaking assignments and receive instruction and practice in effective communication. Their writings have been compiled and recordings have been made. Future plans include videotaped testimonials, publication of a book of poetry, and presentations to audiences that include foster care provider agencies and other child welfare stakeholders.

The expectation is that, by providing a different perspective on who they are, the youth will contribute to greater understanding and system reform. "I can talk all day long to a judge or our staff. But the youth going in front of them and telling their stories is what they will remember," Stoehr said.

"The best way to build relationships with the children you are parenting is to communicate with them." – KYANE, AGE 16

One recent writing prompt, for example, asked the youth to express their thoughts on what it takes to be a good foster parent to teenagers like themselves. Their responses echoed several of the issues that Families for Teens was created to address. Foster parents of teens "need to know the ins and outs of the child welfare system," wrote one young woman, adding, "Some adults can't handle children nor tolerate them." Foster parents also "should know what they are getting themselves into when they decide to take a teen into their home," wrote 17-year-old Naadiya. "They need to be able to ride the ups and the downs and be willing to work it out." And 17-year-old Tyrania offered this reminder: "Always know children are not perfect. We will grow and learn from our mistakes like everyone else."

Marketing

The project's marketing strategy is designed to educate the community about the need for foster families for teens, dispel negative perceptions about serving this age group, and recruit families interested in providing a home for these youth.

DHS issued a Request for Proposals for a marketing firm to design and implement a successful marketing strategy. The selected agency, Blender, proposed a three-stage process: information gathering through focus groups, interviews and market segmentation (identifying the segments of the population most likely to respond to the need); design of the marketing plan; and implementation of the plan through strategies ranging from grass roots to traditional: community gatherings to engage community leaders, social media, earned media (e.g., word of mouth, editorial content), bus ads and billboards. Blender has completed the information-gathering component, which included an assessment of strategies most likely to engage those populations identified through market segmentation. Currently, Blender is in the process of finalizing the marketing plan and campaign branding, entitled Foster Goodness, and the design and production of the branded materials.

An analysis of need and available resources identified three areas within the county where the need is highest and foster homes are in short supply. The marketing strategy, scheduled to launch in January 2016, will target these areas.