

DHS Child Welfare Leadership Fellows: Using Data to Improve the Lives of Children and Families



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TABLE OF CONTENTSAcronyms and Definitions *iv*Executive Summary *1*Introduction *3*The Child Welfare Leadership Fellows Program *4* Program Goals and Requirements *4* The Assignment *6* Data Analysis and Findings *7* Stage One – Initial Analysis *8* Stage Two – In-Depth Analysis of African American Teenage Girls *10*Conclusion *12*Appendix: Leadership Fellows Recommendations *13*

ACRONYMS AND DEFINITIONS

Congregate care	Out-of-home placement in a group or residential non-family setting
DHS	[Allegheny County] Department of Human Services
Early stability	Refers to the degree to which an out-of-home placement is stable. The basic criterion for early stability is that the child has a stable placement by day 45 in out-of-home care.
Kinship care	Out-of-home foster care placement with a relative or family friend
Re-entry	Entry into out-of-home placement after an exit from a prior out-of-home placement
Short stay	Out-of-home placement lasting less than 30 days

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Allegheny County Department of Human Services (DHS) Child Welfare Leadership Fellows program was a success in many ways and on multiple levels. On a systemwide level, it demonstrated how a meaningful investment in staff development can reap rewards well beyond what anyone had envisioned. On a professional level, it created a cohort of staff with the ability to use data in a whole new way to improve case practice and the way in which decisions are made; it also created exciting new professional opportunities for those staff. On a human level, the increased understanding and use of data will change the lives of children, families and staff in a very positive way. The Fellows' final presentation at the end of their yearlong training — and the outcomes generated from their immersion in data — captivated the audience and continues to generate enthusiasm throughout DHS.

“I never expected that data had a feeling connected to it. It elicited a new level of compassion and empathy for the children and families that I serve. It made me [want] to give 100% all the time.”

— Roberta Cillo, Leadership Fellow

The first year of the Leadership Fellows program brought together a dedicated group of front-line child welfare staff to learn about “data” — previously viewed as meaningless statistics and the stuff of boring, mandatory reports. Over the course of the year, the Fellows learned that “data” equates to the lives of real children, and can be used to predict, and even change, their futures. Now, instead of thinking in terms of “10 percent failed outcomes,” they picture 200 children who are in danger of unhappy, and possibly disastrous, adulthoods. And they are determined to prevent those “failed outcomes.”

Fellows learned to take a critical look at how and what data to collect, and how to determine what might be missing, inaccurate or misleading. Not only can they now read data and use them to deliver meaningful information, they can now “talk data” with ease and spread the word about the value of data to their profession and to the welfare of the children they serve. They are thirsty for more — and better — data, and are seeding DHS’s child welfare office with a hunger for data-driven decision-making, monitoring and predictive analytics.

“The program provided a unique learning experience that really reawakened my interest and motivation in child welfare casework. It is easy to muddle through, day by day, doing the best you can for families. But this program gave us a chance to see how our work affects not only individual families but all of the children and families in Allegheny County. We were able to identify a concern that was beyond what anyone anticipated, and to come together creatively to devise solutions. And we were provided the support from administration to implement real change.”

— Angela Steele, Leadership Fellow

The big winners of the program’s first year will be the children — specifically, African American teenage girls in out-of-home placement in Allegheny County. While comparing Allegheny County’s practices to national best practices, the Fellows were able to identify ways in which DHS could improve its child welfare practice. The Fellows’ work illustrated on every measure that negative child welfare outcomes are experienced disproportionately by these girls as compared to their peers. One thing that jumped out of the data was the fact that they were being placed in settings and situations that were less than ideal, highly restrictive, and unlikely to lead to stability and a permanent, forever family. In presenting these findings — and 15 carefully-designed recommendations for change — the Fellows so inspired DHS senior management that this issue is now a top priority for DHS.

Without question, the Fellows program changed the participants, in ways both personal and professional. Working closely together over the course of a year, they formed a professional bond and appreciation for the skills, insight and commitment of their coworkers. To a person,

they feel a renewed commitment to the children and families of Allegheny County. They have honed their communication skills, thereby improving their ability to effectively communicate their enthusiasm, with poise and confidence, in small groups and to large audiences. With newly-developed leadership skills, several have been promoted to supervisory positions within DHS; others have transitioned to data-oriented positions that will allow them to impact the work in a different way.

Given the Fellows’ positive experience, the important work accomplished during the year, and the enthusiastic response to the outcomes, it is no surprise that DHS began a second Fellows class in September. Without a doubt, the Leadership Fellows program has proven to be a meaningful and successful initiative — for the participants, the clients they serve and DHS as a whole. Any organization can make change, but the Leadership Fellows program will ensure that change at DHS is made with purpose and with passion.

“The program’s impact extended beyond the Fellows themselves. The DHS staff that supported the program and coached the fellows also grew professionally through their involvement. Research staff gained a new appreciation of the work of caseworkers and a richer understanding of what the data mean; program staff learned how to better interpret data and gained increased respect for the work of their colleagues. Interestingly, several have since applied for and received promotions that will allow them to have a great impact on the issues explored during the program.”

— *Brian Bell, Analytical Unit Manager,
DHS Office of Data Analysis, Research
and Evaluation, and Leadership Fellows
Project Manager*

INTRODUCTION

Over the past two decades, the Allegheny County Department of Human Services (DHS), as a reflection of its commitment to better decision-making through data analysis, has invested considerable resources in creating a user-friendly and flexible data collection and analysis infrastructure. With such a valuable resource in place, DHS wanted to capitalize on the potential for child welfare caseworkers and supervisors to use the available data to improve outcomes for children and families. Based upon the belief that data is most powerful in the hands of those who understand the agency’s services, DHS created the Child Welfare Leadership Fellows program, a professional development opportunity offered to staff who have the potential to be leaders within the child welfare system.

The program was modeled after “Managing by Data,” a data-focused professional development program implemented by the New Jersey Department of Children and Families. The New Jersey fellowship, developed and administered by Public Catalyst of Iselin, N.J., was a great success. Forty percent of fellowship participants were promoted to key roles in the New Jersey Department of Children and Families, child abuse investigation timeliness improved, parent-child visitation

increased, anonymous referrals decreased, and important changes were made to child welfare practices. DHS first learned about the program at a conference sponsored by Casey Family Programs and was inspired to learn more. A visit to New Jersey, at which key DHS staff met with the Fellows and the agency’s leadership, cemented their enthusiasm and convinced them to pursue replication of the program in Allegheny County.

Allegheny County’s Leadership Fellows program was launched in the spring of 2014 with funding from Casey Family Programs and The Heinz Endowments. The trainings were conducted by Public Catalyst Group, which also provided ongoing technical assistance and support.

The 27¹ first-year Fellows were chosen from a pool of 89 applicants. They were caseworkers and advocates, independent living liaisons and supervisors, and they brought a range of skills and perspectives to the program. DHS views them as an integral part of its succession planning — building leaders from within who can make great data-driven decisions while remaining focused on the department’s mission and vision.



DHS’s overarching hope is for a workplace culture that wholeheartedly embraces creative, data-driven decisions.

¹ Two of the original fellows left over the course of the program year, one for another job and one for personal reasons.

The Fellows program began its first year in June of 2014 and ran through the following April. It was an intense and intensive experience for the Fellows. While maintaining all the responsibilities of their jobs, they committed to three days each month during which they couldn't answer calls, attend meetings, respond to emergencies, or conduct home visits, yet they had to make sure that none of these things went undone. As a result, they worked extra hours and often caught up on their own time. Support by their supervisors, who agreed to be available to handle emergency situations, was a critical part of the program's success.



Many benefits were realized from the Fellows program; not only did child welfare leadership obtain new insights and ideas due to the field expertise and newly acquired data skills of the participants, but Fellows themselves gained new ways of thinking and expanded their career opportunities.

Another key element of the program involved peer coaching by DHS data analysts. They worked closely with teams of Fellows, helping them understand and apply what they were learning and providing technical assistance regarding all aspects of data collection, analysis and decision-making. While the Fellows were learning about data, the analysts were learning how the data translated to children and families and about the high-stress/high-conflict nature of child welfare work. The mutual understanding and respect that developed over the year strengthened DHS's program integration efforts and is another benefit of the program.

The following sections describe the program and the anticipated outcomes that have the potential to make a real difference in the lives of the youth served by DHS. As for its impact on the participants, one of the Fellows said it best:

"This program changed the entire way that I see the world. It gave me confidence to do the right thing. It showed me the way to gently and politely show people the data in a way that they can digest and apply to their daily life. It taught me so much, and I literally think every day about how I can do something good with that information."

THE CHILD WELFARE LEADERSHIP FELLOWS PROGRAM

Program Goals and Requirements

The DHS Child Welfare Leadership Fellows Program was designed to improve the lives of Allegheny County children and families through a professional development opportunity designed to prepare front-line and supervisory staff to:

- Better understand (and therefore demystify) the data they collect daily.
- Master quantitative and qualitative tools so that data can be a decision-making tool.
- Recognize challenges and devise measures to address them.
- Realize that change is challenging, but good practice change is worth celebrating.
- Act as a resource to fellow child welfare staff.

- Grow as managers and leaders of the organization.
- Design and support positive change.
- Be grounded in good and proactive case principles and practices.
- Develop strong presentation skills, thereby enabling them to share their work effectively.
- Identify areas where integrated participation can be beneficial to both internal and external stakeholders.

“I really wanted to be a part of change... to be reignited with compassion and empathy for the work that I love to do, helping children and families.”

— Barb Moore, Leadership Fellow

The program was open to supervisors, managers and front-line staff with at least three years of child welfare and/or human services-related experience. The selection team, which included DHS and child welfare representatives, was careful to ensure diversity of background, role and geographic representation. Of the 89 applicants, 27 were selected who together had more than 350 years of child welfare experience. They applied for a variety of reasons — an interest in data, the desire to learn, professional advancement, wanting to make a difference — but none really knew what to expect or that the program would change them so significantly.

Participation Requirements

The Fellows were required to participate in three days of programming each month for eleven months, while still maintaining full responsibility for their normal workload. Each Fellow had to have full supervisory support for participation, since they would not be available at all during the three program days each month.

Each month, the Fellows focused on a particular topic, according to the following schedule:

- One day of a class session led by Public Catalyst
- One day of coaching facilitated by Public Catalyst
- One day working on team assignments/projects

“I applied to learn more about how data influences decisions.”

— Martin Dorfman, Leadership Fellow

Monthly topics included learning to use data; identifying challenges through data; formulating hypotheses and integrating qualitative and quantitative information; integrating research to support good case practice; leveraging learning with leadership; and managing by data.

Teamwork was an essential component of the Fellows program and one that was a challenge for many. Coming from different offices and different positions, they had to learn to slow down, consider the value of another's perspective, and ask questions rather than jumping to conclusions. Yet as challenging as that was for some, it was also one of the most significant and affirming components of the program.

“The Fellows program had us work with people in all offices and with different roles, without the hierarchy making a difference. Everyone had a voice. The networking among all the Fellows has continued on in many different ways. We see value in talking with other offices and in learning how they do things.”

— Betsy Caroff, Leadership Fellow

The Assignment

The first-year Fellows were asked to focus on **child welfare placement stability**, a topic selected by DHS leadership because of its significant impact on the quality of outcomes for children and youth. Fellows were divided into five teams, each of which investigated one of the following placement practices and/or issues:

- Short-stay placement
- Kinship-care placement
- Congregate-care placement
- Sibling placement
- Re-entries to placement

Target Population

In order to have sufficient data to capture the experience of youth who stayed in placement for 18 months or more, the Fellows selected 2012 as the base year and 2014 as the year to analyze outcome data. They identified 1,197 children who were in placement in 2012:

- Race
 - 51 percent African American
 - 35 percent white
 - 14 percent unreported or “other”
- Age
 - 13 percent infants age one and younger
 - 29 percent ages 15 through 17
- Gender
 - 51 percent girls
 - 49 percent boys

National Research on Placement Stability

Historically, placement stability has been a real challenge in child welfare. The field was slow to recognize the level of trauma caused by removing a child from home and family — no matter how neglectful or abusive that home may have been. The psychological and social impact of this trauma can be dramatic, and it is compounded by a lack of adequate placement opportunities that are both safe and nurturing. As a result, children are too often juggled between placements, such as shelters and congregate care facilities, that have greater capacity and are more likely to accept a child with difficult emotional or behavioral issues.



Children who are stable behave better. They feel safer, and they ARE safer. They are happier. They are more likely to have good lives as adults.

Fortunately, a major shift in perspective is occurring in the child welfare field. Rather than viewing these children as the problem, and using their behavior as an excuse for the system's inability to find an appropriate, permanent placement, there is increasing recognition that the move itself is the problem and that the behaviors being exhibited are normal reactions to home removal, frequent placement changes and the developmental changes of adolescence. Research has shown that the solution is placement stability.

To improve stability for all children, national research recommends the following practices:

1. Whenever possible, keep children at home with their families

- a. Avoid unnecessary placements
- b. Question short stays

2. If placement is necessary:

- a. The motto should be "first placement = best placement"
- b. Choose kinship care first
- c. Choose family settings over congregate care
- d. Keep siblings together

Strive to make the first home removal the ONLY home removal and reduce re-entries.

Data Analysis and Findings

Before jumping into data analysis, the Fellows received some basic training about how to approach the task. They were cautioned to always take their time when gathering data and to carefully test hypotheses. While it is important to look for empirical evidence, and not just rely on stories, they were also encouraged to look at the experience of each individual child rather than just considering averages when looking at data. And one of the most meaningful lessons was to not focus only on challenges but to look for "Bright Spots," those pieces of data that indicate that something is being done right or going well. Bright Spots can serve as the foundation for effective data-driven decisions.



Bright Spots highlight what is right, and can serve as a foundation for developing data-driven solutions.

The project was divided into two parts. In Stage One, Fellows collected and analyzed data about the 1,197 children in child welfare placement in 2012, using the national research on best practices as a guide. In Stage Two, the fellows narrowed their focus, based on the results of the Stage One analysis, and concentrated on the identified target population.

Stage One — Initial Analysis

The five teams conducted analysis on a dataset of the 1,197 children in placement in 2012. They used four of the best practices identified in the national research to guide them.

1. Question short stays (placements lasting fewer than 30 days)
2. Maximize kinship care and reduce congregate care
3. Place siblings together
4. Reduce re-entries into care

1. Question short stays

An analysis of short-stay placements found that 203 children (17%) spent less than one month in care.

“We asked, ‘Did children who were placed for less than a month need to come into placement at all?’ ”

- 19% were white girls
- 21% were white boys
- 23% were African American boys
- 31% were African American girls

Close to half of these children (44%) spent their short stay in a congregate care setting.

Fewer than 25 percent (49) of these children re-entered care after their initial short stay.

2. Maximize kinship care and reduce congregate care

There are a number of reasons why kinship care is a more desirable placement than congregate care. Kinship care relies upon family or close family friends to provide a home for the child; congregate care is an institutional setting with 24-hour staff and many children. Kinship care tends to foster positive relationships and better outcomes, while children in congregate care exhibit far worse outcomes and are much less likely to end up in a permanent placement.

Congregate care

- Eighteen percent of children were placed in congregate care (national average = 14%).
- Teenagers (ages 12 through 17) accounted for 90 percent of congregate care placements (national average = 34%).
- Two-thirds of these teens were African Americans ages 15 through 17.

Kinship care

- Initially, only about one-third (29%) of the children were placed with kin; eventually, this increased to about half (49%).
- Younger children are placed in kinship care much more often than teenagers.



Teens accounted for 90% of the children in congregate care — the **least** preferred placement option.

Congregate care placements in Allegheny County **decreased 20 percent** between 2012 and 2014.

3. Place siblings together

Overall, only 25 percent of the cases involved multiple children being removed from the home.

- Siblings were placed with their brothers/sisters about half of the time.
- They primarily went into kinship or foster home placement.
- Early stability was reached 43 percent of the time when they were with their siblings, 30 percent when not together.

The research indicated that African American children were less likely than children of other races to be placed with their sibling(s).

- 81 percent of siblings identifying as “other” race were placed together.
- 78 percent of white siblings were placed together.
- 69 percent of multiple-race siblings were placed together.
- 60 percent of African American siblings were placed together.

When looking at the ages of children placed with siblings, younger children fared much better.

- Ages 2 and under — 92 percent were placed with siblings
- Ages 3 through 8 — 91 percent were placed with siblings
- Ages 9 through 11 — 65 percent were placed with siblings
- Ages 12 through 14 — 67 percent were placed with siblings
- Ages 15 through 17 — 73 percent were placed with siblings

4. Reduce re-entries in care

Nationally, Pennsylvania ranks next-to-last in reducing re-entries.

In Allegheny County, re-entry occurs more often for older African American girls.

- Children 11 and younger experience low re-entry levels while those 12 and above experience much higher levels of re-entry.
- Overall, 66 percent of African American children and 25 percent of white children re-entered out-of-home care.
- African American children ages 15 through 17 re-entered 72 percent of the time.
- There were twice as many re-entries among African American teenage girls.



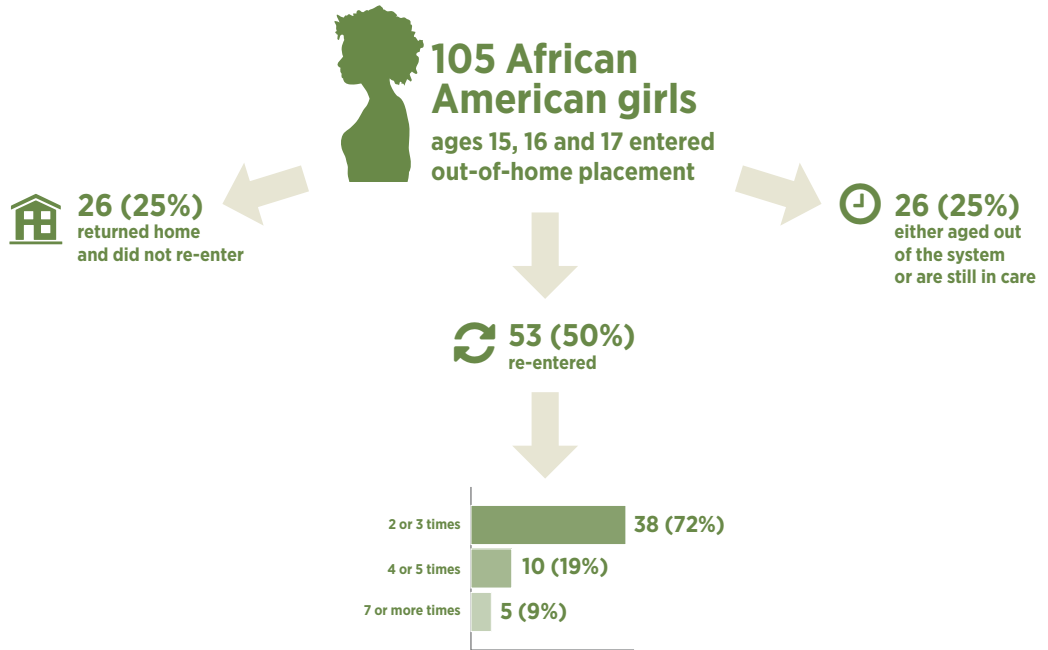
Stability was achieved most often when children were placed in kinship care with their siblings.



If a youth needs to be placed out-of-home, the placement should be a single event. When returned home, the youth should be able to remain home safely.

Stage Two — In-Depth Analysis of African American Teenage Girls

African American girls, ages 15 through 17, stood out by virtue of their high rates of short-stay placement, placement in congregate care and re-entry. The Fellows spent the second half of the year focused on an in-depth analysis of the history and outcomes of the 105 girls in this cohort.



“The program taught me the importance of documenting all the information. ... most of all, asking questions and not accepting what I think or what things appear to be without concrete data.”

— Barb Moore, Leadership Fellow

The Fellows conducted case reviews of written documentation to learn more about these girls and their placement histories. These reviews were eye-opening and provided insight into the kind of information that was missing as well as opportunities for practice changes and improvements.

They discovered interesting differences between girls with one placement and those with multiple entries. For example, as shown in the table below, the girls who were in placement only once were more likely to live with their father or with both parents than were girls with multiple placements..

LIVING SITUATION PRIOR TO PLACEMENT	GIRLS WITH ONE PLACEMENT	GIRLS WITH MULTIPLE PLACEMENTS
Mother	57%	70%
Father	25%	9%
Both Parents	14%	6%
Grandparents	4%	9%
Other	4%	6%

Another surprising finding was that, while 81 percent of the girls had siblings, only 33 percent were removed from home with one or more siblings. Most of the time, the teen was the only child removed from the home. This seemed to indicate that the safety of the home was not the issue (as it typically is with younger children), so the Fellows next examined the reason for home removal. As shown in the table below, it was apparent that home removal for these teens was most often the result of a breakdown in the relationship between the teen and her parent/caregiver. The Fellows' work dispelled their impression that most young women in child welfare spent time in juvenile detention — when in fact most (75%) never did.



More than half the time, the relationship between the teen and her parents drove the placement. Supporting families can prevent a significant number of placements.

REASON FOR HOME REMOVAL	GIRLS WITH ONE PLACEMENT	GIRLS WITH MULTIPLE PLACEMENTS
Parent/Child Conflict	50%	72%
Physical Altercations	42%	19%

The Fellows also looked at placement type and found that 69 percent of the girls who had only one placement were in congregate care for the entire placement, while 51 percent of the girls with multiple placements were placed only in congregate care. In addition, of the 28 girls with siblings in placement, only 10 were placed together at some point in their placement trajectory and only one was placed with her sibling for the entire time she was in placement.

The Fellows compared available data with national research about African American girls involved in child welfare. They were disturbed to find how little information was collected locally about issues such as domestic violence or substance use disorders, which meant the loss of an important opportunity to gather meaningful information about these girls. Data did show that there were higher rates of employment in families where the teen entered only once. Of particular concern was the rate of involvement in the mental health system. Compared to national data, which indicates that 20 percent of teens in foster care have a diagnosed mental health disorder, 50 percent of Allegheny County teens are involved in mental health treatment.

Another area of concern was the educational instability resulting from the out-of-home placements. Research shows that educational instability, particularly related to changing schools as a result of placement, results in poor education outcomes (attendance and achievement). Fifty-nine percent of the girls changed schools while in placement, which put them at high risk for these poor outcomes.



DHS is successfully placing younger children in kinship and foster care. Can it do the same with older youth?

CONCLUSION

Even though there was some information missing in the records of the 105 African American teenage girls examined, there were several clear issues that can and should be addressed in order to improve stability, permanency and quality of life for these girls.

Under the umbrella of Stay Home/Go Home/Find Home, the Fellows proposed specific changes (see **Appendix** on page 13) and summarized them as follows:

- 1) Far too many of these girls are being removed from their homes for reasons that could be better and more appropriately addressed through crisis intervention and family education/support. This refers to both short-stay placements and longer-term placements.
- 2) When home removal is necessary, it should happen only once and be in one placement setting. Kinship and foster care should be priority placements, and congregate care should be the placement of last resort. Re-entry should be prevented through a combination of permanency planning, preparation and aftercare.
- 3) Siblings should be placed together whenever possible.

And finally, documentation improvements are necessary so that decisions can be made based on full knowledge of the girls' family situations, other relationships and strengths/needs.

“Fellows opened my eyes to how much a change in knowledge and change of heart can make a difference to the children I am responsible to protect. I have always had a love of numbers and now believe I can marry these two loves to really be able to make smart decisions. I am now much more confident in my ability to be a change agent for the office I will lead and the community that we serve. I can’t thank the program enough for its guidance and [for instilling in us an] infectious passion to do better and continue to challenge ourselves to ask if we are really doing our best for children and families. From being a Fellow, I know I will be a much more effective leader.”

— Betsy Caroff, Leadership Fellow



DHS is implementing evidence-based programs in a range of areas, including home visiting. These programs may prove to be effective in preventing unnecessary home removal

APPENDIX: LEADERSHIP FELLOWS RECOMMENDATIONS

Short Stay Proposals

PROPOSAL 1: Utilize the CACTIS and re:resolve Crisis Network systems on a more consistent basis.

PROPOSAL 2: Expand family support centers to engage families of teens.

PROPOSAL 3: Strengthen community relations to improve public perception of child welfare.

Sibling Proposals

PROPOSAL 1: Modify Shuman Center to “Shelter” court orders.

PROPOSAL 2: Identify reserved foster homes for siblings.

PROPOSAL 3: Create a receiving center.

PROPOSAL 4: Develop a specialized respite program.

Kinship Proposals

PROPOSAL 1: Establish a consistent understanding and use of the agency’s family finding process and its documentation through the development of a training initiative.

PROPOSAL 2: Provide individual support to youth in kinship care and to their caregivers.

PROPOSAL 3: Provide mental health specialists in each office to enhance support to staff and ensure efficient service delivery to teens entering kinship care.

Congregate Care Proposals

PROPOSAL 1: Enhance services to families to improve successful reunification.

PROPOSAL 2: Develop a supportive service that can be utilized by families parenting teenage daughters.

PROPOSAL 3: Increase the number of foster homes available for teens through Diligent Recruitment efforts.

Proposals on Placement Re-Entries

PROPOSAL 1: Refer families who have filed private petition due to parent/child conflict to the FACT program for mandatory 90-day diversion services before a referral to child welfare is made.

PROPOSAL 2: Promote the visibility of this child demographic throughout DHS.