



PERMANENCY PROJECT

Problem

Nationally, over 90% of children in foster care leave the child welfare system via reunification with biological parents, guardianship, kinship placements, or adoption.¹ The remaining children – approximately 9% of teens and young adults – “age out” of the child welfare system without a permanent family.²

In 2021, over 19,000 teens across the country aged out of foster care.³ In 2022, 769 Arizona teens left the child welfare system without a family.⁴

The outcomes for teens who age out of the child welfare system are dismal:

- 29% of young adults who age out of foster care report being homeless from ages 19 to 21;⁵
- One in five are incarcerated between the ages of 19 to 21; and ⁶
- 43% are unemployed at age 21.⁷

While many teens in foster care are legally free for adoption, only 4% of children aged 16 and older are adopted.⁸ Research indicates that up to 80% of children in foster care suffer from significant mental health issues.⁹ Mental health, behavioral issues, and age are significant barriers to obtaining families for children in foster care.

¹ U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Children’s Bureau. [The AFCARS report: Preliminary FY2021 estimates as of June 28, 2022](#), at p.3.

² Id.

³ Id.

⁴ Arizona Department of Child Safety. *Semi Annual Child Welfare Report*, Reporting Periods: January 1, 2022, to December 31, 2022, p.20.

⁵ “[Child Welfare and Foster Care Statistics](#).” *The Annie E. Casey Foundation*, May 16, 2022; “[Youth Transitioning out of Foster Care: Experienced Homelessness in the Past Two Years in United States](#).” *The Annie E. Casey Foundation, Kids Count Data Center*, May 2022.

⁶ “[Youth Transitioning out of Foster Care: Incarcerated in the past Two Years in United States](#).” *The Annie E. Casey Foundation, Kids Count Data Center*, Sept. 2020.

⁷ “[Youth Transitioning out of Foster Care: Currently Employed Part- or Full-Time by Race/Ethnicity in United States](#).” *The Annie E. Casey Foundation, Kids Count Data Center*, Sept. 2020.

⁸ “[Children in Child Welfare System Who Have Been Adopted by Age Group in United States](#).” *The Annie E. Casey Foundation, Kids Count Data Center*, Apr. 2023.

⁹ Dore, M. (2005). “Child and Adolescent Mental Health.” In *Child Welfare for the Twenty-First Century a Handbook of Practices, Policies, and Programs*. (pp. 148-172) Edited by Gerald Mallon and Peg McHartt Hess, Columbia University Press, 2014.



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Creative solutions and increased, individualized efforts on the part of child welfare agencies and stakeholders are required.

Proposed Solution

Based on a proven, successful program in Georgia, Arizona can develop teams of experienced child welfare attorneys and specialists to identify and remove barriers to permanent families for the children in foster care who are most likely to age out of the system.

In Georgia, the Permanency Project:¹⁰

- Identifies and analyzes the cases of children who remain in foster care long-term and are the most likely to age out.
- Pinpoints specific barriers to permanency for these children.
- Implements effective and creative solutions to remove these barriers and increase the likelihood of obtaining a family for these children.

Elements of the Georgia initiative:¹¹

The project team consists of experienced and trained attorneys specializing in child welfare law.

1. The team has access to:
 - A child and adolescent psychiatrist with expertise in effective therapies and assessing proper use of psychotropic medications.
 - Attorneys with expertise in Social Security benefits, education, immigration, disability, adoption, and DCS policy.
 - A private investigator who can successfully track down biological relatives of children for whom there were no previously identified placement options.
2. Children are selected for review using a computer-based model that predicts which children and teens have the greatest likelihood of aging out.

¹⁰ The program is called the Cold Case Project in Georgia.

¹¹ Rawlings, Tom. "[Georgia's Cold Case Project: Improving Outcomes for Children in Foster Care](#)." *American Bar Association, Center for Children and the Law*, Dec. 1, 2015.



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The team's process includes:¹²

- A thorough review of the child's case file.;
- A written summary of questions and recommendations for further action.
- An initial roundtable that includes the child and people involved in the child's life, including DCS personnel, attorneys, service providers, therapists, school personnel, CASAs, and foster parents.
- A written action plan.
- Ongoing roundtables and continuation of the action plan.

"The ultimate goal of these meetings is to provide assistance, tools, resources, and creative thinking and dialogue to break through any barriers and to move cases forward toward permanency."¹³

Impact

In the first few years of Georgia's program, permanency for the reviewed children increased by 20 to 25%.¹⁴ Interestingly, the project improved permanency outcomes by simply flagging the child's case, perhaps by encouraging staff to give these children a fresh look.¹⁵ After 10 years, permanency was achieved for 34% of the reviewed children in the program.¹⁶ In 2018-19, Georgia's program encompassed 536 children, translating to permanent homes through adoptions, guardianships, relative placements, and reunifications for 182 of the most challenging cases.¹⁷

For youth who do not obtain permanency, the project's individualized attention still improved outcomes and overall well-being for the participants by encouraging them to remain in extended foster care and establishing connections to family members and adult mentors.¹⁸

¹² Ashley, Wilcott, and Leslie Stewart. [Cold Case Project Annual Report for the Work of 2019](#). (p.5.) Judicial Council of Georgia Administrative Office of the Courts, Apr. 2021.

¹³ Id.

¹⁴ Rawlings, Tom. "Georgia's Cold Case Project: Improving Outcomes for Children in Foster Care." *American Bar Association, Center for Children and the Law*, Dec. 1, 2015.

¹⁵ Id.

¹⁶ Ashley, Wilcott, and Leslie Stewart. [Cold Case Project Annual Report for the Work of 2019](#). (p.3.) Judicial Council of Georgia Administrative Office of the Courts, Apr. 2021.

¹⁷ Id. at 4.

¹⁸ Rawlings, Tom. "Georgia's Cold Case Project: Improving Outcomes for Children in Foster Care." *American Bar Association, Center for Children and the Law*, Dec. 1, 2015.



Implementation

In Arizona and other states, the Permanency Project lends itself to a task force or community approach to allow Arizona courts, child lawyers, and other relevant stakeholders to creatively develop, implement, and fund a state-specific program. Legislative language could establish a task force and outline requirements and timelines for the development of the program.

As a possible guide, Georgia's program, which went under the title of Cold Case Project, was implemented and developed as follows:

- The project was started by the [Supreme Court of Georgia Committee on Justice for Children](#) in 2009.¹⁹
- Originally funded by grants, Georgia's Division of Family and Child Services (DFCS), Georgia's Office of the Child Advocate, Title IV-E federal funding, and the Court Improvement Program, the program was institutionalized with state funds granted by the Georgia General Assembly in 2016.²⁰
- Currently, the program is run in partnership with the [Office of the Child Advocate](#), a Georgia agency established in 2000 by [O.C.G.A. §15-11-740\(b\)](#) that provides independent oversight of the child welfare system.
- Leadership of the program falls under the purview of the executive director of the Office of the Child Advocate with the full partnership and support of Georgia DFCS.
- The Georgia model incorporates all branches of state government.²¹

Cold Case Project (CCP) is a joint effort by Georgia's Executive, Judicial and Legislative Branches to address the problem of finding permanent homes for children in foster care.

Executive Branch		Judicial Branch
Office of the Child Advocate (OCA)	Division of Family and Children Services (DFCS)	Supreme Court of Georgia's Committee on Justice for Children (J4C)
Legislative Branch		
Appropriations		

¹⁹ "The Cold Case Project." Georgia Supreme Court Committee on Justice for Children.

²⁰ Ashley, Wilcott, and Leslie Stewart. [Cold Case Project Annual Report for the Work of 2019](#). (p.18.)

Judicial Council of Georgia Administrative Office of the Courts, Apr. 2021.

²¹ Id. at 3.



Stories

- “I was in foster care twice in my life and experienced a lot of trauma and abuse,” says Zeke, who is now 27.²² “In my last four years of foster care before I turned 18, I had approximately 54 placements. I have seen how my foster care peers who did not have family support have struggled. Many have been homeless. One is in prison for armed robbery, and another became a prostitute who was murdered. When I became a legal adult, I had not completed high school, had no job skills, and was generally hostile. Violence was my preferred way of solving problems. I was very angry at the world and made many poor decisions. Ten years later, I have my GED and am making progress toward making a good life for myself, though it remains a challenge. Even middle-class kids with family support can find it hard to live independently these days. If not for the commitment of a family who I met through the Cold Case Project, I would likely be homeless today.”
- “‘T’ has received services from the Cold Case Project for five years now and is now approaching her 18th birthday,” writes Georgia attorney Tom C. Rawlings. “While she has not yet achieved permanency, the judge overseeing her case has marveled at the progress she has made due to the team’s collaboration. Cognitive behavioral therapy helped her achieve some control over her stress reactions, and special psychiatric care has weaned her off many of her medications. A volunteer group, ‘Faithful Visitors,’ began building a strong relationship with her and five women from that group now serve as her mentors. Special educational services have helped achieve steady climbs in her IQ and other test results. She has decided to remain in care after her 18th birthday, and she recently was placed in a regular foster home. The court and team continue to seek a permanent family for her.”²³

Quote

“The Cold Case Project has been so impactful, not just for the immediate child being reviewed, but also for the children’s cases that come afterward. The reviews and roundtables move us out of hopelessness and groupthink back to creativity and passion for the children we serve.” - Ashley Willcott, J.D., State Office of the Child Advocate, Project Lead²⁴

²² Ashley, Willcott, and Leslie Stewart. [Cold Case Project Annual Report for the Work of 2019](#). (p.2.) Judicial Council of Georgia Administrative Office of the Courts, Apr. 2021.

²³ Rawlings, Tom. “[Georgia’s Cold Case Project: Improving Outcomes for Children in Foster Care](#).” American Bar Association, Center for Children and the Law, Dec. 1, 2015.

²⁴ Id.