

**Barriers to Successful Reunification of Children With Their Families
After Foster Care**
August 2012



In July of 2009, Stoneleigh Foundation Emerging Leader Fellow Wanja Ogongi was selected to partner with Community Legal Services (CLS) to address Philadelphia's high rate of children returning to foster care within 12 months of being reunified with their birth families. Wanja's project consisted of analyzing existing research on reunification and conducting qualitative research with a sample of parents and key informants. The purpose of this study was to identify the challenges families faced during and after the reunification process and make recommendations for how CLS could better support its clients.

According to a report released by the Data Analysis Unit from the Department of Human Services (DHS) in March 2010, there were a total of 4934 children in dependent placement in Philadelphia as of December 2009. A September 2008 report utilizing data from the Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS), a federal database that collects case level information on every child placed in foster care nationwide, reported that 43% of children reunified with their birth families in Philadelphia returned to foster care within 12 months after reunification — compared to 28% in Pennsylvania and 30% nationally.

Despite the importance of stability in a child's life, reunification services have not attracted the degree of research attention as have other child welfare services, such as family preservation and child protection. Thus, the evidence base for successful reunification programs and practices was especially thin. The research that was available on foster care re-entry focused on predictive characteristics of children who re-enter the child welfare system within 12 months of being reunified as well as those of their families.

With Philadelphia representing a third of all children in foster care in Pennsylvania between April 2008 and March 2009, it was imperative to find out what problems were contributing to this high rate of re-entry.



DISCOVERY

The objective of this study was to identify recurrent and systemic problems families face before and after reunification that may contribute to foster care re-entry.

To accomplish this, Wanja interviewed parents and child welfare specialists. She hoped to use the findings to strengthen the legal services provided to the affected families by her partner, CLS, and improve practice within the child welfare system.

Wanja's research sample consisted of birth parents that had recently reunified or were scheduled to reunify. Parent participants, from the clientele of the Family Advocacy Unit at CLS, were referred for interviews.

Key components of this phase included in-depth interviews with 20 birth parents: All were women between 19 to 42 years old. Twelve of the women identified as African-American, five as Caucasian, and three as Hispanic.

Seventeen of the birth parents had reunified with at least one of their children. Three were close to reunification at the time of the interview.

FINDINGS

Concern: What were the barriers to successful reunification identified by parents?

In interviews, parents shared information about the problems that arose after reunification and how they dealt with them. Specific problems included: managing adjustment issues, obtaining mental health services for children, transferring to new schools, reinstating public benefits, obtaining child care, losing employment, inflexibility in choice of service providers, logistical difficulties, and the lack of clarity about how to get help without triggering foster care re-entry.

Inadequate Parental Preparation Services: All seventeen of the reunified parents indicated that due to the inadequate quality and content of reunification preparation by providers, they had experienced some adjustment challenges after their child returned home from foster care. Parents felt that they were unable to criticize the services they were given, stating that if they did, they feared their case worker would take their child away in retaliation. Mothers also reported anxiety over reasserting their role as a parent and re-establishing parenting routines due to the fear of losing their child again.

Parents felt unprepared to deal with their children's mental and behavioral health challenges. They noticed disruptive behaviors at school or at home after reunification, yet were frustrated by the fact that after reunification, their child's social and behavioral services were discontinued. In some cases, the neighborhood school was not able to provide the appropriate services for their child.

Mothers stated that their childcare options were severely limited by DHS involvement, particularly in cases when the parent was reunified with some of their children while their other children remained in foster care.

Six of the seventeen parents lost their jobs once their child returned home. Some could not sustain employment while meeting the requirements they were mandated to complete prior to and after reunification to maintain custody.

Parents reported that they did not understand what aftercare services consisted of and they did not feel meaningfully engaged in the planning process or during aftercare service provision. Most parents were unaware of any of the services that were offered in the aftercare program and were not given adequate opportunity to plan for using them.

Timeliness of the Reunification Process: There were unexpected processing delays for childcare subsidies that led to the lack of timely childcare and, in some cases, loss of employment. Out of the seventeen parents whose children were already reunified at the time of the interview, five reported childcare challenges after reunification.

Childcare was particularly difficult for working parents, especially those that received vague reunification notices. One mother explained that she was not aware of the exact date her child would be returned to her, and therefore did not have arrangements for childcare prior to reunification. Others reported losing their jobs after reunification because they were not aware when reunification would occur and therefore did not make arrangements for childcare.

Parents also spoke of the challenges they faced when navigating the school system after reunification. Some parents faced enrollment delays because they were not given the documents they needed to enroll their child in school.

Parents experienced problems obtaining or maintaining public welfare benefits for themselves and for their children. This included general assistance and SSI among others. They reported facing delays getting public benefits reinstated once the children returned home, which strained their financial stability after reunification. Five of the twenty parents interviewed stated that they lost their public welfare benefits once their children were removed from home. For families struggling with poverty, losing public benefits made it even harder for the parent to maintain the economic stability and housing necessary to take care of their children.

Concern: What were the barriers to successful reunification identified by child welfare professionals?

In addition to parent interviews, data was collected utilizing individual interviews and focus groups with diverse groups of child welfare professionals who practice in and outside Philadelphia. The child welfare professionals interviewed shared the perception that the quality and content of services provided to parents prior to reunification was inadequate and did not achieve their purpose.

Misaligned Goals: The Family Service Plan (FSP) is a legal document that details the services that are provided to a family seeking reunification and the goals a parent will accomplish to increase their chances of reunification. Despite the importance of the FSP, many professionals who participated in this study indicated that this document does not always reflect the actual needs of the family. They also perceived a lack of effectiveness in mandated services and interventions. Participants pointed out a tendency to send families to routine interventions that were unnecessary.

Service Quality: Many professionals noted the poor quality of parenting training both in terms of content and teaching techniques. Professionals cited their lack of early involvement in the FSP process and untimely receipt of the FSP and other necessary documents from DHS, as barriers to implementing the services they were required to provide.

Inadequate Tools: All professionals agreed that compliance alone is an inadequate measure of whether a child should be reunified with his/her parent. Professionals said they lacked proper assessment tools and the skills to accurately and comprehensively assess parenting ability and the family's needs.

Unclear direction: Focus group participants struggled to give a clear explanation of what "aftercare service" involves. While many explained that aftercare ensures that children are safe and that the family is stable, they could not explain how aftercare workers accomplished these goals or what modalities and interventions were utilized to meet the desired outcome. Even providers of aftercare services could not always clearly articulate which interventions they used to stabilize families after reunification.

Cross-Systems Communication: Consistent with information from parent interviews, service professionals described communication problems with the education system. Negative and critical opinions of the School District of Philadelphia were pervasive and affected opinions about the expectation of youth to successfully attend school. As parents indicated, providers also cited enrollment delays due to a lack of timely provision of required paperwork.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings from this research called for revisions to child welfare practices and policies to improve reunification outcomes for children and their families.

Overall, the system needs to focus on providing family-centered services that are evidence- and outcome-based and most importantly, guided by individual family and children's needs. Furthermore, revised accountability measures could help ensure that providers utilize appropriate interventions and children and families receive the services they need for successful reunification.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS ARE AS FOLLOWS:

Improvements to Post-Reunification Planning and Services For Parents:

- ⇒ All families must receive post-reunification services tailored to their specific needs.
- ⇒ Providers must ensure that aftercare services are implemented in a manner that incorporates the voice of the parent and looks at the welfare of the family as a whole.
- ⇒ Providers must engage parents as partners early in the process and ensure their input is incorporated in planning and decision making.
- ⇒ Parents must be given an early and aggressive plan for anticipated post-reunification issues and needs such as childcare and public benefits.
- ⇒ Diversifying and strengthening parenting programs is necessary.

Improvements to Post-Reunification Planning and Services for DHS and Other Stakeholders:

- ⇒ Systems must implement policies that ensure essential planning for foreseeable needs, such as childcare, prior to reunification.
- ⇒ To improve collaboration between multiple systems, it is necessary to include all team members early in reunification planning and solicit their input when determining post-reunification needs.
- ⇒ Team members must facilitate information sharing between providers and establish MOUs with other stakeholders such as school and community behavioral health systems to reduce delays in school engagement, and receipt of behavioral health care and public benefits after reunification.
- ⇒ DHS should revise provider training for post-reunification services to ensure that there is a clear understanding of the intended purpose of interventions and that training is of high quality and relevant for meeting the needs of families.
- ⇒ All systems must review the required training for workers who provide services to families of children with mental health and behavioral issues.

Improvements to Post-Reunification Planning and Services for Providers:

- ⇒ Providers need to share clear and timely information about the aftercare services and interventions available to families and ensure that they offer evidence-based interventions.
- ⇒ Providers should regularly solicit feedback from birth parents on aspects of aftercare and other reunification services to determine service effectiveness and suggestions for improvements.
- ⇒ To ensure meaningful service delivery and quality practice, post-reunification outcome measures need to be revisited and data collection processes streamlined.



OUTCOMES: MOVING THE DIAL

Community Legal Services continues to use Wanja's research and findings to improve reunification outcomes for vulnerable families. Her research identified some common problems that families tend to experience, which influence reunification outcomes. Her work has also provided useful evidence that has helped CLS advocate for policy and practice reforms.

Stoneleigh Foundation

The Stoneleigh Emerging Leader Fellowship Program provides recent graduates with an opportunity to help design and carry out social change projects in the fields of child welfare, juvenile justice, education and behavioral health, with the support of a local partner organization. The Fellowship is designed to provide a dynamic, hands-on experience for the Emerging Leader Fellow, resulting in a tangible product that advances the work of the partner organization.

For more information about Stoneleigh Foundation and our fellowship programs, contact us at 215-735-7089 or visit our website at www.stoneleighfoundation.org

Wanja Ogongi, PhD

Prior to receiving a Stoneleigh Emerging Leader Fellowship, Wanja worked as a foster care social worker in Philadelphia. It was during this time that she discovered that too often little effort went into ensuring that the biological parent received needed support. She also noticed that when a child was reunited with his or her family, there was little contact between the foster care worker and the newly assigned aftercare worker. A native of Kenya, Wanja has also advocated for child and family rights in her home country.

Community Legal Services

The mission of Community Legal Services (CLS) of Philadelphia is to help low-income Philadelphia residents obtain equal access to justice by providing them with advice and representation in civil legal matters; advocating for their legal rights; and conducting community education about the legal issues that affect them.

For more information about this project, contact Community Legal Services at 215-981-3765 or visit their website www.clspila.org

State focused Advocacy: As a member of the Pennsylvania Department of Public Welfare (DPW) workgroup charged with drafting a new policy on post-reunification planning, CLS has used Wanja's research to advocate for better reunification planning policy. The goal of the workgroup was to address the problem of re-entry to care. As the only Pennsylvania specific research study that has been done on reunification barriers, the workgroup relied on Wanja's report and broadly incorporated her recommendations into the text of its draft policy bulletin, which included encouraging the use of evidence-based practices and stronger advance planning.

Philadelphia focused Advocacy: Wanja and CLS shared her research findings and recommendations with the Department of Human Services. As her fellowship was ending, the Department was beginning a major transition to a single case management model called Improving Outcomes for Children (IOC). During the planning and development of IOC, CLS was asked to participate in workgroups and the Steering Committee informing the transformation. Wanja's work is reflected in the new practice model, which requires aftercare services for all children returning home from any placement.

As the IOC unfolds, CLS will continue to provide input to DHS and work directly with the community-based agencies providing case management and aftercare services to families to ensure that Wanja's findings inform their aftercare programs.

Community Legal Services: Wanja has impacted CLS' internal practices as well. Moving forward, CLS will use her findings to strengthen its counsel, social work practices, and communications with clients regarding public benefits and service transfer. As a result of Wanja's work, CLS has identified the need to participate in aftercare meetings and keep cases open post reunification to provide necessary follow-up counsel.



NEXT STEPS: WHERE IS THE DIAL NOW?

CLS continues to advocate with DHS regarding systemic reunification-related problems and standards of aftercare. CLS will also engage with the behavioral health system to highlight the service disruption that frequently occurs post-reunification and collaborate on ways to minimize this.

In addition to the internal practice and protocol changes, CLS is drafting a sample protocol document which will be shared with parent and child advocates outside the agency.

Wanja Ogongi: Wanja's fellowship ended in June 2010. She used her fellowship research to complete her dissertation and obtain her PhD from Widener University.

