

Site Visit Report: A Parent for Every Child (PFEC)

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Award #: 90CO1038

Cluster: Adoption Opportunities: Diligent Recruitment of Families for Children in the Foster Care System

Grantee: New York State Office of Children and Family Services

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SUMMARY

Approximately 3,000 children in New York State are eligible and waiting to be adopted. Of those children, about 1,500 (currently 1,050) do not have an identified adoption resource. Approximately 325 children freed for adoption have emotional, behavioral, and developmental challenges so serious that residential treatment is needed. On average, these children have been legally free for adoption for more than 7 years and in care more than 11 years.

The New York State Office of Children and Family Services (OCFS) received a grant from the Children's Bureau to establish the program A Parent for Every Child (PFEC). Its goal is to find permanent families for at least 50 youth who are available for adoption.

The targeted group includes children who reside in a facility licensed or operated by:

- New York State (NYS) Office of Mental Health
- NYS Office of People with Developmental Disabilities
- OCFS juvenile justice facilities

The target group also includes youth residing in child welfare residential, or congregate, care who have a permanency goal other than adoption. PFEC will recruit a pool of families willing to adopt these children with special needs and provide training on their unique parenting requirements.

The site visit occurred in May 2010 at the New York City Regional Office of OCFS, the OCFS Central Office, and the Parsons Child & Family Center, a PFEC project partner site.

Specific action steps that were in the process of being implemented by PFEC staff were the following:

- Conduct a public awareness campaign to dispel misconceptions about the adoption of youth with disabilities
- Implement targeted recruiting to match these youth with resource families with the skills and commitment to meet their needs
- Develop specialized training for families without experience who are open to adopting children with disabilities
- Engage Adoption Navigators—experienced adoptive parents who help potential adoptive parents navigate the system and overcome barriers
- Identify successful recruiting practices that will work for the target population
- Collaborate through a statewide partnership with private agencies to implement promising practices such as child-specific permanency recruitment through family search and engagement, and activities and media that feature waiting children

One highlight of the project is the development of Adoption Chronicles, which are video interviews that provide prospective parents with indepth profiles of children. Another feature of the project is the Child Survey and Database, which facilitates the staff's ability to capture data that measure PFEC's effects on intervention and control group children and youth. The database also functions as a case management tool (e.g., contacts, recruitment strategies, milestones, child characteristics, and needs).

Among the challenges the State staff experienced are separating State agency and project responsibilities, the poor economy and staff layoffs, agency closures, lack of continuing care, and incomplete files for children.

At the time of the site visit, after the first year planning period, the project experienced several successes:

- Identification of resource families for 12 children
- Development of data collection instruments
- Significant data cleanup of New York State's Child Care Review System, which tracks children in foster care
- Training for all PFEC Permanency Specialists on:
 - National Resource Center for Adoption's "Adoption Competency Curriculum"
 - Family search and engagement from the National Resource Center for Permanency and Family Connections
 - Family finding by Kevin Campbell
- Improvements in making the children and youth in the target population a priority on agency agendas
- Increased awareness of the need for wraparound, adoption-competent, post adoption services

Reprinted from *Children's Bureau Express*, "Site Visit: A Parent for Every Child (PFEC)" (<http://cbexpress.acf.hhs.gov>).

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

Abstract *(adapted from the grant application)*

A Parent for Every Child (PFEC) will find permanent families for at least 50 youth. Targeted youth are legally freed for adoption and reside in a facility licensed or operated by:

- New York State (NYS) Office of Mental Health
- NYS Office of Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities
- Office of Children and Family Services' juvenile justice facilities

The target group also includes youth residing in child welfare residential (congregate) care who are available to be adopted and have a permanency goal other than adoption. PFEC will recruit a pool of families willing to adopt these children with special needs and provide training on their unique parenting requirements. Although the PFEC target population includes many children ages 20+, the Bureau of Research and Evaluation decided to exclude children over 19.5 years old at the time the sample was drawn. This decision was made in consultation with the project supervisor and program director, so the program would have time to make an impact before children aged out of eligibility for foster care services at age 21.

General characteristics of the intervention group:

- 67 percent male, 33 percent female
- Older (age 17+)
- African-American
- Eligible for adoption
- Residing in Residential Treatment Centers
- Planned Permanency Goal of other planned living arrangement or adult residential care

While adoption is clearly the preferred permanency outcome for these children, New York will allow for other permanent relationships, if appropriate.

PFEC engages in the following in order to meet the program's goals:

- **Conduct a public awareness campaign** to dispel misconceptions about the adoption of disabled youth
- **Implement targeted recruiting** to match these youth with a pool of available families with the skills and inclination to meet their needs
- **Develop specialized training** for families without experience who are open to special needs adoption
- **Engage "Adoption Navigators"**—experienced adoptive parents who help potential adoptive parents navigate the system and overcome barriers
- **Identify successful general-population recruiting practices** that will work for the target population
- **Implement promising practices**—including child-specific permanency recruitment through family search and engagement as well as activities and

media that feature waiting children—through a statewide partnership with private agencies

- **Document support needed by foster families** and tailor connections to support programs to facilitate adoption
- **Create statewide practice guidance and training** on successful strategies for expediting placement of special needs and juvenile justice youth freed for adoption
- **Propose policy and regulatory changes** as needed to reduce systemic barriers to the adoption of cross-system children
- **Improve concurrent planning processes** for these populations, bringing them into alignment with best practice

Need for This Service

There are more than 3,700 children in New York State who are eligible and waiting to be adopted. Of those children, about 1,500 (currently 1,050) do not have an identified adoption resource. Approximately 325 children freed for adoption have emotional, behavioral, and developmental challenges so serious that residential treatment is needed. On average, these children have been freed for more than 7 years and in care more than 11 years. These children have had no permanency focus throughout the nation.

SITE VISIT HIGHLIGHTS

The site visit occurred May 5–6, 2010, in three locations:

- New York (NY) State Office of Children & Family Services (OCFS), New York City (NYC) Regional Office
- OCFS Central Office
- Parsons Child & Family Center (a Parent for Every Child [PFEC] project partner site)

May 5

The visitor spent a full day at the NYC Regional Office with PFEC project staff who work directly with the target population, the evaluator, and PFEC community partners, including:

- Brenda Rivera – PFEC Project Supervisor, NY OCFS
- Michael Carroll – PFEC Director, Hillside Children's Center
- Randi Rosenblum – PFEC Evaluator, Chapin Hall
- Karry Monahan-Price – PFEC Evaluator, Chapin Hall
- Cheryl Larrier – PFEC Adoption Specialist, OCFS, NYC Regional Office
- Dorothy Naimo – PFEC Adoption Specialist, Administration for Children's Services
- Yolanda Dillard – PFEC Adoption Specialist, Administration for Children's Services
- Pat O'Brien – PFEC Project Partner, Director, You Gotta Believe!
- Joanne Ruppel – PFEC Researcher, NY OCFS (via telephone)

Project staff were asked to talk about what they felt was most important for others to know about the program, target population, community, challenges and success, and results thus far. Findings are reported in the Lessons Learned section.

May 6

The visitor spent the morning at OCFS with PFEC project senior staff and the evaluator, including:

- Brenda Rivera – PFEC Project Supervisor, OCFS
- Michael Carroll – PFEC Director, Hillside Children's Center
- Carol McCarthy – PFEC Consultant, NY OCFS
- Joanne Ruppel – PFEC Researcher, NY OCFS

Staff were asked what they felt was most important for others to know about the program, target population, community, challenges and success, and results thus far. Findings are reported in the Lessons Learned section.

The afternoon was spent at the main office of one of PFEC's project partners, Parsons Child & Family Center, with the above-listed program staff and:

- Michael J. Finn – PFEC Permanency Specialist, Hillside Children's Center
- Lisa Maynard – PFEC Consultant, Director of Adoptions, Hillside Children's Center
- Stephen McCall – PFEC Permanency Specialist, You Gotta Believe!
- Pat Dudley – PFEC Permanency Specialist, You Gotta Believe!
- E. Denise Royal – PFEC Permanency Specialist, You Gotta Believe!
- Kelly Salamone – PFEC Permanency Specialist, Parsons Child & Family Center
- Damarise Alexander-Mann – PFEC Consultant, Parsons Child & Family Center, Director, Foster Care & Adoption Program

The visitor:

- Observed PFEC Permanency Specialists preparing for a workshop presentation at the NY State Citizens' Coalition for Children's 21st annual statewide conference
- Attended a 90-minute workshop given by the Project Director and five Permanency Specialists, where they discussed the barriers and successes encountered by youth and permanency resources
- Previewed many of the Adoption Chronicles for PFEC project target children and youth (with firewalls in place to respect confidentiality)

LESSONS LEARNED

Unique and Innovative Features

A Parent for Every Child (PFEC) Project Child Survey and Database

The project database facilitates staff's ability to capture data that speak to PFEC's effects on intervention and control group children and youth. The database also functions as a case management tool (e.g., contacts, recruitment strategies, milestones, child characteristics, and needs). Note: A PDF of the PFEC Project Child Survey and screen shots that describe the database content can be found in the Attachments section.

The evaluator designed the web-based database tool with more than 80 variables and worked with project staff to determine:

- How to label and define each variable accurately
- When to enter particular types of data (e.g., child and parent enrollment process)
- The kinds of data to be entered on control group children
- How variables will be linked
- How reports and reminders will be generated
- Parameters for family inclusion
- Procedures for collecting information on the control group

As of March 30, 2010, 70 percent of the first cohort of intervention cases had been entered into the database. In the other 30 percent of cases, Permanency Specialists were having difficulty finding up-to-date information in the case records. Information continues to be gathered during site visits to facilities. However, some youth have transitioned to new sites, and the Permanency Specialists were in the initial stages of establishing relationships with staff at these facilities.

Permanency Specialists' comfort level has grown rapidly as a result of the evaluator's focus on training, technical assistance, and quality control. The evaluation team began formal database trainings to PFEC project staff in January 2010, and a close working relationship has continued. The evaluator is aware of the many demands on staff, as well as the importance of making sure the technology is well integrated into project work.

Adoption Chronicles

The Adoption Chronicles are on-screen interviews that provide prospective parents with in-depth profiles of individual children. Young people are asked questions that provide a snapshot of their personality, their likes and dislikes, and how they see themselves. If a child is nonverbal or unable to communicate, a worker close to the case is interviewed.

Challenges

Some of the more common challenges encountered by project staff included:

- **Separating State agency and project responsibilities.** This arises especially when the regional adoption specialists who supervise agencies are required to intervene in control group cases.
- **Poor economy/staff layoffs.** Around the time of PFEC project start-up, agency layoffs resulted in workers needing to be reoriented, reassigned, and trained.
- **Agency closures.** As a result of the economic downturn, a large number of voluntary agencies are closing, creating issues of reassigning kids in the intervention and control groups.
- **Youth selection.** Districts were "offering" children and youth that they thought would be best suited or most easily matched with a resource family. PFEC staff could not allow this, as the target population was selected at random.
- **Lack of awareness.** Voluntary agencies and Administration for Children's Services (ACS) are sometimes unaware of PFEC, despite the Commissioner being very much on board. The information is not always filtering down.
- **Lack of continuing care.** PFEC Advisory Board and project staff are very concerned about what will happen to the target population after they age out. Many of the systems don't have continuing care after age 21. Kids who are adopted receive postadoption services, but what about kids who age out without a family?
- **Selection of outcome indicators.** The Performance Management Online Tool (PM-OTOOL) allows Federal grantees to select performance measures and submit data on these measures at the end of each reporting period. Federal staff and grantees can then create reports that reflect and analyze individual grantee data or aggregated data for a program for a particular reporting period or across multiple reporting periods. The PFEC project feels that the previously selected diligent recruitment cluster outcomes are not reflective of their project's work.
- **Identifying necessary postadoption services.** Children placed through PFEC have a wide array of special needs that must be met on a case by case basis. Finding and accessing more post-adoption services to prevent disruption is an ongoing challenge for the program.
- **Incomplete Files for children.** Many of the ACS case files for children in PFEC only have information up to 2007. Incomplete files on children make it more difficult to provide a comprehensive picture of the child and his or her needs.

Successful Strategies and Keys to Success

- **Letter to ACS Commissioners.** A letter from the Director of New York State (NYS) Adoption Services and PFEC Project Supervisor to ACS Commissioners helped create full and immediate buy-in from ACS. The letter summarized the project, confirmed the selection of a child or children from the Commissioners' districts, and detailed next steps.
- **PFEC Permanency Specialists' knowledge of local resources.** Every community has slightly different strengths and systems of family support. PFEC Permanency Specialists' knowledge of what's available in each community, and their ability to get families connected to these often-informal community networks and resources, has been crucial to PFEC's success.
- **Viewing workers as permanency resources.** Permanency Specialists are having success targeting the child or youth's regular workers as a permanency resource.

- **Focused efforts.** Doing PFEC as a study, with control and intervention groups and randomized selection, is thought to be more conducive to the project's success than simply trying to reach as many in the target population as possible.
- **Interjurisdictional placements.** There has been occasional resistance to interjurisdictional placements (e.g., placing in New York City from Westchester County); PFEC project partner relationships make it possible to work through these issues.
- **Defining permanency.** The NYS Office of Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities and the NYS Office of Mental Health systems don't allow for permanency as child welfare defines it. These systems tend to think of the PFEC target population as "unadoptable." (PFEC advisory group meetings have been helpful in helping their partners to see that with the proper recruitment strategies and post-adoption supports, these children can achieve permanency with a family rather than in an institutional setting.)

OUTCOMES

A Parent for Every Child (PFEC) has made progress toward reaching permanency goals for this population of children, one that experiences many challenges. The following is a brief description of their accomplishments and the dissemination strategies intended to inform the field about PFEC practices.

Summary of Major Accomplishments

By the time of the site visit, after a 1-year planning period, the PFEC project had already experienced a number of successes, including:

- **Resource families identified** for 12 children
- **Data collection instruments developed** – e.g., what the diligent recruitment strategies would be and how/when to capture data
- **Significant data cleanup** of the New York State (NYS) Child Care Review System, which tracks children and youth in foster care
- **Training for all PFEC Permanency Specialists**, including:
 - National Resource Center (NRC) for Adoption's Adoption Competency Curriculum
 - NRC for Permanency and Family Connections curriculum on family search and engagement.
 - Family Finding by Kevin Campbell
- **Decreased resistance** to making the children and youth in the target population a priority on agency agendas
- **Increased awareness** of the need for wraparound adoption-competent postadoption services

Dissemination Activities

PFEC presented program successes and challenges at the NYS Citizens' Coalition for Children 21st Annual Statewide Conference (<http://nysccc.org/conference/2010-conference>), May 7-8, 2010 (Friday, May 7, 10:30 am).

Workshop Description: Learn about a new federally funded multisystem effort to find families for at least 50 youth who reside in an NYS Office of Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities or NYS Office of Mental Health residence or an Office of Children and Family Services juvenile justice facility. Barriers encountered by youth, and permanency resources and successes will be discussed. *Mike Finn, Denise Royal, Pat Dudley, Kelly Hart Salamone, Stephen McCall (Michael Carroll, Moderator)*

ATTACHMENTS

- PFEC Screen Shots
- Letter to the Commissioners
- Barriers to Permanency Study
- PFEC Project Child Survey
- PFEC Newsletter