Between People and Places
Reducing Upheaval for Children Moving Around in Connecticut Foster Care

Stephanie Luczak, Nicole Updegrove, and Lauren Ruth, Ph.D.

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**Introduction**

For any child, moving to a new place can evoke uncertainty and anxiety. A move may present new opportunities: a new school filled with new teachers and friends, a different neighborhood with unknown people and places, and a new space to call home. With new and exciting opportunities may also come devastating loss: leaving school connections, saying goodbye to familiar faces and routines, and the possible loss of personal possessions in the shuffle. Moving from place to place is a regular experience for some children in foster care. When children and youth in foster care are moved to new placements, the transition may bring more upheaval: each new placement brings a new set of adult caregivers with different routines, personalities, and implicit or explicit expectations. The experience of placement changes can disrupt any sense of predictability and belonging for children in care.

A child’s initial removal from the biological family’s home constitutes the first placement change, but many more often follow. The goal of modern child welfare systems is to secure “permanency” outcomes – legally permanent, nurturing families and other enduring relationships – for every system-involved child. Permanency may consist of reunification with biological family, a legal transfer of guardianship, or adoption. Often, a child’s first out-of-home placement is not their ultimate, permanent destination; rather, children are moved between placements as needed in search of a match that can best suit their needs.

There are many reasons why children may be removed from an out-of-home placement: conflict between children and foster parents, a need for more intensive clinical care, or a transition into a placement that may offer permanency, such as a pre-adoptive foster home. Although in the short-term, most individual placement changes occur to advance the child’s best interest, in the long-term, placement changes can compound the trauma and upheaval experienced in the child welfare system.

The Department of Children and Families (DCF), Connecticut’s child welfare agency, serves to protect and promote the well-being of all children and youth, particularly those in state care. In conjunction with recent federal changes, DCF has made great strides towards securing permanency for all children by reducing the use of congregate care settings, increasing placement of children in foster care with relatives (kinship care), and increasing adoptions. These reforms are part of a significant and positive philosophical shift across child welfare systems nationwide, from an old model that sought safe homes in which to house children until adulthood to a contemporary model that seeks to find true and enduring family for every child. Connecticut DCF has been recognized as a national leader for sharply reducing the number of children in congregate care between 2004 and 2013. Yet, even today, some children live in transition in the foster care system until they “age out” into adulthood. Regardless of ultimate permanency outcomes, many children and youth in foster care experience multiple placement changes and the associated upheaval during their time in care. Ensuring that children experience smoother transitions into new placements can help increase the likelihood that the placement will endure.
As we will explore, experiencing multiple placement changes increases the risk of negative outcomes for children in foster care. This paper discusses a review of the literature, DCF policies and practices related to placement changes, the current realities for children in foster care, and a comparative examination of state practice. Through these various lenses, we hope to both expand awareness of placement changes and make recommendations to maximize stability and minimize upheaval for children in care.
Literature Review

Over the last two decades, child welfare research has focused largely on how and when children enter and exit foster care, with less emphasis upon what happens in between – specifically placement changes and placement stability. This section discusses the limited available research on placement changes and placement stability that may have implications for policies and practice around placement changes for children and youth in care. Notably, we were unable to identify any studies on the transition experience itself or youth’s perspectives of these experiences. This paper begins to explore those themes, but there is a pressing need for more empirical research to inform the creation of efficient policies that maximize stability and positive long-term outcomes for children in care.

The Nature of Placement Changes: Who is at Risk?

While empirical studies have not determined a predictable pattern of placement moves,1,2 a body of research has identified some factors that increase the risk of experiencing a placement change.3-6

- According to one study, the greatest risk of placement change occurs during the first 6-month period in the first out-of-home placement.3 If a child is removed from the initial out-of-home placement, the risk of a subsequent placement change increases.6
- Children who exhibit frequent maladaptive behavior(s) and/or an emotional disturbance are at the highest risk for experiencing a placement change.4,6
- Separate studies conducted within the past three decades confirm that older child age is associated with increased risk for placement change.5

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1 Wulczyn, Kogan, & Harden (2003) analyzed placement moves of children in foster care in New York City. Placement changes were counted as each move before the final permanency goal. The authors used a multivariate regression analysis to account for factors such as age, placement type, and gender. The researchers concluded that there was no predictable pattern for placement movement but that certain factors impact placement stability.
2 James, Landsverk, & Sylmen (2004) retrospectively examined the placement patterns of youth in care in San Diego County. Using administrative data, the researchers use an inductive reasoning methodology to classify placement movement patterns in two ways: duration of longest placement and movement between the degree of restrictiveness of placement type (i.e., relative foster care [less restrictive] versus a group home [more restrictive]). While the researchers expanded the conceptualization of placement stability based on placement changes (early stability, later stability, variable stability, no stability), the researchers did not find any causal relationships between predictors and patterns.
3 Wulczyn et al. (2003) confirmed this movement trajectory through an extended event count regression model.
4 Chamberlain, Price, Reid, Landsverk, Fisher, & Stoolmiller (2006) administered the Parent Daily Report (PDR) Checklist to 246 foster parents in California at three different points in time, and placement changes were tracked for the following year. Foster parents reported an average 5.77 identified items on the PDR Checklist per day. The author used a Cox hazard regression analysis, in which the baseline number of behaviors from the Parent Daily Report Checklist had significant predictive linear effects. Baseline PDR increased the hazard of disruption by 17 percent for every behavior reported.
5 As cited by Wulczyn et al. (2003), several studies conducted by John Pardeck (Pardeck 1945, 1985, Pardeck, Murphy, & Fitzwater, 1985) suggests that older age is associated with increased rates of placement changes. Wulczyn et al.’s (2003) study confirms that this relationship is still significant.
- Children in relative foster care experience greater placement stability compared to their comparative cohort in non-relative foster care.  

Despite these factors, research also suggests that placement changes are a common experience for youth who spend significant time in foster care:

- Regardless of any individual child factors, as a child’s length of time spent in foster care increases, so does the likelihood of a placement change. 

**Understanding the Complex Nature of Attachment**

**Attachment Theory**

Almost fifty years of research in the fields of psychology and child development have shown that the relationships and patterns of interaction children develop with their caregivers early in life impact how that child will form relationships with others throughout life as well as many other facets of their lived experience. These patterns of behavior, called attachment orientations, are “orientations toward relationships that are largely learned from our experiences with others” (p. 18). These orientations, learned through interactions with primary caregivers throughout childhood, are strong predictors of the patterns of relationship behavior children will exhibit as adults. This section will briefly discuss what these patterns of attachment are, how children form patterns of attachment, and the lasting influence of patterns of attachment.

Attachment orientations are conceptualized through two broad themes. First, people differ in their **avoidance of intimacy**, which describes the ease with which a person accepts care from others and displays care for others. Second, people differ in their **anxiety about abandonment**, which describes the people’s dread that others will find them unworthy of care and leave. When people are relatively low in both avoidance of intimacy and anxiety about abandonment—that is they easily accept love, and don’t worry about love being withdrawn—they are referred to as displaying a **secure attachment style**. People who display large amounts of avoidance of intimacy and/or anxiety about attachment are described as having an **insecure attachment style**.

The attachment styles children develop are most strongly predicted by their parents’ attitudes toward parenting. Even when babies are temperamental or colicky, patient and loving parenting increases the likeliness that children will group up displaying a secure attachment style. The influence of parenting style on children’s attachment style continues throughout childhood and adolescence. How parents interact with their pre-teens in seventh grade predicts how teenagers express complex emotions and develop romantic relationships and friendships years later.

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6 Webster, Barth, & Needell (2000) conducted a study examining placement changes during an eight-year period with over 5,000 children using longitudinal administrative data. The authors found that children in relative foster care had fewer placement changes than those in non-relative foster care, regardless of the youth’s age.
Beyond impacting children’s relationships, attachment style impacts children’s learning, behaviors, and self-perceptions. Children with secure attachment styles are more likely to explore their environments, to interact with new people, and to actively solve problems rather than responding with frustration or helplessness.  

Unsurprisingly, children with secure attachment styles are more likely to develop prosocial behaviors throughout the stages of their childhood, while children with insecure attachment styles are more likely to develop aggressive behaviors, maladaptive externalizing behaviors such as theft and cheating, and substance abuse as a coping mechanism. Finally, attachment style impacts the way that children as well as adults view themselves; people with insecure attachment styles tend to have lower self-esteem, are more shy, and have lower self-efficacy.

Although attachment styles begin to develop as a response to a child’s first caregiver in infancy and toddlerhood, peoples’ attachment styles continue to be influenced through experiences with caregivers and other close relationships in youth and adulthood. Attachment styles can be unlearned over time, and this is particularly true for insecure attachment styles. That is to say, through experiencing sensitive, responsive, and predictable loving relationships, people’s avoidance of intimacy and anxiety about abandonment can diminish, and formerly insecurely attached people may begin being able to develop secure orientations toward relationships.

**Forming and Sustaining Relationships while Moving Throughout Foster Care**

Children involved in the child welfare system may enter the system already having an insecure attachment style, and they risk developing further anxiety and avoidance during their time in foster care. Many children enter the foster care system due to having been physically or emotionally abused or neglected by their caregivers. Children who have experienced abuse are more likely to develop avoidance of intimacy; they learn that their caregiver may not be safe and cannot be trusted, and they learn to keep close enough to their caregiver so as not to anger the caregiver but far enough away to not get hurt. Children who have experienced neglect are more likely to develop anxiety about abandonment; they learn that their caregiver is not dependable and will not always be available to meet their needs, and this may prompt the children to develop jealousy of others viewed as rivals for caregiver attention and behave in a way that is needy and lacks independence. Childhood trauma such as abuse or neglect has long been known to predict depression and anxiety in adulthood, and recent research suggests that attachment style may explain this relationship.

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7 In one of the most important experiments conducted to understand attachment, Mary Ainsworth and colleagues (1978) placed infants in a strange room and observed the infants’ behaviors in the presence and absence of their parents. Children with secure attachment styles, in the presence of their parents, would explore the room. When a new adult entered the room, the securely attached children would interact with this new adult. When the children’s parents left the room, the children would show distress but resume exploration upon their parents return. If their parents left the room a second time, these children would continue exploring the room and interacting with the new adult, indicating that they understood their parents would come back. Children with insecure attachment styles were less likely to explore the room, less likely to interact with the new adult, and sometimes displayed resentment or helpless passivity when their parents left the room.
in part explains negative mental health outcomes including depression, anxiety, low self-esteem, and chronic stress.

Although children who experience abuse and neglect are at risk of developing insecure attachment styles in response to this abuse and neglect, removing children from their homes may also result in children developing insecure attachment styles. Longitudinal research has found that when comparing children who were removed from maltreatment and placed in foster homes, children who were maltreated but continued living at home, and children who had not experienced maltreatment, children placed in foster homes displayed greater levels of internalizing and externalizing maladaptive behaviors than children who had experienced maltreatment but continued living at home.\textsuperscript{9} This suggests that in some situations, the act of removal from home may result in behaviors associated with insecure attachment. Further, children placed in residential state care after the age of seven display higher levels of anxiety, depression, and social maladjustment than children placed in residential state care earlier in life,\textsuperscript{mn} suggesting that upsetting long-formed attachments can lead to the negative mental health outcomes of having an insecure attachment style.

Fortunately, creating significant and positive relationships with new adults can serve to increase the resiliency of children in foster care and increase secure attachment.\textsuperscript{nn,oo} Foster parent sensitivity as well as foster parents’ expectations about what foster parenting will be like both predict whether a foster parent and foster child will form a secure bond.\textsuperscript{pp} Time is also an important influence on whether children and foster parents will develop bonds; longer time with a foster parent is a strong and significant predictor of foster children developing greater security in attachment style.\textsuperscript{qq}

However, experiencing multiple placements or forming an insecure relationship with foster parents will have the opposite effect. When a child in foster care experiences an insecure relationship with their foster parents, or if there is a disruption in a child’s attachment relationship with his or her foster parents, this may lead to extreme behavioral outbursts and psychiatric emergencies.\textsuperscript{rr} Additionally, experiencing numerous placements increases children’s risk of developing internalizing and externalizing behaviors associated with insecure attachment,\textsuperscript{ss} potentially because the child has not experienced sensitive parenting, has not had the time needed to develop secure relationships with foster parents, or because the child has experienced numerous interrupted attachments.

The Effects of Placement Moves on Child Outcomes

Child Behavior

Children who have suffered from traumatic experiences, like abuse or neglect, may have difficulty regulating their emotions, often resulting in changes in behavior.\textsuperscript{tt} For a child or youth in foster care, experiencing multiple placement changes can exacerbate trauma and diminish his or her sense of belonging, leading to both internalizing behaviors (i.e., anxiety or low self-esteem) and externalizing behaviors. Researchers have identified a causal relationship between negative behavior and the experience of multiple placements: several studies point to placement changes leading to an increase
in maladaptive behavior – and vice versa – and is the most commonly cited issue arising from placement instability.\textsuperscript{8,9,uu,ww} This can become a vicious cycle: when children experience repeated placement changes, they may struggle understanding their emotional response to these events and engage in maladaptive behavior leading to a progression of instability and damage to a child’s life.\textsuperscript{ww}

Maladaptive behavior can lead to challenges for both children and their caregivers. When children engage in patterns of maladaptive behavior, caregivers may conclude that extreme measures such as calling the police, using the Emergency Department, or requesting the child’s removal are the only viable means of control. One study published in\textit{Pediatrics} found that as the number of placement changes increase, children in foster care of all ages had an increasing reliance on outpatient care as well as visits to the Emergency Department,\textsuperscript{10} further contributing to instability and turmoil for the child.\textsuperscript{xx}

\textit{Education}

“School mobility,” or children’s movement between different schools, not only interrupts learning, but can also strain relationships and connections with trusted teachers, staff, and peers.\textsuperscript{yy} If placement changes also cause school mobility, foster children may then face significant educational challenges. The federal Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008 attempted to mitigate that risk by requiring state child welfare agencies to develop plans to ensure foster children’s educational stability throughout placement changes, including requiring an assessment of the appropriateness and proximity of the child’s school to determine whether continuing to attend said school remains in the best interest of the child.\textsuperscript{zz} However, if a placement change entails significant geographical relocation, enrollment in a new school may be in the child’s best interest.

The experience of multiple placement changes may increase the probability that children experience at least one school change. Such change may further weaken the child’s emotional development, as well as their educational development. One study found that:

- Children who were in foster care for longer periods (>12 months) of time were more likely to be suspended or expelled from school, and

\textsuperscript{8} In addition to the two studies conducted by Wulczyn et al. (2003), James et al. (2004), and Chamberlain et al. (2006), Newton, Litrownik, & Landsever (2000) was one of the first studies to identify through a sample of 415 youth that unstable placement histories contributed negatively to both internalizing (behavior directed towards self; i.e., social withdrawal, low self-esteem) and externalizing behaviors (behavior directed towards others; i.e., aggression, defiance).
\textsuperscript{9} A later study conducted by Rubin, O’Reilly, Luan, & Localio (2007) determined that regardless of a children’s baseline behavior at the time of entry into out-of-home care, those who do not experience placement stability are at an increased risk for exhibiting maladaptive behavior.
\textsuperscript{10} Rubin, Alessandrini, Fuedtner, Localio, & Hadley (2004) used Medicaid claims linked to foster care administrative data of youth who spent 9 months or more in foster care. The authors determined a temporal relationship between ED visits and placement changes: 75 percent of visits occurred with 3 weeks after a placement change.
• Number of placement changes was associated with having at least one skill delay in academic performance. 11,aaa

Another national study of foster care alumni found that fewer placement changes strongly predicted likelihood of graduating from high school, 12 and that when youth experience one fewer placement change per year, they are 1.8 times more likely to graduate high school while in care. 13,bbb

**Adult Outcomes**

Children who spent time in foster care in childhood tend to face a variety of challenges in adulthood. However, experiences in foster care vary, and children’s unique pathways throughout care are associated with different outcomes. In addition to educational achievement, several studies have shown that placement stability and the number of placements are significant factors that influence adult outcomes.

One study indicated a strong statistical significance 14 between multiple placements and life dissatisfaction, low self-efficacy, and criminal convictions. 15,ccc

These three outcomes have severe negative impacts on quality of life. Both life dissatisfaction and low self-efficacy may hinder trying new things, applying for jobs or pursuing higher education, and developing and exploring social relationships or starting a family. Criminal convictions may lead to jail time, increased social isolation, decreased job opportunities, or continued engagement in criminal behavior. Overall, these three outcomes perpetuate instability and impede opportunities for individuals who grew up in foster care to develop to their full potential and live productive, fulfilling lives.

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11 Zima, Bussing, Freeman, Yang, Belin & Forness (2000) used administrative data from the Los Angeles County Department of Children and Family Services for children ages 6 to 12 living in out-of-home placements and stratified the sample for children in care for both more than 6 months and more than 12 months. Interviews were then conducted with the foster parent, youth, and the youth’s current school teacher regarding academic performance and maladaptive behavior.

12 Pecora, Williams, Kessler, Hiripi, O’Brien, Emerson, Herrick & Torres (2006) presented case records and interviews regarding educational achievements including high school graduation for over 1,000 foster care alumni. Using an exploratory analysis and logistic regression analyses, the researchers were able to determine the characteristics with the strongest correlations to high school graduation. Including fewer placement changes, the other characteristics were: older age of entry into the child welfare system; youth employment while in care; independent living support while in care; and less criminal behavior.

13 Pecora et al. (2006) calculated the odds ratio for all of the significant characteristics identified in the previous footnote. An odds ratio quantitatively tells us how likely an outcome is to occur in the presence of a certain event.

14 A p-value is the calculated probability that determines the statistical significance and strong evidence. A strong statistical significance (p<.001) means that there is less than a one in 1,000 chance that the difference seen was due to random chance.

15 Dregan & Gulliford (2011) studied the associations between factors such as type of placement, length of placement, age at entry into care, reason for entry into care, and the number of placements with certain behaviors and feelings at the age of 30. These researchers used the British Cohort Survey of participants born in 1970 who completed a survey in the year 2000. From the survey results, the researchers conducted a series of regression analyses to adjust for explanatory variables (such as age and gender) and then estimated the odds ratio for each occurring behavior.
Connecticut Policy Concerning Placement Changes

The Department of Children and Families’ policy manual is the primary staff tool covering legal requirements and agency mandates; it provides instructions, guidance, and standardized procedures to staff to assist in informed decision-making. The policy manual notes that “The optimal structure for providing the opportunity for healthy development, emotional attachment, and behavior modeling for children is a permanent family environment….Options for permanence may include:

- Reunification
- Relatives, friends, godparents
- Adoption
- Foster care with a long-term agreement
- Therapeutic foster care
- Independent living
- Emancipation” (p. 1).

Adoption has been a particular emphasis of this administration. Chapter 48 of the Policy Manual provides in-depth guidance about how a case worker can support children and their pre-adoptive families during transitions in and out of the home, with sections entitled: Preparing the Child for Placement (Chapters 48-13-2 and -3), Child Disclosure Forms for Preparing an Adoptive Family for Placement (48-15-5 and -5A), the Transition Process (48-15-8), Placement Procedures (48-15-9), Pre-Placement Visits (48-15-7), and Adoption Disruptions (48-17).

Similarly, in-depth policy guidance does not exist for transitions in and out of foster homes that are not considering adoption (see DCF Policy Manual Chapters 36 and 41, which address Child Protective Assessment and Services, and Foster and Adoption Services). While adoption is often preferable to placement in a foster home or group home, many children spend some time in foster care prior to finding permanency. Many of the policies surrounding transitions in and out of pre-adoptive homes could be adapted for use in other placements. In the absence of more detailed policy, in this section we first examine written policies regarding placement changes for foster care; second, we discuss concerns with existing policy; third, we discuss gaps in existing policy.

Policy: Foster Family Profiles

In accordance with Connecticut General Assembly Public Act 16-123, DCF Policy 41-1 requires that DCF and private foster care providers create a Foster Family Profile for each foster family. As long as the biological parents retain their parental rights, children are not available for adoption. Such children often spend time in foster care prior to reunification, transfer of guardianship, or transfer to a pre-adoptive home.

16 Connecticut General Assembly Public Act 16-123, An Act Concerning Youth Advisory Councils and Foster Families, was a piece of legislation initiated by youth comments at one of Connecticut Voices for Children’s Youth at the Capitol Day event. Relevant provisions of the bill included requirements that DCF survey youth’s experiences about foster homes after leaving them, and that youth receive profiles about the foster family prior to entering any new foster home.
DCF Form 4928 in Appendix A). Any child aged 12 years or older should receive the profile at least seven calendar days prior to placement, or as soon as possible in the event of an emergency placement. These profiles include information including family composition, pets, race, ethnicity, language spoken, family schedule, hobbies, and expectations.

Policy: Placement Removals

DCF’s policy about removing children from out-of-home placements (36-55-15) outlines procedures for two primary types of removals: removals initiated by DCF and removals initiated by request of the out-of-home placement resource (such as foster parents or congregate care staff).

For removals initiated by DCF, the policy distinguishes between removals initiated for non-emergency reasons and emergency placement changes. When a child is removed for non-emergency reasons, the child’s foster parent, attorney, and guardian ad litem should be notified at least ten calendar days prior to the change; in the event of emergency, said parties should be notified as soon as possible. Notification of the foster parent includes notification of the right to request a removal hearing to determine whether removal is in the child’s best interest. Barring a request for a removal hearing, the child is to be maintained in the placement for ten days unless (1) an emergency develops or (2) the placement resource requests earlier removal and the placement cannot be maintained. If a removal hearing is requested, the child remains in the home until the resolution of the hearing process (unless an emergency requiring the immediate removal of the child occurs or is suspected).

For a placement change initiated by request of the current out-of-home placement resource, the social worker is supposed to meet with the caregiver, the Foster and Adoptive Services Unit (FASU) social worker, and if appropriate, the child and child’s biological parents. Ideally, this meeting should occur “on the same day if the request is for immediate removal; or within five working days in all other situations,” and should address:

- “the reason for the request for the child’s removal;
- the impact upon the child of continuing the current placement;
- services that may be offered to maintain the placement;
- whether a respite placement is appropriate;
- if the child is to be removed, whether and under what conditions the child may remain in the placement pending a planned move; and
- if and how the caregiver will continue his or her relationship with the child” (p. 2).

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18 Guardian ad litem is a court-appointed person designated to promote and protect the youth and their interests.
19 See Policy 22-6 for details about removal hearings.
20 As defined in DCF policy 36-55-15, emergency means “a situation in which an immediate threat to the physical or emotional health or welfare of a child exists or is suspected and there is no means of temporarily alleviating that threat.”
21 Foster and Adoptive Services Unit. A FASU social worker is assigned to the foster parent to offer support and understanding of the foster home dynamics. This is separate from the child’s social worker, who is not a part of the Foster and Adoptive Services Unit.
If the placement is maintained rather than ended, the DCF social worker should arrange appropriate services to mitigate conflict in the home. If the placement is to end, social workers should immediately search for a new placement. In either case, the child and caregiver should be provided counseling and support; social workers “shall also assist the child with issues of loss pertaining to the move to reduce the possibility of future placement changes.”

If the child “is old enough to understand the situation,” social workers are instructed to inform the child of the reasons for the move and provide “information about any planned new placement and have pre-placement visits.”

Policy 36-75-1 provides the framework for notifying “parents, guardians, or caretakers” of placement changes, as keeping parents informed about changes in a child’s life helps maintain the connection between the parent and the child. For an emergency situation, the policy indicates that within five working days, the caseworker or supervisor must attempt to discuss with parents, guardians, or caretakers the reasons for the emergency change. For non-emergency placements, the policy reads that parents should be notified prior to the changes. In either case, parents, guardians, and caretakers have the right to challenge the decision or request a treatment plan review through the DCF Administrative Hearing Unit.

Policy: Child and Family Permanency Teaming

Utilizing a more collective, holistic approach to make decisions throughout the life of a child’s case has been a major paradigm shift in Connecticut DCF within recent years. This shift brought about the practice of “teaming,” including Child and Family Permanency Teaming (CF-PT). DCF Policy 36-8 and the accompanying Child and Family Permanency Teaming Practice Guide identify procedures and best practice for these meetings to be successful. Child and Family Permanency Teaming is meant to be an ongoing casework practice that “maintains important relationships for the child and ensures ongoing progress towards permanence” (p. 1). This practice also includes active participation of the child or that their perspective is heard if they are not present.

Permanency teaming involves individual conversations with the child and their supports, joint conversations, as well as large team meetings that convenes the entire team involved with supporting the child in care. As the policy explains, large team meetings are not meant to be “event-driven” (p. 4); however, there are some events that do require large team meetings. As explained in policy, a change in placement calls for a large team meeting prior to a planned move, or within two business days after an emergency placement.

Policy: Placement Disruption Conferences

In addition to notification of involved parties and, in the event of placement resource-initiated removals, removal conferences, DCF Policy 36-55-20 calls for convening “placement disruption conferences” to attempt to understand patterns of placement changes in the event that a child experiences two placement changes within an eighteen-month period “for reason related to the child’s
behavior or [medical] condition” (p. 1). Such a conference is not required for “planned moves resulting from

1. Initial emergency placements
2. Changes in permanency planning
3. Life changes within the foster family
4. Respite requests” (p. 1).

The conference is supposed to include the child’s social worker, social work supervisor, FASU worker, any appropriate community-based service provider, and other DCF or outside consultants as needed. This group will determine whether:

1. “It is in the child’s best interest to place him or her in another foster home;
2. A different type of placement setting may be more appropriate;
3. A decision shall be deferred for a period not to exceed sixty (60) days pending a special evaluation of the child” (p. 1).

If needed, the group may determine that the child needs special evaluations or that other steps should be taken to reduce the risk of future placement changes.

Policy: Foster Family Surveys

Under Policy 41-1, when a child of seven years or older leaves a foster home, DCF workers are required to provide children with a Foster Family Survey within 15 calendar days. Survey results “shall be used to gather information relevant to the recruitment, training and retention of foster families” (p. 10).

Identified Concerns with Existing Policy

As evidenced by DCF’s regular reviews of its published policies, policy and practice can always be strengthened to better serve children and their families. Below, we identify some concerns and/or details left unspecified in existing policy that warrant discussion and could be improved or expanded upon.

1. Permanency teaming offers a more holistic approach to convening a child’s support team throughout the duration of a child’s time in care, including in the event of placement changes. These meetings may help replace some other team meetings, including placement disruption conferences. However, this policy is new (first enacted in 2015) and has not yet been fully implemented in all DCF area offices or in all cases. Given some gaps in other removal policies, some cases may not receive the integrated team approach that could help make transitions smoother. Without permanency teaming, advance notification of youth about moves and the incorporation of youth voice into decision-making may not occur.

2. For DCF-initiated removals, policy does not require notifying the child in advance. While the policy for placement disruption conferences notes that children should be informed in person about the reasons for the move and about a new placement, no timeline is provided. Teaming
policy requires a large team meeting prior to a change in placement, but not all DCF area offices have fully implemented this policy. This poses a risk for children to find out that they are being removed without time to assemble their belongings, discuss with friends and loved ones, or emotionally prepare for the impending change.

3. Policy does not establish a minimum age at which it is appropriate for a child to be provided with the reasons for the move or attend the removal meeting, which may allow older youth to be left uninformed and denied a chance to participate.

4. Although Child and Family Permanency Team Meetings are required for placement changes, current policy does not specify the timeframe for holding a large team meeting prior to the change in placement.

5. In the section concerning follow-up activities after a removal meeting, policy does not indicate the designated timeline for the social worker to determine a new placement for the child after the removal meeting. This lack of timeline may allow for flexibility to respond to complicated relationships between the child and foster family and extenuating circumstances, but in some cases, it may result in hastily planned placements.

6. No placement disruption conference is held in the event of repeated placement changes that are unrelated to the child’s behavior, despite the fact that such placement changes are nonetheless potentially harmful to the child if the child experiences interrupted attachments in the process of changing placements. This may result in unidentified and/or unaddressed service needs in offices in which permanency teaming has not been fully implemented.

7. Policy does not allow for the participation of the child in a placement disruption conference, regardless of age. Age-appropriate participation in meetings can help ensure that youth can advocate for their needs and concerns, especially in a meeting intended to identify children’s unmet needs.

**Identified Gaps in Policy**

Although flexibility is critical to enable social workers to address specific situations, based on youth stories about difficult or chaotic transitions between placements, ratifying and disseminating clear and specific policy within the policy manual to address more elements of the transition process may help improve children’s and youth’s experiences. We were unable to identify policy presenting guidelines concerning the following elements of case work:

1. Preparing a child for a change in foster placement.
2. Preparing a foster family for a new placement, both for foster children who have just experienced an initial removal and for children who have left other placements.
3. Conducting a placement change and supporting child and family through transition.
4. Pre-placement visits.
5. Foster care removals: services to prevent removal, determining the next placement, and placement disruption meetings (as in Policy 48-17 for Adoption Disruptions).
6. Processing child removals (both before and after the removal) with foster families and addressing family issues that may contribute to removals.
7. Placement removals initiated or requested by the child (rather than by the placement resource or by DCF).

While the permanency teaming practice guide does discuss ways to address placement changes within the permanency team, much of the case work involved in placement changes is individual work performed between social workers, children, and future and former foster families. Written policy and practice guides specific to placement change can help social workers best address the challenges that children and foster families face that are specific to changing placements. Notably, items 1 – 5 in the above list all exist in DCF policy regarding pre-adoptive and adoptive homes and could be adapted for use in foster care placements and placement changes.

**Placement Changes for Children in Connecticut**

*DCF Data*

**Placement Change Rates**

The Department of Children and Families provided Connecticut Voices for Children with several data points regarding placement changes for children in Connecticut.\(^{22}\)

In accordance with federal law, Connecticut reports on the placement change rate per 1,000 days in care. This rate is calculated by dividing the number of placement changes experienced per child by the number of days the child remained in care, then multiplying by 1,000. The rate is often reported for cohorts that entered care in a particular year. Connecticut has consistently maintained a placement change rate below the national performance standard of 4.12 placement moves per 1,000 days in care. While these rates remain low, some differences persist across various demographics including age, race, and gender.

*Placement change rate: the average number of placement moves per 1,000 days in care*

Consistent with the previously mentioned literature, older children in care experience more placement changes. DCF data shows that among all children in care,\(^{23}\) those ages 12 - 14 and ages 15 and older experienced a rate of 2.8 and 2.7 placement changes per 1,000 days, respectively, as of FY 17 –

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\(^{22}\) Data supplied via secure email communication on December 22\textsuperscript{nd}, 2017, in response to a Connecticut Voices for Children data request first submitted to DCF on October 13\textsuperscript{th}, 2017.

\(^{23}\) As opposed to all children in the cohort entering care in that year, as is reported in the placement stability rate. The disaggregated data supplied to Connecticut Voices for Children showed placement stability for all children in placement rather than for entering cohorts.
significantly higher than that of younger children. It is important to note that the placement change rate for adolescents ages 12 - 14 in particular has gradually increased since state Fiscal Year 2014 (FY 14). The placement change rate for children ages 0 - 8 has also risen between FY 16 and FY 17. Via email, a DCF administrator suggested that “the recent increases in the rate of placement moves during episodes are … likely to do with positive practice changes to considerably increase our use of kin and other forms of foster care.”

Figure 1. Placement moves per 1,000 days in care by child age range.

Racial disparities persist in many areas of Connecticut’s child welfare system, including placement change rates for children and youth in care. Although research has produced no consistent evidence that racial differences are a factor in placement changes, Black and Latino children and youth in Connecticut experience more placement changes than their white peers in care. While the disparities are not drastic, disparities in placement change rates have emerged since FY 11. The sources of these disparities warrant further research.

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24 Reported via email by Fred North, Evaluation Program Manager, Office for Research and Evaluation, Department of Children and Families. Full text of email available from Lauren Ruth upon request: lruth@ctvoices.org.
There is no research to support or predict gender differences in placement changes for children in care, yet longitudinal data in Connecticut suggests the presence of differences in how boys and girls may experience placement changes. Between FY 11 and FY 16, girls in care consistently experienced slightly more placement changes than boys. However, in the most recent state fiscal year, boys slightly surpassed girls with a rate of 2.1 placement changes compared to 2.0 placement changes. The trend we observe suggests that more research is needed to understand the existence of any national trends showing gender differences in placement changes and whether boys and girls experience placement changes for different reasons.

*Figure 2. Placement moves per 1,000 days in care by child race/ethnicity.*

*Figure 3. Placement moves per 1,000 days in care by child gender.*
Youth Notification and Transition Planning

DCF was unable to provide quantitative data to address Connecticut Voices’ request concerning notification of the child about an impending placement change or about transition planning between placements. DCF and private therapeutic foster care providers differ in their policies and practices surrounding transition planning, and the plans must also be individualized based on a child’s age and cognitive and emotional needs. While a qualitative study would be the most effective means to determine whether youth are receiving early notification and high-quality transition plans, quantitative data on the presence of and timeliness of advance notification and transition planning could still provide important information regarding the experiences of youth going through a placement change. As DCF transitions to a newer and more integrated Comprehensive Child Welfare Information System (CCWIS), this is an area they may consider for expanded data collection.

Juan F. Court Monitor Reporting

Under the revised Juan F. v. Malloy federal consent decree, DCF is required to report on 14 outcome measures that evaluate the implementation of DCF policy. One of the outcome measures that must be reported on is multiple placements. Outcome Measure 12 states: “Beginning on January 1, 2004, at least 85% of the children in DCF custody shall experience no more than three (3) placements during any twelve-month period” (p. 14).

Although DCF consistently has achieved this outcome measure, the Court Monitor’s finding shows that this outcome has consistently stayed between 95 and 96 percent, with the most recent percent being at 95.6. This trend is extremely positive, but 168 children – roughly four percent of children in care – still experienced more than three placements in one year.

Child and Family Service Review Measures

Child and Family Service Reviews (CFSRs) are federal audits that measure outcomes for child welfare agencies across the United States. The CFSR includes measures of permanency, safety, and well-being of children and families who come into contact with a child welfare system. The measures in the CFSR provide a mechanism through which to compare states’ practices, not only to ensure consistency across all public child welfare systems, but also to provide an avenue for states to improve their practice and to maximize potential positive outcomes for all children and families who have child welfare involvement. In this section, we will discuss Connecticut’s results on measures of placement stability, preserving connections, and meeting the needs of foster parents.

Note: this data was updated on February 6, 2018, based on new data provided via email by the Court Monitor to Connecticut Voices for Children. Full text of email available from Lauren Ruth upon request: lruth@ctvoices.org.

Sampling across all state case reviews have several common requirements. While the sample sizes for cases are relatively small, the sample must include a minimum of 65 cases, in which 40 of the cases are foster care cases and 25 cases are in-home cases (CFSR Procedures Manual, p. 25). The Procedures Manual states that a simple random sample is also required, which gives an equal chance for every case during that time period to be selected. While a simple random sample is required, the manual also leaves room for additional stratification, or categories of populations, if needed.
Placement Stability

The CFSR uses two indicators to measure placement stability. One indicator measures placement stability in the form of the number of placement changes experienced per child per 1,000 days in foster care, as discussed above. Children included in the analyzed sample are those who enter state care during a given year and remain in care at the end of that year; in other words, the 2017 placement change rate reflects placement changes for children who entered care in 2017, rather than all children in placement in 2017.27

Connecticut has a rate of 2.92, faring far better than the national performance standard of 4.12. Yet, an average of 2.92 moves per 1,000 days in foster care is still an average of at least one move per year in foster care. A child who remains in care for only a year (26.0 percent of foster children in 2017) would experience on average just one move before achieving permanency; however, as of 2017, 41.4 percent of foster children had not yet achieved permanency after two years in care. For these children, placement changes can add up.999

The second indicator is Item 4 on the CFSR, which measures placement stability through examining a sample of case plans. Item 4 examines whether, during the six-month period of review, children were in a stable placement and if a placement change occurred, that it was in the best interest of the child.

On Item 4,28 Connecticut scored relatively high, with 86 percent of cases rated as a Strength.29 Only two states, North Dakota and Delaware, scored higher. This signifies that during this period under review, comparatively many Connecticut children remained in stable out-of-home placements. Both North Dakota and Connecticut utilize Child and Family Team Meetings, which bring families and all stakeholders involved in case planning to discuss strategies and outcomes for the child. By bringing different perspectives into the decision-making process, a clearer and more careful process is achieved, increasing the likeliness for greater permanency in the child’s life.

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27 Risk-Standardized Performance (RSP) is “derived from a multi-level statistical model and reflects the state’s performance relative to states with similar children and takes into account the number of children the state served, the age distribution of these children, and, for some indicators, the state’s entry rate. It uses risk adjustment to minimize differences in outcomes due to factors over which the state has little control and provides a fairer comparison of state performance against national performance” (Connecticut 2016 Child and Family Service Review Final Report, Appendix A, p. A-9).
28 The purpose of Item 4 is “to determine whether the child in foster care is in a stable placement at the time of the onsite review and that any changes in placement that occurred during the period under review were in the best interests of the child and consistent with achieving the child’s permanency goal(s)” (p. 7).
29 The Children’s Bureau of the U.S. Health and Human Services’ Administration for Children and Families has a set list of criteria for evaluating child welfare agencies. For each measure of permanency, well-being, and safety, each case that is reviewed must meet all of the designated criteria to be rated as a Strength. A majority of the cases reviewed must be rated as a Strength for the agency to be recognized as in substantial conformity. Thus, receiving a rating of Strength is extremely challenging and does not necessarily indicate bad practice. Rather, ratings should be used to inform areas where practice could be further improved.
Figure 4. CFSR Round 3 percent of case plans where child placement stability was rated as “Strength” by state.

Preserving Connections

In contrast, Item 9 on the CFSR is a measure on which Connecticut did not exceed the performance of the other states reviewed. This item measures the preservation of connections to the child’s family, community, neighborhood, and other forms of social connection while in foster care. Preserving connections in a child’s life while the child is placed in out-of-home care helps to maintain the child’s sense of belonging and attachment to both their family and social environment. In turn, this may impact a child’s experience in out-of-home care, ultimately affecting their placement stability.

For Item 9 in Connecticut, only 50 percent of cases were rated as a Strength. The CFSR reads:

“DCF’s commitment to preserving connections for children in foster care is apparent across multiple areas of practice. The percentage of relative placements has steadily increased to over 40%. Case reviews showed that concerted efforts are made to place siblings together and that parent-child visitation occurs weekly or even more frequently. Case review results also found that the agency transitions from supervised to unsupervised visitation appropriately and changes the visit location from the agency office to the community or the parent’s home. An area of challenge is maintaining connections for the child in a foster care placement with his or her extended family and friends” (p. 4).

30 The purpose of Item 9 is “to determine during the period under review, concerted efforts were main to maintain the child’s connections to his or her neighborhood, community, faith, extended family, Tribe, school, and friends” (p. 9).
Figure 5. CFSR Round 3 percent of case plans were preserving connections was rated as a “Strength” by state.

Item 9. Preserving Connections

Needs of Foster Parents
Every child in out-of-home care is unique and requires individualized support from their new caregivers. To successfully nurture children in out-of-home care, foster parents need adequate training and support around navigating new household dynamics and caring for children who may come from a different culture or may have experienced significant trauma. Item 12 examines how needs of parents, children, and foster parents are assessed and addressed through services.\(^\text{31}\) It is divided into three sub-sections; Item 12C addresses the needs of the foster parents. This item illuminates another area where Connecticut continues to struggle. The CFSR found that 61 percent of foster care cases were rated as a Strength in Connecticut. Nineteen states were rated as stronger than Connecticut at serving the needs of foster parents; only five were marked as weaker.

\(^{31}\) The purpose of Item 12 is “to determine whether, during the period under review, the agency (1) made concerted efforts to assess the needs of children, parents, and foster parents (both initially, if the child entered foster care or the case was opened during the period under review, and on an ongoing basis) to identify the services necessary to achieve case goals and adequately address the issues relevant to the agency’s involvement with the family, and (2) provided the appropriate services” (p. 10).
Innovative State Practices in Connecticut

One explanation for this may be the strides that DCF has made in recent years, such as reducing the number of children in congregate care settings while simultaneously increasing the number of children in relative foster care. Consistent with research findings, children in relative foster care are less likely to experience a placement change, and are thus more likely to experience placement stability while in out-of-home care. Based on DCF’s Child in Placement projections from January 2017 to January 2019, the number of children in relative foster care is likely to continue to exceed the number of children in non-relative foster care this coming year.32

Another practice implemented in recent years that might account for Connecticut’s relatively positive CFSR results is the use of teaming during considered meetings to discuss the potential removal of a child from the biological home, as referred to by DCF as “considered removal – child and family teaming” (CR-CFT).32 The purpose of child and family team meetings is to bring all members involved in the child’s life to discuss, deliberate, and strategize what the next step of action should be. Convening child and family team meetings rather than relying on a single social worker to make a determination may result in different outcomes, such as maintaining the child in the home in more circumstances or identifying other kinship connections for placement rather than nonrelative foster care.

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32 DCF policy 34-10-1
Youth Advisory Board Surveys and Discussion

Some information is best obtained by asking youth directly about their experiences. In researching this topic, Connecticut Voices for Children met with six Youth Advisory Boards (YABs) to learn more about youth’s experiences, perceptions, and ideas about placement changes. Conversations with the YABs took a variety of forms depending on group size, available time, and youth’s comfort levels. We administered a five-minute survey about youth’s recent histories with placement changes with five of the six regional boards. We did not ask for identifying information, and we collected surveys from the youth to maximize anonymity. Youth participation was voluntary (see Appendix B for the full text of the survey); 45 youth completed surveys while about a dozen youth chose not to participate. In all cases, other trusted adults were present in the room for support if youth needed it.

Youth Advisory Boards (YABs): small groups of youth in DCF care convened by DCF area offices to advise on issues of practice and policy.

The purpose of the survey was to gain greater general understanding of what some youth in DCF care have experienced in terms of placement changes. The survey included questions that are not captured within the available quantitative data, such as how many times each youth could remember changing placements and whether they considered their current placement to be better or worse than the previous one. This was not a random sample and should not be considered representative of the general population of youth in care. However, it does begin to illuminate the spectrum of what a nonrandom selection of youth have experienced in Connecticut foster care.

Consistent with CFSR data, youth reported that they had changed placements an average (as measured using a median score when discussed in text) of one time in the past year, and remembered an average of three placement changes in total; answers to this question varied greatly. Youth’s most recent placement change occurred an average of 11 months prior, but youth’s experiences varied considerably: one youth planned to move the following day while another had not moved in seven years; the number of placement changes youth could remember ranged from zero to 30. Twenty-two percent of all respondents expressed uncertainty and/or that they could not remember all the times they had moved.
Table 1: Descriptive statistics of Youth Advisory Board participant responses to placement change survey.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Median</th>
<th>Mode</th>
<th>Standard Deviation</th>
<th>Minimum</th>
<th>Maximum</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number of placement changes in the last year(^{33}) (n=25)</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>1.2</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>4.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total number of placement changes remembered(^{34}) (n=41)</td>
<td>6.1</td>
<td>3.0</td>
<td>3.0</td>
<td>7.2</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>30.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recency of last placement change(^{35}) (number of months) (n=38)</td>
<td>15.1</td>
<td>11.0</td>
<td>12.0</td>
<td>19.6</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>96.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amount of notice given to youth before placement change(^{36}) (number of days) (n=34)</td>
<td>18.2</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>43.2</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>180.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Answers also illustrated some of the upheaval brought by placement changes: youth reported that they received an average of just one days’ notice before being moved. 14.7 percent of participants reported that they were told they were moving either as it was happening or just minutes or hours before. Notably, 74.4 percent indicated that in their last transition, they had moved to a new town. Two-thirds of respondents indicated that their current placement was better than the previous placement (just 10.0 percent indicated that the placement was worse than the previous placement, while 22.5 percent reported uncertain or ambivalent answers).

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\(^{33}\) This question asked, “How many times have you changed placement in the last year?” One youth who did not answer this question but did list a most recent placement change within the past year was recoded as “one.” One youth who answered, “two or three,” was coded as 2.5.

\(^{34}\) This question asked, “How many times do you remember changing placements?” NA’s were recoded as “zero;” three nonnumeric answers (two answers of “a lot” and one answer of “many”) were excluded from analysis.

\(^{35}\) This question asked, “When was the last time you changed placements?* Placement could be a group home, residential placement, or foster home.” Answers included both relative dates (e.g., “a week ago”) and exact dates (e.g., “December 26, 2016”). We recoded exact dates into relative dates based on survey administration dates in October 2017. Three NA’s were excluded from analysis.

\(^{36}\) This question asked, “The last time you changed placements, how soon did someone tell you that you were moving before it actually happened?” Some answers were expressed in terms of hours or minutes; we recoded these answers as “0.” Three NA’s and two unclear qualitative answers were excluded from analysis.
Table 2. Youth Advisory Board participants reporting having moved to a new town during their last placement change.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Youth Reporting Having Moved to a New Town during Last Placement Change (n=39) (^{37})</th>
<th>Count (n)</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>25.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>74.4%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3. Youth Advisory Board participants’ reported valuation of new placement compared with previous placement.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Youth’s Valuation of New Placement Compared with Previous Placement (n=40) (^{38})</th>
<th>Count (n)</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>New Placement is Better</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>67.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New Placement is Worse</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>10.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ambivalent or Uncertain Answer</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>22.5%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Conversations with the six Youth Advisory Boards also included informal discussions about experiences with placement changes. Observations described here are based upon notes taken by Connecticut Voices for Children staff but have not been subject to rigorous qualitative coding and analysis. Themes discussed below should guide further research but should not be interpreted as empirical evidence.

Many of the youth emphasized the loss caused by placement changes: a loss of connections (with both social workers and families) and personal belongings. Similar to what they reported through surveys, youth shared a range of experiences in terms of the placement changes they had experienced, the kinds of relationships they had built, and how much each terminated placement had impacted them.

One point that many youth mentioned was the negative emotional impacts caused by events that had precipitated certain individual placement changes, especially when the removal occurred abruptly with little notice. Numerous youth shared stories of removal from a foster home in which the parent-child relationship had become unhealthy. Youth’s concerns with foster parent behavior included verbal and/or emotional abuse, being locked out of the foster home or returning from school to find their

\(^{37}\) This question asked, “The last time you changed placements, did you stay in the same town or move to a new one?” Two youth who answered “sometimes” were excluded from analysis.

\(^{38}\) This question asked, “The last time you changed placements, did you stay in the same town or move to a new one?” Two youth who answered “sometimes” were excluded from analysis.
belongings packed, and relationships that were severed completely by removals. Some youth expressed understanding some level of shared responsibility for the end of a placement due to their own behavior or attitudes in the home; nonetheless, these stories suggest that when a placement devolves, foster parent conduct before and during a removal can have a lasting impact on youth for years to come. Across all YABs, youth expressed the need for foster families to be more prepared for and patient with their foster children.

Youth also expressed certainty or hope that they were in better placements now, or would be soon. Some expressed that they were glad that they had left certain homes - in fact, several youth commiserated over the same former foster families. However, a number of youth expressed concerns that their current placements would fall apart as well, whether due to a poor fit, youth’s current behavioral challenges, or continued fallout from past behavior. In several YABs, youth expressed concerns about families receiving their “file” depicting past poor behaviors. Being able to “start over” and leave their past mistakes behind, several youth indicated, would help them succeed in future placements.

The range of youth experiences also included youth’s awareness or experiences with newer child welfare policy. While some youth reported having received foster family profiles in accordance with new state law before moving into new placements, others had not heard about the new policy. Similarly, some youth had experienced only kinship foster care in accordance with DCF’s current kinship care initiative, while youth who had remained in foster care longer had experienced a multitude of nonrelative caregivers. Older youth who have grown up in foster care have lived under up to two decades of evolving child welfare policy; while positive policy changes may improve the experiences of children and youth going forward, policy change cannot negate past traumas or eliminate adverse outcomes going forward that result from past policy.

Within our conversations with youth regarding their changes in placement, relationship attachment was a strong underlying theme. When children’s relationships with their foster parents devolved, the insecure attachment between youth and their foster parents precipitated maladaptive behaviors among both parties. Although some youth implied a desire for secure, loving attachments (whether with foster parents or other past caregivers), they expressed anxiety about past relationships that had gone wrong and anxiety that current and future relationships could similarly be unhealthy. To be able to develop secure relationships with foster parents, youth expressed needing patient, sensitive foster parents who did not have preconceived negative impressions about what foster children would or should be like. Fortunately, the research discussed earlier in this paper suggests that finding foster parents who display these qualities or supporting foster parents to develop these qualities can help children and youth in care move toward more stable, secure, and loving relationships with their foster families.
Comparative State Policy

In this section, we use the four measures from the Child and Family Service Review to compare and contrast the issue of placement changes and placement stability within Connecticut DCF with other child welfare systems across the nation. From those measures, we examine innovative state policies and practices that may improve the experience of placement changes and placement stability for children in care.

Table 4. CFSR Round 3 measures of placement stability, maintained connections, and foster parent needs met by state.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>State</th>
<th>Percent of cases reviewed rated as a Strength</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Placement stability rate (placements / 1,000 days in care)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National Standard</td>
<td>4.12 or lower</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Connecticut</td>
<td>2.92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Delaware</td>
<td>4.17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arizona</td>
<td>3.53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Idaho</td>
<td>3.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Texas</td>
<td>4.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wyoming</td>
<td>3.33</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Delaware

Although Delaware’s placement stability rate of 4.17 is slightly higher than the national standard of 4.12 placements per 1,000 days in care, Delaware consistently scored higher than Connecticut in several other areas of the CFSR, including Item 4, Item 9, and Item 12c. The CFSR highlights some of Delaware’s Division of Family Services (DFS) successes, including its ability to maintain and preserve connections for a child in care:

“DFS was also found to be effective in identifying and preserving the important connections in a child’s life at the time the child entered foster care. Here, case reviews identified that foster parents played an important function in maintaining a child’s connection to neighborhood, friends, church, and other activities. Expanded efforts to select an initial foster care setting that best meets the needs of a child; to recruit, train, and support foster parents; and to encourage the role of foster parents in preserving the connections of the children in their care are needed” (p. 4)."m

Likely a result of Delaware’s current placement stability rate, DFS has dedicated significant attention to placement changes and placement stability. As identified in DFS’ 2015-2019 Child and Family
Service (CFS) Plan, DFS developed and utilizes a longitudinal database (named the Entry Cohort Longitudinal Database) for all children entering out-of-home care. Longitudinal data allows tracking for individual children over time. As opposed to point-in-time placement stability data, this data shows unique placement changes for each individual children throughout their entire time in care. Not only may this provide more thorough information about placement changes in general, this type of data may provide unique patterns of why individual children experience multiple placement changes. Through analysis of this data, DFS identified that the child in out-of-home care who had multiple placement changes during the initial 100 days after being removed from their home were more likely to continue to experience placement changes while in care. Per DFS’ 2015-2019 CFS Plan:

“By using the Entry Cohort Longitudinal Database, DFS has been able to demonstrate that children entering foster care in the last two years are having 60% fewer placements in the first 100 days. There has been a 64% reduction in the number of teens with more than 2 placement moves in the first 100 days of placement” (p. 19).

In addition to tracking children in foster care longitudinally, DFS also screens every child that enters foster care for their Level of Care (LOC) based on the emotional/behavioral and physical/medical needs of the child. There are four levels of care, which is determined through a survey that must be completed at the time the removal decision is made and for each new placement. By assessing the child’s level of care at the time of entry into each foster care placement, children may be placed into more appropriate foster homes, diminishing the chances for a future placement change.

Lastly, Delaware DFS has two policies that may also alleviate stressors that arise during out-of-home care:

1. **Initial Visit Following Placement** – the child’s caseworker must visit the child within five working days of a new placement.

2. **Placement Change Request** – unless an emergency, foster parents must request a placement change with a two-week notice, in which they must also participate in planning for the child’s next placement.

**Arizona**

Arizona has a placement stability rate of 3.53 placements per 1,000 days in care, which is lower than the national standard, yet higher than Connecticut’s rate. However, compared to Connecticut, Arizona scored relatively higher on the other relevant items on the CFSR besides Item 4, in which there was only a three percent difference between the two states.

Despite Arizona’s gains on the CFSR, the Department of Child Safety (DCS) continues to prioritize the issue of placement changes and placement stability for children in out-of-home care. DCS’ strategic plan for fiscal year 2018 includes a goal for increasing the number of children in a family-like setting.

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39 minimal (0), mild (I), moderate (II), intensive (III).
(i.e., foster care as opposed to a group home setting) and decreasing the number of placement moves. The objectives for this goal include: 1) implementing a standardized placement process, 2) improving support to foster parents, and 3) further expanding the Fostering Sustainable Connections project. Arizona is one of 25 states who received funding under a Title IV-E waiver through which the Sustainable Connections project was made possible in 2016.

Fostering Sustainable Connections is a program designed to assist children in congregate care settings to have the opportunity to identify and reconnect with important people in their lives and establish supportive relationships. Based on a July 2017 semi-annual progress report, 75 children participated in the Fostering Connections program, in which 42 successfully completed the program. Of the 42 children who have exited the program, 15 were placed with relatives, three were placed in a family-like setting, and 14 were pending placements with relatives.

Similar to Delaware DFS, Arizona DCS also has notable policy and processes regarding placement stability. For unexpected or unplanned placement change requests from the out-of-home care provider, Arizona DCS policy mandates that a Placement Stability Team Decision Making meeting occur within three days of the move, or within 48 hours for an emergency.

Aside from preserving connections and smooth transitions, Arizona DCS provides significant support for foster parents: specifically, the Warm Line. The Warm Line – separate from the agency’s child abuse hotline – is a resource line only for foster parents and acts as a backup support for when a caseworker cannot be reached. While the Warm Line is not meant to replace communication with the primary social worker, it serves as another resource for foster parents for information and timely communication. By providing foster parents with an additional resource and support during challenging and emotional moments, greater placement stability may be achieved within foster homes.

Idaho

Idaho, another state who did comparatively well on the CFSR, requires an annual legislative report regarding its foster care program. In its most recent available report from FY 16, the Child and Family Services (CFS) Department provides a holistic view of the state’s foster care system.

This legislative report provides the reasons for removal over the past 5 fiscal years based on type of neglect, which shows an individual count of all children who were removed during that year. In addition to unique entries and exits from foster care, the legislative report dedicates significant attention to placement changes in foster care. Similar to Connecticut DCF’s Juan F. reporting, Idaho breaks down the number of children in foster care by placement type. However, the legislative report also provides information regarding placement end reasons and acknowledges that improvements were made to the database system to better track reasons for a placement ending.

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40 Title IV-E is a part of the Social Security Act. In 1996, Congress granted authority to the Department of Health and Human Services to approve state child welfare and/or foster care projects through the flexibility of funding via a waiver.

41 Pursuant to Idaho Code, Title 16, Chapter 16, Section 1646
Idaho’s policy, though similar to Connecticut’s, places a standard for timely notification during a placement change. For planned placement changes initiated by CFS, the child’s parents, guardian ad litem, foster parents, and Indian tribe must be notified in writing at least seven days before the change in placement. For unplanned placement changes, written notice must be provided no later than seven days following the placement change.

**Texas**

The Texas Department of Family and Protective Services (DFPS), who scored particularly high (94 percent) on Item 12C and has a placement stability rate of 4.04 placements per 1,000 days in care, has both an in-depth Policy Handbook (Section 4000) regarding the placement process as well as a Placement Process Resource Guide. Both documents, though dense in nature, provide specific and detailed steps for every step of the placement process.

For example, the Policy Handbook denotes that the social worker must consult both the biological parents (Section 4113.3) and the child (Section 4.113.4) about their preferences for a placement. This policy handbook is unique in that it places a high level of emphasis upon the caseworker taking into consideration the child’s preferences and routines. The DFPS Policy Handbook also requires at least one pre-placement visit during any placement change, regardless of kinship or contract. Requiring a pre-placement visit allows for a smoother transition for the child and minimizes some of the effects of changing placements. Additionally, the Placement Process Resource guide includes important topics such as caseworker actions for a placement change, ensuring educational stability, best tips to support a placement move (before, during, and after the move) and discussion topics for a child whose placement is changing.

Lastly, Texas also has a Placement Summary Form, similar to Connecticut DCF’s use of the Placement Portfolio (Policy 36-50-2). Both the Placement Summary Form include all essential contents to transfer information from one caregiver to the other and increase the continuity of care for the child. However, unlike Connecticut’s Placement Portfolio, Texas’ Placement Summary Form (Appendix C) includes a section on the child’s personal belongings that must follow the child and states that the caseworker should review these items with the current caregiver prior to leaving the placement.

**Wyoming**

Wyoming’s Department of Family Services (DFS), which received higher scores on all relevant CFSR Items than Connecticut and has a placement stability rate of 3.33 placement changes per 1,000 days in care, prioritizes training for staff in its agency. The CFSR commented on DFS’ “work to maintain and support the child’s connections to the family during foster care placement highlights the application of key Practice Model principles in casework practice” (p. 3). As listed in its annually updated Child and Family Service Plan, Wyoming DFS identifies training for placement stability titled, “Placement Stability and Reduction in Risk of Placement Disruption:
Identifying Placement Risks and Resilience” as well as “Working Together: Foster Parents and Biological Parents (or Primary Parents) Collaboration” (p. 318). Prioritizing and identifying training for staff may equip workers with the appropriate skills and embellish their prior knowledge to better work with both children in care and foster parents.

Similar to Connecticut’s Foster Care Manual, Wyoming also has a Foster Care Parent Handbook. One unique aspect of this handbook is that it breaks out the initial stages of placement from when a child enters the home, which may increase foster parents’ knowledge of what to expect upon arrival, and in turn, placement stability within the foster home. These stages are the: 1) shock or honeymoon period, 2) anger, 3) despair, and 4) detachment/reattachment (p. 1). Exploring these stages prior to the child’s arrival may help the foster parent understand the child’s experience during their transition into a new placement and respond with the patience and sensitivity needed to help the child begin transitioning toward secure relationships within his or her new family.
Policy Recommendations to Improve Placement Changes for Connecticut Children

In this section, we discuss recommendations for policy and practice change to reduce instability for children and youth undergoing placement changes.

1. Notify youth well in advance of placement removals and help them prepare to change placements.

Although DCF does not record or monitor the amount of advance notice given to youth before they transition into a new placement in their current CCWIS data system, abrupt removals were a commonly reported youth concern. For removals initiated by DCF, existing policy does not require notification of the child at any point prior to removal other than if a large team permanency meeting is held. (As noted above, permanency teaming is a newer policy that has not yet been fully integrated into every area office’s case practice.) For removals initiated by the placement resource, the child is to be notified if he or she “is old enough to understand the situation,” but no age guidelines or notification timelines are provided. We recommend that all children 12 and older (at minimum) be notified of non-emergency removals at least ten days prior to removal and hold a large team meeting at least ten days prior to the placement change as well. Such time would allow children to process the news, prepare their possessions, notify friends and other supports, and otherwise prepare for impending change.

We also recommend four additional changes to help children and youth prepare for placement changes.

- **Encourage children to generate their own foster child profiles to complement the information shared with foster families prior to placement.** These profiles would complement DCF’s own case information to help match children with foster families, promote strengths-based information sharing, and facilitate the attachment process.

- **Permit and encourage youth to participate in placement disruption conferences as age-appropriate.** Under current policy, youth are already invited to attend their biannual Administrative Case Reviews (See Policy 36-11-2) beginning at age 12 and to participate in permanency teaming meetings. Youth participation in placement disruption conferences would both 1) allow youth to self-advocate about their perceived placement needs and 2) help ensure that all parties making decisions about youth have heard the youth’s perspectives.

- **Require documentation of pre-placement visits before any non-emergency placement change.** In the event of removal, Policy 36-55-15 indicates that “the child shall…have pre-placement visits.” In conversations with Youth Advisory Board Members, youth indicated both that pre-placement visits are very helpful and that they do not always occur. A requirement that all youth have pre-placement visits documented in the case file before they can be moved into a new home (unless there is an emergency removal) would help ensure that policy is followed.
• Develop policy to support case work around foster placement changes. Chapter 48 of the DCF Policy Manual provides helpful resources for case workers in the event of adoption. This policy helps case workers support the child and family, prepare for a transition, and prevent unnecessary removals. Adapting these policies to aid in the event of a transition between non-adoptive foster care placements would help ensure smoother transitions for foster children and may increase placement stability.

2. Convene the youth’s support team (including youth) to plan, process, and regroup whenever placement changes occur. Meet with the youth’s former foster parents in the event of removals to plan for more stable placements in the future.

DCF has reported that the agency is updating the placement disruption conference policy to be integrated into permanency teaming practice.\textsuperscript{42} Permanency team meetings are to occur “prior to a change in placement or within two business days of an emergency removal.”\textsuperscript{43} (p. 4) The associated practice guide, available online, lists items for discussion in the event of a removal, including reasons for removal, possible mechanisms through which to preserve the placement, and a clear transition plan. The current policy, however, is more general. \textit{We recommend that the revised permanency teaming policy include discussion of topics that must be addressed in the event of a change in placement.} Furthermore, placement disruption conferences were intended to help understand unmet needs that contribute to patterns of placement changes and determine the correct type of placement setting for the child. \textit{We further recommend that the charge of a permanency team meeting in the event of a placement change be expanded to include discussion (with the child as age-appropriate) of any underlying unmet child-specific needs that must be addressed to increase placement stability.}

Foster family behavior impacts placement stability and the need for removal just as much as foster child behavior. In several Youth Advisory Boards, multiple youth noted concerns about the same foster families. \textit{We recommend that a FASU social worker (and potentially the child’s social worker) meet with foster parents after a child’s removal, especially in the event that a family has experienced multiple child removals from the home.} Such meetings could help identify areas for support and improvement to increase future placement stability or identify foster homes that should be closed.

3. Require that the child and social worker develop a list of the child’s possessions that must follow the child between placements.

Multiple youth expressed concerns that their personal belongings had been lost during placement changes. Connecticut’s Placement Portfolio includes information about the child’s needs to be shared with each treatment provider but does not include a list of the child’s possessions. Research indicates that for children, the acquisition of possessions is part of identity formation and personal power.\textsuperscript{44}

\textsuperscript{42} Reported by Kristina Stevens, DCF, on January 9, 2018 during a review of this paper. The full text of Ms. Stevens’ response is available upon request from Lauren Ruth: lruth@ctvoices.org.
For foster children, retaining treasured items such as gifts and photographs may be especially important. We recommend requiring that social workers work with each child to develop a list of the child’s belongings to help ensure that every child retains their belongings when they change placements (see Appendix C for the template used in Texas).

4. Improve data collection and reporting.

Working with the Department of Children and Families to gather data for this report indicated some gaps in data collection and reporting about children’s experiences with placement removals and changes. Fortunately, DCF is in the process of upgrading its CCWIS, and the new system will allow for real-time data entry that could better illuminate how and when children in care experience placement changes. Below, we list data points that we recommend be included within each child’s file and available for data collection and analysis.

- The date on which a child was informed of their impending placement change.
- Reasons why a placement ended.
- A record of transition planning conducted with the child, including but both one-on-one case work and permanency teaming meetings.
- Record of any time a child spends a night absent without leave, in respite care, or in the Emergency Department.

Placement changes reflect on foster parent quality and service needs as well as on the child. Below, we list data points that we recommend be included within foster parent files and available for data collection and analysis.

- Reasons why a placement ended.
- Efforts to discuss placement termination and subsequent plans to address any issues that contribute to child removals.
- Foster care family surveys.

5. Convene youth to provide input into policy and practice around placement changes.

Under Commissioner Katz’s leadership, DCF has fostered youth participation in policy development and oversight. This has led to the creation of important new policy resources, such as the Adolescent Bill of Rights, and revision of emergent and preexisting policies. In our discussions with Youth Advisory Board members, young people expressed a number of concerns about the implementation of placement changes and suggestions for improvement. We recommend convening youth in care to review and provide suggestions regarding DCF policies about placement changes. Youth may choose to focus on areas identified above as gaps in existing policy. We also recommend asking youth to develop informal practice guides for foster families and social workers about placement changes. Convening youth for this
purpose would ensure that those who are most impacted by foster care policies have an active voice directing how critical moments in their lives are carried out.

Conclusion

After a child’s initial removal from their biological family’s home, many foster children experience additional upheaval as they are moved between different congregate care settings and foster homes in search of a supportive, permanent home. Each change brings not only a new home, but a new set of adult caregivers with unique routines, communication styles, and expectations. At an average of about one placement change per year, children and youth who spend a longer period of time in foster care in particular may experience a vast number of transitions. Experiencing numerous placement changes can adversely impact attachment styles and is associated with a variety of negative outcomes in childhood and adulthood. Supporting youth agency during the placement change process, addressing child or family needs implicated or caused by placement changes, helping youth retain all their possessions, collecting data to better understand how children experience placement changes, and supporting youth-led policy reform may help ensure smoother placement transitions so that future placements will be more stable than the last.


iiii Ibid.


nnn Data supplied by Fred North via secure email on January 12, 2018.


qqq The survey of YAB youth also asked about youth’s experiences with respite care. 56 percent of youth (n = 39) had attended respite in the past year, at a median of 1.0 times in the past year (mode = 0.0; range = 0.0 – 52). Although the use of respite may contribute to instability for youth, x percent indicated that their last respite experience was positive. We do not discuss respite in this paper due to lack of DCF data regarding respite usage and lack of literature concerning potential impacts of the use of respite care upon attachment.

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