



USING DATA TO GUIDE POST-PERMANENCY PROGRAMMING: Lessons from Delaware

Although adoption and guardianship are intended to provide children and youth in foster care with a permanent family, these placements are not always permanent.


Research has shown that as many 30 percent of adoptive families experience significant struggles (*Keeping the Promise: The Case for Adoption Support and Preservation*, 2014), and 5 to 20 percent of adoptive and guardianship families may experience instability where the children no longer live with the family ([Identifying families who may be struggling after adoption or guardianship](#), *Journal of Public Child Welfare*, 2020).

States, counties, tribal nations, and territories can benefit from looking into how many of their children return to care after adoption and guardianship, and why these placements were unstable. Delaware's efforts to review data on adoptive and guardianship families and implement changes to reduce instability give a good example of how and why it can be done.

Creating a CQI Committee

In late 2018 or early 2019, Delaware's Department of Services for Children, Youth & Their Families (DSCYF) conducted a review of the children in their custody who were placed in out-of-state residential treatment facilities. They realized that one-third of these children had been previously adopted. This finding led leaders in the Division of Family Services (DFS) to look into other residential treatment centers, and they again found that many of the children had been adopted. When the DFS CQI Manager presented this data to the agency's Continuous Quality Improvement (CQI) committee, the group decided to create a CQI Post-Adoption Disruption Committee to discuss how to better serve the population of adopted children and prevent re-entry into foster care. The first meeting was held in March 2019.





Now known as the CQI Promoting Permanency Success Committee, the group is one of the state's four CQI subcommittees. All four committees review data related to the identified problem, propose solutions, and discuss action steps, and then continuously monitor the steps taken to evaluate outcomes. The Promoting Permanency Success Committee meets quarterly to review data about children who enter care after adoption and guardianship, recommend actions to reduce these numbers, and discuss if those actions are making the hoped-for difference.

In the beginning, the committee was small and primarily included DFS staff. But the team wanted to ensure it was able to learn from those most affected by the issue, so they added parents and young people with lived expertise as well as community partners. Over time, members of the committee have grown to include the agency's CQI Manager, Family Services program managers, adoption subsidy worker, data analysts, foster parents, kinship project supervisor, adoptive parents, young adults with lived experience, QA case reviewer, supervisors, and stakeholder representation from Department's Office of Case Management, Prevention and Behavioral Health Services, Youth Rehabilitative Services, and post-permanency services contract providers A Better Chance For Our Children, Children's Choice, and Children and Families First.

Gathering and Analyzing Data

As part of its initial efforts, DFS decided to dig deeper to determine how many children were entering care after adoption and what the financial implications were. They found that many adopted children were involved in foster care or other state agencies such as behavioral health and juvenile justice, often due to mental health or behavioral challenges. In 2019 and 2020, 5 to 6 percent of the children in foster care had been previously adopted. In the second half of federal fiscal year 2019, for

example, DFS found that 45 of the 744 children who spent in foster care (6 percent) had been previously adopted.

The financial analysis showed that adopted children made up about one-third of the population in higher-cost placements such as intensive residential care. The state's analysis also found that previously adopted children tended to stay in care until they aged out.

To help determine what challenges adoptive families might be facing, the committee conducted a survey of adoptive parents. The survey gathered information on the following:

- The age of the children now and at adoption
- The household makeup
- Supports and activities the family found most helpful
- Concerns related to stability of the adoption
- Barriers to accessing supports to address challenges
- Services used, including specific post-permanency services

DFS sent the survey to more than 500 families who were receiving adoption assistance and also asked staff members and the state's contracted post-adoption provider, A Better Chance for Our Children, to share it with families. Eighty-four responses were received.

A Better Chance conducted follow-up interviews with about 35 survey respondents to gather more in-depth information.

DFS also assigned a case review team to learn more about the adopted children who had entered foster care. For a sampling of 27 cases of children who had re-entered care between 2011 and 2019, reviewers examined the child's age at adoption and at foster care re-entry, their diagnoses and other needs, if the placement was with a relative, what services were in place at time of adoption, changes in the family household since adoption, circumstances that led to re-entry, and if the family was receiving services from the post-adoption program or other agencies.

Team members also conducted interviews with parents and youth who were willing to discuss what led to the placement breakdown. During these interviews, families provided more detailed information about their situation, what challenges they faced, and whether they had used post-adoption or other services. Interviewers asked both parents and youth for their perspective on what caused the adoption breakdown and if anything could have prevented it. Many parents reported that they had turned to foster care so the children could access needed supports.

The survey and interviews showed that almost half of adoptive families, including those experiencing significant challenges, were not aware of the state's post-adoption services. Results confirmed that many families did not seek support until they were in crisis. DFS also found that some community-based providers were not trained to understand [the core issues in adoption](#).

Delaware's Post-Permanency Services

Delaware provides the following supports to adoptive and guardianship families:

- **Case management**
- **Counseling**
- **24-hour telephone support**
- **Support groups**
- **Educational advocacy**
- **Respite care**
- **Information and referral**
- **Parent coaching**
- **Training**
- **Events**
- **Support for finding child care**
- **Support with birth family connections**

Learn more about the services in the Post-Adoption Center's [Delaware post-permanency profile](#).

Taking Action

After reviewing and discussing the initial data, DFS launched two efforts in November 2019 designed to increase families' knowledge of and access to post-permanency support services:

- **Raising awareness at DFS and other agencies** — Parents were already receiving information about post-permanency services during training and with the annual subsidy renewal, but the data showed this wasn't sufficient. As a result, DFS launched an internal campaign to make sure that all DFS staff and staff in other divisions that interacted with many adoptive families were aware of post-permanency services. They educated participants on the need for services, what services were available, and how to make a referral. The goal was to ensure that professionals could share that information with parents and normalize the idea of asking for help. Later, the agency made the training on post-permanency services mandatory for all DFS staff and began offering training on post-permanency services to other public agencies, mental health providers, court-appointed special advocates, legislators, faith communities, differential response contractors, congregate care providers, foster care agencies, schools, family intervention programs, and others.
- **Building adoption competence in the community** — Delaware also began training mental health providers about the specific needs of adoptive families. DFS partnered with Springfield College and A Better Chance for Our Children to create and support an adoption certificate for mental health providers. Over time, A Better Chance also offered trauma training for mental health providers and conducted outreach to community-based organizations to encourage them to send providers to

training. DFS also added the National Adoption Competency Mental Health Training Initiative (NTI) to the agency's learning management system so that all staff would have access. DFS conducts ongoing outreach to child welfare staff and community agencies to let them know about the availability of this free adoption-competency training.

Over time, based on the committee's continued analysis and discussion of potential strategies, DFS implemented other changes as well:


- **Expanding services** — With the increased outreach came the expected and hoped-for higher demand for support services. In 2021, using adoption savings funds¹, DFS began to serve guardianship families and expanded to three post-permanency providers. That year, the agency also expanded its existing adoption navigator program to serve guardianship families as well. The navigator's job is to help families transition from foster care to adoption or guardianship. Families are introduced to the navigator before finalization, and the navigator can help them address challenges they are facing and connect them to support services when needed.

¹ The Preventing Sex Trafficking Act of 2014 requires states to spend 20 percent of the funds earned through the 2008 Fostering Connections Act's expansion of IV-E adoption assistance eligibility on supporting adoptive and guardianship families.

- **Improving data collection** — DFS has added fields into its data system so staff can more easily create reports about adopted or guardianship children involved with the system. For example, the hotline intake form and the investigation and diligent response assessment tools now have fields to note if the case involves an adoptive or guardianship family and if referral has been made to post-permanency services. The adoption manager receives a weekly report on all adoptive and guardianship families being served by the DFS investigation team or differential response program. Adoption staff then determine if the families are already engaged in post-permanency services or if outreach is needed.
- **Partnering with the courts** — As a result of the committee's work, DFS also strengthened its partnership with the courts. The court added fields to its data system to track adoption and guardianship disruptions, which has allowed for better data analysis and review of prevention strategies across departments and the courts. The Promoting Permanency Success Committee manager also has access to the family court data.
- **Expanding outreach to families** — The awareness-raising campaign is continuing so that all families understand that asking for support is to be expected. DFS added testimonials from families who have used post-permanency services to its website, and the adoption and guardianship navigator sends an email newsletter to families. The contracted post-permanency providers have expanded their outreach, including testing efforts to call families at 30 days, six months, and one year after finalization and again at subsidy renewal. Families also receive targeted information based on their child's age, including specific supports in their community such as groups for teens.
- **Supporting families during transitions from higher-level services** — Due to concerns that adopted children and youth were entering care after leaving residential treatment or similar programs, DFS enhanced its transition support efforts. About two months before a young person is due to leave a higher-level placement, representatives from the involved agencies work with the youth and families to develop a transition plan and ensure the family is connected to post-permanency services.

Making a Difference

Data gathered by the committee show its efforts are having a positive impact. Preliminary results from a summer 2025 survey of adoptive parents show that 74 percent of respondents are aware of post-permanency services, compared to only 47 percent in 2020. Other agencies are also more aware of post-permanency services. CPS investigators and staff of behavioral health agencies reach out to the adoption manager more often when they are working with adoptive or guardianship families to see if post-permanency services can provide additional support. Court orders are now more likely to include information about post-permanency services, and the post-permanency providers report increased referrals from families served by the hotline.



During its most recent Child and Family Services Review, stakeholder interviews and the federal reviewers highlighted the availability and effectiveness of Delaware's post-permanency services. (Learn more about how to assess the effectiveness of post-permanency services in the Post-Adoption Center's [resource on continuous quality improvement](#).)

Most importantly, data shows that fewer adopted children in Delaware are spending time in foster care. In the first half of federal fiscal year 2025, only 17 children who had previously been adopted spent time in foster care, compared to 45 children in the second half of 2019. The number of children receiving adoption subsidy was similar during these two time periods (1,217 in 2025 and 1,301 in 2019), so it was not simply a case of there being fewer adopted children in the state's population.

Embarking on the Next Phase

The Promoting Permanency Success Committee will continue to address adoption instability—including analyzing the results of its most recent adoptive parent survey—but is now focusing heavily on guardianship. In 2023, 14 percent of the children who entered care in Delaware entered after either DFS-involved or private guardianship. To respond to this high percentage, DFS will:

- **Conduct an awareness campaign for the state's kinship navigator program** — Information about the navigator program is included in new worker training and is provided to all staff. DFS also makes sure that its staff and community partners who receive training on post-permanency services know these services are available to guardianship families as well.
- **Connect guardianship families directly to post-permanency services** — For DFS-involved guardianships, families' workers are expected to share information

about post-permanency services before finalization. Any families working with a kinship navigator during the guardianship process are referred directly to post-permanency services so there is no gap in services.

- **Track data on kinship families in CPS and differential response programs** — DFS has added ways to track all relative and fictive kin families (including guardians) who are involved with the investigation unit or differential response programs, and will make an automatic referral to the kinship navigator program for these families.
- **Expand the court partnership** — Because so many guardianships are completed privately without DFS involvement, DFS is also expanding its efforts to work with the courts. Staff recently presented at a judicial conference about post-permanency services, and the courts have added information about post-permanency supports to the family court's web page about guardianship.

Lessons for Replication

Other sites considering similar efforts to analyze and address the issue of adoption and guardianship instability can learn from efforts like Delaware's. Key considerations include:

- **Be data-driven** — Delaware's Promoting Permanency Success Committee has been committed to analyzing existing data, expanding the data and reports it can generate, and looking at changes over time. In addition, the committee created specific

benchmarks with objectives and timelines to guide its efforts. The committee also uses data to test its theories. For example, workers and families had expressed concerns that children were entering care after residential treatment rather than returning to their adoptive or guardianship families, but data analysis showed this was not a significant problem. (Learn more about calculating data on foster care re-entries in [this](#) article from the Post-Adoption Center.)

- **Listen to families' stories** — Committee leaders emphasize that it has been critical to hear directly from families. As DSCYF's CQI manager Christine Weaver explained, "You need quantitative and qualitative data. We got the most specific information from the case reviews and from the calls with families. It's not just making decisions with bigwigs sitting in a room."
 - **Build real connections with families** — DFS has also undertaken significant efforts to reach out to families and to make them feel comfortable about accessing post-permanency support. Moira Dillon, Delaware's former adoption manager, reports, "We know if we are starting families with support from the moment of finalization, the outcomes are going to be better. When families feel you care about who they are, they won't hesitate to call." (Learn more about connecting with families early in [How to Reach Adoptive and Guardianship Families Before They Are in Crisis](#)).
 - **Understand the site's current services** — Delaware had a fairly robust post-permanency program so the committee was able to focus primarily on raising awareness and enhancing adoption competence in the community. Over time, it was able to expand the availability of services as increased outreach led to higher demand.
- Other sites may need to expand their service array and then educate families about the new services. Each site will need to be guided by its own data and circumstances. (Sites interested in enhancing their post-permanency services can learn more about [technical assistance from the Post-Adoption Center](#).)
- **Include key players on the committee** — One of the reasons the Promoting Permanency Success Committee is able to be so effective is that its membership includes leaders who can make decisions and implement many new initiatives themselves. For larger changes, the committee seeks budget approval from the agency director, who has always been supportive of the effort. Participation from those with lived expertise, frontline workers, and community-based providers is also critical to providing key perspectives and for helping suggest proposed solutions that will work.
 - **Create a community** — The committee has been dedicated to operating as a team with other CQI committees and with the broader community. The committee is able to partner with the state's existing interagency adoption committee, and committee members meet regularly with key players (sister agencies, service providers, community organizations, etc.). Committee leaders report that some of the group's best ideas arose during conversations with the broader adoption and guardianship community.

Perhaps the most important lesson, however, is that sites should commit to an ongoing process rather than a one-time effort. The best way to ensure the most positive outcomes for children exiting foster care to adoption and guardianship is to create a system for continuing to examine what

happens to children and families after finalization—including whether they experience instability such as foster care re-entry and how they are faring when the family remains together—and how support services may help improve child and family outcomes.

To delve further into this topic, check out the Post-Adoption Center Resource Library:
www.postadoptioncenter.org/resource-library



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