Promising Practices and Lessons Learned

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In November 2005, under the leadership of Commissioner Harry Spence, Deputy Commissioner of Field Operations Susan Getman, and Assistant Commissioner of Adoption, Foster Care, and Adolescent Services Mary Gambon, the Massachusetts Department of Social Services conducted the first statewide, fully state-sponsored Breakthrough Series Collaborative (BSC) in child welfare. This BSC had the participation of all 29 Area Offices in the state and also included representation from the states of Rhode Island and Maine.¹

This report highlights the emerging themes and practices resulting from the work of the participating teams focused on permanency for adolescents. The BSC process, combined with a willingness to participate from all levels of DSS, made it possible for trust to be garnered, ideas to be tested, themes to emerge, and promising practices to be identified. Lessons learned address both practice-related themes as well as lessons that speak to the use of a quality improvement methodology to improve case practice.

The BSC methodology requires a broad level of inclusion to be effective. For this BSC participants included adolescents, resource families, Social Workers, Supervisors, Managers, residential placement providers, courts, schools, and community and agency partners. Because participation in this BSC was so widespread, the changes tested have the potential to be spread on a broad basis and successes replicated and sustained across the state.

**Key Themes and Promising Practices**

Over the course of this BSC, Area Office teams tested small changes to improve the way adolescents in their offices were able to achieve permanency. By BSC design, these changes were shared broadly among participants, such that successes spread quickly and promising practices were rapidly adapted and implemented across the state. Six key practice themes emerged based on the work of the teams.
In these six themes, many promising practices emerged. Some highlights include:

- Ensuring that adolescents 16 and older actively participate in their own Permanency Hearings, as well as other meetings and reviews;
- Creating Lifebooks or “Discharge First Aid Kits” with all older adolescents in placement;
- Using structured narratives and forms to gather information directly from youth in their own words;
- Mining case records, asking non-traditional questions, and asking youth multiple times to identify potential lifelong connections and placement resources;
- Increasing understanding between youth, families, staff, and partners about what permanency really means to individual youth;
- Using various strategies to encourage youth over 18 to remain in care with and receive support from the Department; and
- Engaging partners earlier to focus on maintaining permanency for youth prior to placement, ultimately diverting placements entirely.

**Sucesses Related to the BSC Methodology**

In addition to making great strides in the practice area of adolescent permanency, the state experienced dramatic success in using the BSC methodology on a statewide scale. While the purpose of this work was to improve outcomes for adolescents by focusing on new strategies to help them achieve permanency, the Breakthrough Series Collaborative methodology resulted in several unanticipated benefits as well, including:

**KEY THEMES**

- Including Youth in Planning for Their Own Lives
- Preparing Youth to Actively Participate in Planning
- Using Broad Methods to Identify Potential Connections and Resources
- Establishing and Maintaining Ongoing Support
- Engaging Youth in Mentoring, Training, Planning, and Policy Development
- Providing Education and Information to Families, Staff, and Partners
Executive Summary

- Development of teams that included multiple layers of the DSS hierarchy as well as youth, resource families, and community partners;

- Creation of a virtual “peer network” in the area of adolescent permanency across the state;

- Validation of the clinical expertise held by DSS Social Workers, Adolescent Workers, and Supervisors;

- Understanding and skill in using small tests of change to test practices that can improve outcomes for youth, children, and families;

- Management support for workers testing practices based on their experience and expertise; and

- Recognition that youth and consumer voices are essential in every aspect of system change efforts.

In the coming year, the state plans to continue its work in this area by developing an infrastructure that will support the ongoing work of and collaboration between teams. Regional meetings to support and sustain the Area Office work will be held on a quarterly basis; the topic of adolescent permanency is now on regular statewide agendas; the Commissioner’s Leadership Group on Adolescent Permanency (GAP), a group of senior leaders within the agency identified by the Commissioner to improve permanency outcomes for adolescents, meets monthly to plan, implement, spread, and sustain the work of the BSC; and a formal statewide Summit is being planned for Fall 2007 to help maintain the incredible momentum this BSC began.

Additionally, the state is continuing to explore ways in which the collaborative and “creative” aspects of the BSC methodology can be used regularly and more extensively for a wider variety of case practice and systemic issues. This project resulted not only in progress in the practice of achieving permanency for adolescents, but it has also moved the Department more fully toward becoming a true learning organization that is structurally prepared to implement and sustain dramatic organizational change efforts.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We are deeply grateful to Mary Gambon, for her vision, passion, commitment, and creativity in making this Breakthrough Series Collaborative on Adolescent Permanency a reality. Without her dedication and perseverance, this BSC never would have come to fruition. Mary was joined in this vision by Julie Sweeney-Springwater, who was committed to ensuring that New England states beyond Massachusetts could participate and benefit from this work.

Harry Spence and Susan Getman, through their unwavering, outspoken, and continuous leadership created an environment that not only allowed this work to flourish, but also has encouraged the work to take root, grow, and continue far into the future.

Leo Farley, as the Project Director for this work, held the day-to-day responsibility for managing this project seamlessly in addition to his everyday responsibilities as the Director of Adoption Support Services. In close partnership, Renee Zalesky, as the Project Coordinator, did an incredible job of managing all of the complex and often thankless tasks of logistics and conference planning. And similar to Leo, Renee did all of this on top of her responsibilities as Adoption Specialist in Central Office.

The Unit of Foster Care, Adoption, and Adolescent Services at MA DSS’ Central Office, led by Mary and including Leo, Renee, Shirley Braithwaite, Joy Cochran, Judy Howard, Eleanor McGarry, Debora Sullivan, and Susan Tucke managed all aspects of this project, from the details of the in-person Learning Sessions to monthly conference calls to communications with the Area Offices. While the typical staffing for a BSC is three full-time staff who focus solely on a single BSC, this state team assumed and absorbed all of the responsibilities in addition to their everyday jobs gracefully, professionally, and with a level of competence that is virtually unmatched in the private sector.

The Faculty for this project were invaluable. Bill Deveney, Rich Doria, Susan Dougherty, Paul Fitzsimons, Terry Flynn, Maria Fournier, Valerie Lovelace-Graham, Sarah Greenblatt, Michelle Mason, Gail Medeiros, Maureen Messeder, Virginia Peel, Diane Robie, Jacqui Romer-Sensky, and Kim Stevens provided their unique perspectives and expertise to ensure that Area Offices received the support they needed and that improved practices related to adolescent permanency were being tested, implemented, and spread across the state.

Pat Moffett applied her remarkable talents to the design of the BSC logo, the artwork for Learning Sessions, and the photo-documentation of the in-person work.

We also thank Sarah Greenblatt and Casey Family Services Center for Effective Child Welfare Practice for supporting the participation of teams from Rhode Island and Maine. In addition, Casey Family Programs had the courage and foresight to adapt the BSC methodology from the healthcare world for child welfare in 2001, helping make rapid change of this magnitude in child welfare a reality.

The Social Workers, Supervisors, Managers, and community partners who participated on teams took a leap of faith in joining this work. Not knowing how it would impact their regular
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

responsibilities, they volunteered largely based on their passion and commitment to youth and families. And despite the additional workload their participation required, they brought this passion and energy together in a way that resulted in true improvements in practice.

The Resource Families who participated on teams deserve thanks far beyond their participation in this BSC. Not only did they take the time to participate in this work, but they each work every single day in their personal lives to touch, impact, and improve the lives of the youth in our care.

Most of all, we thank the youth who joined us in this work. We have extraordinary respect for each of them – both personally and professionally – and hope they recognize the dramatic influence they had over this work. Their presence, their voices, and their words shaped the work done throughout this BSC. We hope that their voices and words continue to push us forward and do not let us rest until all adolescents in our care achieve true and meaningful permanency.
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As child welfare data have continued to become more available over the last several years, it has become clear that older youth comprise a disproportionate number of children in the foster care system. Moreover, recent research has shown that youth who leave the foster care system without permanent lifelong connections or stable living situations face dramatically increased likelihoods of poor outcomes later in life, including homelessness, unemployment, incarceration, early parenthood, and unmet mental health issues.

Nationwide, youth ages 12 and older make up roughly 45% of all youth in out-of-home care. In Massachusetts, this age group is even more striking, with youth 12 and older comprising 59% of all youth in out-of-home care. The need to address this population was reinforced in Massachusetts when an April 2005 report, *18 and Out: Life After Foster Care in Massachusetts*, published by the Massachusetts Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children with the support of the Massachusetts Department of Social Services (DSS), described the dire consequences faced by youth leaving foster care at age 18 as well as the need for policies that support youth in attaining legal permanency and developing lifelong connections.

As a result, DSS decided to take action. DSS Managers and staff no longer just wanted to talk about the issue or rewrite policy; they wanted to address the practice issues such that outcomes for youth would be improved as quickly as possible. Moreover, they did not want simply to address the situations of youth leaving foster care at age 18; instead they wanted to prevent youth from leaving foster care without permanency or lifelong connections.

DSS Assistant Commissioner of Foster Care, Adoption, and Adolescent Services Mary Gambon knew from previous experience that the Breakthrough Series Collaborative (BSC) methodology could help DSS make real and significant progress in this area in a fairly short period of time. She had served as the “Senior Leader” in the national Recruitment and Retention BSC in 2002 (co-sponsored by Casey Family Programs and the David and Lucile Packard Foundation) as well as the national Kinship Care BSC in 2004 (sponsored by Casey Family Programs). Based on her familiarity with the methodology and her passion to improve outcomes for adolescents in Massachusetts, Assistant Commissioner Gambon, with the support of her Unit of Foster Care, Adoption, and Adolescent Services at DSS’ Central Office, engaged in a year of intensive planning and formally launched this statewide BSC in November 2005.
Over the course of the next ten months the BSC served as a “learning laboratory,” in which teams were able to test their own ideas of promising practices on a small-scale. They worked to identify barriers to good practice and then tried different strategies to surmount those barriers. Not only did this process enable participants to draw upon their clinical expertise in order to improve practice for adolescents in placement, but it also provided them with a tool to ultimately improve all practice in the agency.

This report describes the process, successes, and learnings of the BSC on Adolescent Permanency. Where appropriate, detailed descriptions of practice are included. These descriptions come directly from the documentation provided by teams. In addition, descriptive data is included from various sources: conference calls, Learning Sessions, and evaluation forms.

The successes achieved through this BSC are evidenced in many ways. There is the progress made in achieving permanency for individual youth; increased participation from youth, families and partners; increased involvement from membership at all levels of the system; and staff who are re-energized and excited about the incredible work they do every day.
The Breakthrough Series Collaborative (BSC) methodology focuses on engaging an entire organization, from high-level administrators to youth to resource families to community partners in the change process. As a result, it is not uncommon for teams that participate in a BSC to experience a transformation in the entire culture of their organization such that the organization itself is ready to embrace, support, and sustain changes as a true learning organization.

There are several key aspects of a standard Breakthrough Series Collaborative that allow it to support organizational change in this way:

- **Framework for Change**: A Framework for Change is a guiding framework for the BSC and is intended to direct and promote all of the improvements that participants are making through this process. The Framework for Change used in this BSC was developed in July 2004 with the input of an Expert Panel convened jointly by the National Resource Center for Family-Centered Practice and Permanency Planning and Casey Family Services Center for Effective Child Welfare Practice. [See Appendix A for the complete Framework for Change.]

- **Model for Improvement**: Teams utilize an improvement method designed to effect and track organizational change. This method relies on the Framework for Change, which serves as the basis for each team’s overall priorities; Monthly Measures, which ensure that changes being tested are resulting in improvements; and Plan-Do-Study-Act Cycles (PDSAs), which are used to rapidly execute small tests of change. The PDSA method provides a structure for planning changes, making changes, studying the impacts of those changes, and then acting again based on what was learned as the changes grow toward full implementation and are spread throughout an entire office and ultimately statewide.

![Model for Improvement Diagram](image-url)
Section II: Using the BSC Methodology to Impact Practice

- **BSC Core Teams**: Each participating office convenes its own internal team to focus on this work over the course of the entire BSC. In this BSC, teams were comprised of six individuals, including one high-level Manager, Supervisor, Social Worker, youth, resource family, and community partner.

- **Collaborative Learning Environment**: The BSC is structured to support shared learning and innovation within and across teams using a variety of methods including:
  - Three two-day Learning Sessions (face-to-face meetings) over a ten-month period (January 2006-October 2006);
  - Collaborative calls during the “Action Periods” between Learning Sessions;
  - Collaborative Extranet Site (website developed for this BSC); and
  - Monthly Newsletter.

- **Faculty Support**: The BSC Faculty works together to guide and mentor the work of the teams throughout the BSC. They serve as planners, coaches, mentors, facilitators, and supporters of this work. The Faculty for this BSC was comprised of staff from Central Office’s Foster Care, Adoption, and Adolescent Services Unit, members of the Commissioner’s Leadership Group on Adolescent Permanency (GAP), several regional and national experts, two advisors on the Model for Improvement and the BSC methodology, and a national consultant on leadership and organizational change. [See Appendix B for a complete list of faculty.]

### Impact of the BSC Method in Massachusetts

As described above, the Model for Improvement has several key aspects: use of a Framework for Change to guide teams’ individual priorities, monthly measures, and the Plan-Do-Study-Act (PDSA) cycles. Teams developed their own priorities based on the national Framework for Change and then tested PDSAs based on their priorities. Unfortunately, for this BSC the planned monthly measures were not ready on a statewide basis to be useful for teams. Despite this challenge, teams were able to learn a considerable amount from the nearly 200 small tests of change they tested and shared.

#### PDSA Cycles

Teams’ use of the Plan-Do-Study-Act method (PDSAs) to test small changes was apparent through various sources: discussions on All-Collaborative Calls, discussions and presentations at Learning Sessions, and postings on the BSC Extranet. Based on these qualitative data, the use of PDSAs resulted in significant benefits. They not only allowed teams to test ideas in small increments, making this large and complex topic manageable, but they also empowered all participants to take an active role in the change process.

The PDSAs appeared to “level the playing field” in terms of the standard bureaucratic hierarchy. A great deal of validation was given to Social Workers and Supervisors on the front line.

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“I think we should do this BSC at each Area Office to get each staff member on board.”

– Social Worker
lines who hold a great deal of expertise on this issue. Furthermore, PDSAs invited the resource family and youth participants to take an active role in changing this system. In fact, at the final Learning Session, the youth regularly referred to PDSAs they wanted to test going forward.

The PDSAs energized participants by allowing them to “do” rather than “talk.” Many participants repeatedly expressed how liberating it was to make actual visible changes in practice with real youth and families rather than just continuing to sit in meeting rooms and plan new ideas.

In October 2006, following the final Learning Session, the BSC was discussed at DSS’ Monthly Statewide Managers Meeting. Several Area and Regional Directors in attendance expressed agreement that the PDSA method was one of the most significant gifts that had been brought to the agency in terms of inviting staff to share in making changes. One Area Director talked about his staff now wanting to use PDSAs to implement other changes in the office beyond adolescent permanency, as they found the method so effective.

**Core Teams**

The composition of the Core Teams proved to be another great benefit of this BSC. While several teams initially struggled with whether they would be able to include youth as team members, the youth proved to be invaluable to the work of this BSC. Repeatedly, both in the final BSC evaluation as well as in informal discussions with participants during and after the final Learning Session, participants were overwhelmed by the impact the youth had in this BSC. The comments below, written by participants in their final evaluation, demonstrate these sentiments.

> "The young people were truly an inspirational and insightful group. They were clearly the true teachers/leaders."  
> - Supervisor

> "We need to remember how intelligent our young adults are and to take their experiences to make changes in the system."  
> - Social Worker

Not only did Social Workers and Supervisors appreciate having youth on the teams, but the youth themselves also experienced great satisfaction with their own participation. This was made clear at the final Learning Session when the youth requested an hour-long session amongst themselves to brainstorm ideas that would allow them to continue this work and remain in contact with one another following the final formal BSC session. Based on these youths’ recommendations, the state is now exploring a variety of ways not only to keep these youth in touch with one another, but also to provide leadership training to youth across the state. This will ensure that the pool of youth who help shape policy and practice in the state continues to grow.

> "I like that I have been a helpful member of my team and that I can help voice out the opinions and concerns that other youth have in a way that helps change and improve the way we think about permanency and the youths’ lives."  
> - Youth
The participation of Social Workers and Supervisors as core team members proved critical in other ways. They were able to bring a first-hand understanding of both agency practice and the current strengths and needs of youth and families. Additionally, the Workers and Supervisors involved in this BSC expressed a sense of validation of their expertise that they had not experienced previously.

The DSS Managers who were active participants repeatedly talked about the new sense of energy they felt around this work. And because the BSC methodology pays careful attention to the critical role of leaders and champions in this work, they were also able to focus on their own leadership skills. To support the advancement of these skills, a consultant who focuses on leading in times of organizational change was brought in to facilitate several sessions with this group over the course of the BSC. The feedback about these sessions was overwhelmingly positive. Leaders felt that this support raised their awareness about the importance of their roles, enhanced their ability to motivate, engage, and support staff, and ultimately provided them with the tools necessary to spread and sustain this work over time. One DSS Manager described this work as “an enhancement of our [the Department’s] core values.”

While not all teams included community partners, those that did found them incredibly valuable. These partners not only tested their own PDSAs, but they became vocal champions of the Department’s work, as this partnership further enhanced their knowledge and understanding of DSS. Moreover, the community partners who participated found the experience supportive, helpful, and exciting. The active inclusion of community partners at the Learning Sessions afforded all teams the benefit of their participation.

**Collaborative Learning Environment**

Without a doubt, the collaborative learning environment that was created and supported through this BSC developed a camaraderie and movement throughout the agency around the issue of adolescent permanency. Nearly 50% of all evaluation respondents named the sharing that occurred across teams (known as “shameless stealing” in BSC parlance) as the most helpful aspect of the BSC. Participants repeatedly asked for more time to share ideas with and hear ideas from their colleagues across the region and across the state. The shameless stealing was so valuable that the state is exploring how to maintain the Extranet as well as how to create other venues for the ongoing sharing of ideas.

The BSC collaborative learning environment was supported through three key structures: 1) the Learning Sessions; 2) All-Collaborative conference calls; and 3) ongoing communication through the Extranet Site and Monthly Newsletter.

**Learning Sessions**

The three in-person Learning Sessions were widely identified as crucial to the success of this BSC. These meetings brought all participants together for a series of two intensive days focused entirely on the issue of adolescent permanency. By creating a blended agenda that brought in outside experts, allowed participants to share across teams on specific issues, developed
“affinity groups” based on roles and self-identified expertise areas, provided dedicated blocks of time for teams to meet and plan, and utilized coaches to help teams develop new PDSAs, teams left exhausted yet re-energized to return to their offices with new ideas that had been tested successfully by other offices.

Conference Calls
The conference calls were the aspect of the BSC with the most room for improvement. The calls started out using a roll call/report-back format that most participants found difficult to follow, given the large number of people on the calls (roughly 200). Based on participant feedback, the call format was changed to focus on specific issues that were identified by the participants themselves. These calls were intended to address questions raised by participants and often served to be “myth-busters” as many misperceptions about state policies and regulations were identified on these calls. Once the call format was changed, most participants reported finding them extremely helpful.

Extranet Site and Monthly Newsletter
The final two vehicles that were used to facilitate sharing and stealing between Learning Sessions were the Extranet site (a password protected internet site) and a monthly Newsletter. Both were reported to be quite helpful. The Extranet was reported as slightly difficult to navigate initially, but once participants became familiar with it, it became the repository of most PDSAs as well as documents that teams developed. This allowed teams to check the site and simply download and adapt forms and documents already tested by other teams, rather than needing to create them themselves.

The Newsletter served a similar purpose. It often highlighted new materials posted on the Extranet to help remind participants of this valuable tool. It also delved into more detail on some of the promising practices and strategies that were being tested by various teams. Last, it provided a forum for reinforcing some of the key aspects of the BSC method, including the importance of true inclusion of all team participants, regardless of role or established hierarchy; tools for leaders; and how to think about spreading ideas beyond initial key learnings.

SUCCESS OF THE BSC METHODOLOGY IN THIS WORK

The combination of the multiple tools used to create and support this collaborative learning environment allowed teams to test the number and quality of practices that they did over the course of only ten months. The structure of the BSC reinforced the need for ongoing peer support throughout the Department to promote and implement change.

Not only did the Core Team composition lend itself to forging new relationships within Area Offices, but by bringing teams together from across the state and creating “affinity groups” based on roles, participants were able to develop a solidarity that served to strengthen their individual voices. Participants described their experiences within affinity groups as helping to further validate the work they do, both in terms of ongoing challenges as well as opportunities for success.
Nowhere was this more evident than in the affinity group comprised of youth. What began as a group of 30 somewhat quiet participants became perhaps the most powerful influence in the BSC. By Learning Session 3 the group no longer sat on the periphery of the work; instead they requested their own meeting space and time, spoke eloquently of their recommendations for system improvements, stood in front of the 250 participants in large group sessions and made recommendations directly to the DSS Commissioner and Chief Judge of the Juvenile Supreme Court, and shared concrete ideas for carrying this work forward.

The classic BSC mantra of “steal shamelessly” took on new meaning in this state-sponsored BSC, as successes spread like wildfire throughout the state. As a result, teams were able to move from small tests of change to implementation to working to sustain improvements in incredibly short periods of time. When most people hear about the work of a public agency, they rarely expect to hear about creativity, innovation, inclusion, collaboration, and passion. Yet those are exactly the characteristics that best describe the participants, teams, leaders, and work in this BSC.
SECTION III: PROMISING PRACTICES IN ACHIEVING PERMANENCY FOR ADOLESCENTS

Over the course of this Breakthrough Series Collaborative, teams from all 29 Area Offices and two additional New England states (Maine and Rhode Island) tested many different ways of working with adolescents, families and partners to shift their practices to improve the way youth are able to achieve permanency. By synthesizing the nearly 200 small tests of change (PDSAs) that were posted on the Extranet site and carefully reviewing the feedback from the monthly All-Collaborative Calls and three Learning Sessions, many promising practices related to adolescent permanency emerged.

These practices are considered promising based on several factors: 1) the sheer number of teams that tested the practice; 2) the depth to which a team was able to move from a small test of change toward full implementation in the office; and 3) direct feedback from youth, families, and staff about the outcomes and impact of the practice. They can be categorized into six key themes, as detailed below.

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**KEY THEMES**

- Including Youth in Planning for Their Own Lives
- Preparing Youth to Actively Participate in Planning
- Using Broad Methods to Identify Potential Connections and Resources
- Establishing and Maintaining Ongoing Support
- Engaging Youth in Mentoring, Training, Planning, and Policy Development
- Providing Education and Information to Families, Staff, and Partners

Although this report divides the practice changes into these six thematic areas, there is a great deal of crossover among them. For the purposes of this report, each promising practice has been grouped under the key theme to which it is most closely tied, but the connections and intersections between all of the themes and practice changes should be noted.

Additionally, the practice changes described in this report by no means constitute all of the changes that teams may have made in establishing routes to permanency for older youth during this BSC. Instead, these appeared to be some of the most promising practice changes related explicitly to the development of lifelong connections and the establishment of permanent living situations that rose to the surface statewide through the PDSAs shared during this BSC. Wherever possible, concrete examples of how teams were able to take a broad strategy and test it through a series of more manageable PDSAs that could be tested rapidly are provided. [Appendix C provides a complete list of all PDSAs described in this report.]
I. Including Youth in Planning for Their Own Lives

The contribution of youth throughout this BSC was immeasurable. From team participation, Learning Session panel contributions, and ongoing Area Office involvement, youth continue to play a critical role in establishing practice changes in the pursuit of permanency for youth.

Early on in the BSC, many teams tested strategies to include youth in various team meetings. At the final Learning Session, it became evident that valuable youth participation was occurring at many levels in the system. Practices were tested in the following major categories:

I.1. Hearing Youth in Their Own Words
I.2. Inviting Youth to Actively Participate in Meetings
I.3. Including Youth-Identified Supports in Meetings

I.1. Hearing Youth in Their Own Words

In the plenary panel that was conducted at the first Learning Session, the youth Faculty Member spoke of the need for open communication, trust, and room for Workers to hear what youth had to say about their own lives. This message came through powerfully enough that nearly every team participating in the BSC tested PDSAs around this strategy.

Many teams tested methods for adolescents to write and talk about themselves. They found that this benefits the youth, placement resources, and Workers as it allows each a better understanding of the youth's needs, desires, and goals. Most PDSAs adapted the “About Me” form, a form developed by the Foster Club to allow youth entering placement to tell their stories and provide information about themselves in their own words. This worksheet could then be shared with the placement resource to help acquaint the placement resource with the youth. Additionally, it provided an outlet for youth to use their own voices and feel heard. As of December 2006, the use of this form was being explored as a new statewide practice in Massachusetts. [See Appendix D for a copy of the “About Me” form.]

A Snapshot of a PDSA:

Brockton Area Office – Using the “About Me” Form to Aid in Placement

The Brockton team hypothesized that by asking youth for input about goals, expectations, preferences, and needs prior to placement, placement disruptions could be avoided. The team tested several cycles of this PDSA and found that when youth were included, it often resulted in better identification of potential placement options, better cooperation from youth and families, and a better “fit” between the youth and the placement resource.

In general, youth were very forthcoming and felt valued by providing input to the process. The staff felt that they knew the youth much better and the information was also helpful to the resource family.
Brockton had success with using this form in many situations including initial placements, youth awaiting placement, youth being placed in transitional settings, and youth returning from a run.

As a result, Brockton has made this a part of the standard intake process at their Youth Transition House and at their weekly Shelter Review Meetings. In addition, they have adapted the form for resource families to provide information to youth as they await placement.

Some offices adapted this idea and developed their own information sheets that could provide similar information for Social Workers and placement resources.

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**A Snapshot of a PDSA:**
**Lawrence Area Office – Using a Narrative Sheet in the Youth’s Own Words**

The Lawrence team hypothesized that having youth complete narratives about themselves would have several positive results, including: youth would feel more valued if they had a voice in what a resource knew about them; the placement resource would have a better understanding of the youth and would be more receptive to having the youth placed in their home; and the Social Worker would learn additional information about the youth.

Once the youth wrote their narratives, the Social Worker asked the youth how it felt to write about themselves. The Social Worker asked the youth if there was anything else they would have liked to add. The Family Resource Worker or specialized agency staff then read the narrative to the prospective resource families and asked the resource families how they felt about hearing information directly from youth. Resource families were also asked if there was any other information they would have liked to know. Lastly, the resource families were asked if having this information helped them feel better about the placement. These responses were then used to further adapt and refine the narrative sheet.

When the PDSA was tested the team did not expect the youth to be so responsive to the request. The narrative was found to be very helpful and informative for both the Social Worker and placement resource.

The final narrative sheet asks the following:

- What would you like the foster parent to know about you?
- What are your interests?
- Who are your friends/where do they live?
- What is your favorite food?
- Do you like to listen to the radio, watch TV, etc?
- Are there any items that you need right now?
- Would you feel comfortable talking to the placement resource
Lifebooks were another way that teams were able to engage youth in their own voices while at the same time helping them better understand the process. The use of Lifebooks turned out to be such an overwhelming success that materials for these books were provided statewide at the final Learning Session with Area Offices clamoring for more.

The Haverhill Area Office took these Lifebooks one step further by working with their adolescents to create what they called “Discharge First Aid Kits.” Similar to the Lifebooks, these First Aid Kits are living collections of vital documents, adolescent-specific social services, medical and educational histories, as well as directed psycho-educational materials designed for and by each adolescent discharging from care as adults. This Discharge First Aid Kit is a tool intended to provide the young adults with the necessary information needed to successfully live independently. The Haverhill Office is now spreading this practice throughout the office and sharing the concept across the state.

1.2. Inviting Youth to Actively Participate in Meetings

Another important practice to ensure the youth voice is heard is to include youth in team meetings. Some teams, such as the Worcester East Area Office, are enhancing the experience of youth and family members by having a conversation with the youth and family to ask them what issues/concerns they would like discussed at the meeting, prior to a regularly scheduled Family Team meeting.

While agency policy recommends including youth in Foster Care Reviews and Permanency Hearings, many offices have found it challenging to put into action for many reasons, including scheduling, preparation, and engaging youth actively in these meetings in ways that are mutually satisfying. Teams that tested practices in this area focused on crafting and tailoring active roles for the youth to ensure they would have a clear part to play during the meeting. This would mean that youth were there as true participants, and neither as observers, tokens, nor simply to “follow the policy.”

A Snapshot of a PDSA:

CAPE ANN AREA OFFICE – TEEN INVOLVEMENT IN PERMANENCY PLANNING CONFERENCES

The Cape Ann team started with the premise that by allowing a youth to participate in the meeting he would be able to guide decision-making, become a true member of the team, make plans for his future, and help identify what he needed to achieve his goal.

One youth was invited to participate in the meeting and he attended. The meeting was very productive and the teen had the opportunity to give his input.
Following the meeting, as the 'Study' part of the PDSA, the youth was asked the following questions:

1. Did you feel this meeting gave you the opportunity to say what you wanted about your future?
2. Did you feel that people on the team listened to what you had to say and acted upon it?
3. What would you have changed about the meeting?
4. Did you feel a real part of the team?
5. Did you feel that your opinions were listened to and valued?
6. Did you appreciate being given the option to attend the history part of the meeting?

While the teen was very happy to participate in the meeting and felt it was productive, he did not like that so much time was spent going over history. He said, "This is about my future, not about my past." The team adjusted by deciding that the next time the history of the case would be discussed in the earlier part of the meeting. In the end, the youth felt like he was treated as a valued part of the team and was heard.

The team learned that it is always better to give youth options about their participation and role and that they should not assume that all youth feel the same way. It is important to test out many variations of meetings to decide which is the best option for each individual youth.

Many teams tested similar practices and although youth attendance at Foster Care Review meetings has always been a standard expectation, many teams suggested it now has become an actively supported practice. Teams accomplished this in many ways including providing transportation; working with the adolescent and/or support person in advance to answer questions and cover areas that they are uncomfortable raising in the team meeting; and altering how information is presented so it is understandable to all attendees. Overall, the inclusion of youth in various case planning and case decision-making forums is recognized as a valuable and permanent shift in day-to-day practice.

I.3. Including Youth-Identified Supports in Meetings

Not only did teams in this BSC recognize the importance of including youth in their own case planning and decision-making meetings, but they also realized that it was important for youth to be able to identify and invite their own supports to attend with them. Many teams are now including other adults who are significant to the youth to join in case planning processes. The perspective given by these key constituents can assist in identifying and maintaining ongoing supports for adolescents.

“We learned that adolescents want to be in the forefront of their own planning. It is important to identify manageable tasks with deadlines and identify people who can assist in the process so he/she does not feel like they have to do everything on their own.”

– Greenfield Area Office
A Snapshot of a PDSA: Park Street Area Office – Including Youth and Supports in the PPC Process

This team hypothesized that by participating in the Permanency Planning Conference (PPC) with their supports, youth would feel empowered and become an important part of the decision-making process. Increased communication would help to build trust between the youth, providers, and supporters. Finally, youth would feel empowered through the process and would buy into their plans for their future, ultimately leading toward greater success.

In this PDSA, both youth and their supports were asked about their plans and goals for the youth’s future and what they felt was needed in order to be successful in reaching the goal(s). Information was provided and the youth and her support person were able to ask questions to clarify the process.

The outcome was pleasantly surprising for attendees. The youth liked the fact that she was part of the process and was able to voice her opinions. The team believed the meeting was successful in part because everyone involved made sure that the youth was presented with enough information prior to the meeting so she felt well-prepared. Other units in the office are now running similar meetings and talking to youth about their permanency and future plans and goals.

Once teams had the “right” people in the room, the purpose and tone of the meeting was the next area of focus. Teams wanted to capitalize on the presence of individuals who knew and cared about the youth to help the youth plan for their future in positive ways.

A Snapshot of a PDSA: Greenfield Area Office – Personal Future Planning

In this series of PDSAs, adolescents were asked to identify members of his/her support system and invite them to attend a scheduled meeting. The purpose of the meeting was to work together to identify short-term goals, steps to get there, and a time frame in which to complete them. Other participants at the meeting would include the Social Worker, Supervisor, ARCHIE team member, and ARC Worker. Greenfield hoped that this model of active inclusion would empower adolescents to take control of planning for their future and identify concrete steps toward goals, supports needed to reach those goals, and timelines. Ideally, the adolescent would complete the short-term goals by the identified date.

For the initial PDSA, an adolescent was asked to attend a meeting and bring whoever she identified as part of her support system. She was also asked what kind of food she wanted at the meeting to help make this feel like her meeting. A "people map" was utilized to help her sort through her
connections during the meeting.

The results were even better than expected. The adolescent attended with her foster parent, participated actively in the meeting, and reported feeling positive about the meeting. She said that she was expecting the meeting to be deficit-oriented as opposed to a more positive approach. Greenfield plans to replicate this process with other teens.

Finding ways to welcome youth and actively include them and those significant to them has proven to be essential in the pursuit of permanency for youth. When youth and those important to them are engaged, greater success can be maintained over time.
II. PREPARING YOUTH TO ACTIVELY PARTICIPATE IN PLANNING

Inviting youth to participate in meetings that focus on their own lives is certainly the first critical step in treating youth as true partners. But based on the age differences, differences in life experiences, “professional” training, and the Department’s power and authority, expecting youth to feel prepared or comfortable expressing their voices without prior support, information, or preparation would be unrealistic.

Teams learned that achieving true participation from youth once they were included in meetings strongly depended on both the youth’s willingness to engage as well as their understanding of the process. The PDSAs tested in this thematic area focused on ensuring that once youth were at the table, they were ready and able to participate as true partners in the discussions about their own lives.

II.1. PROVIDING INFORMATION IN FAMILY-FRIENDLY WAYS
II.2. LISTENING TO YOUTHS’ WANTS AND NEEDS
II.3. GIVING YOUTH THE INFORMATION THEY WANT

II.1. PROVIDING INFORMATION IN FAMILY-FRIENDLY WAYS

A key challenge in including families and other youth-identified supports in meetings is the language used by the Department. Many teams identified this “child welfare jargon” as a significant barrier to participation, as it is intimidating and reinforces the feeling that the youth, family, and other non-DSS participants are outsiders to the process.

A Snapshot of a PDSA: Worcester West Area Office – Presenting Information in a Family-Friendly Way

The Worcester West team hypothesized that presenting information in a more understandable way would result in the youth and family feeling more encouraged to participate, feeling more empowered, and having a better overall understanding of the process.

To this end, the Social Worker and Facilitator from Family Networks\textsuperscript{11} presented information at a Family Team Meeting in a manner that was clear and understandable to the youth and the family. At the conclusion of the meeting the Social Worker met with the youth and family to get feedback from them as to whether they felt more a part of the process.

This format did indeed result in more participation by the family in the process. The team learned that more input from the youth and family prior to the meeting would enhance the experience for all team members.

“We learned that it is important to include adolescents in their PPCs and we must do so by preparing them ahead of time for the meeting. It is such an easy way of allowing them to have more of a say in their lives.”

- Malden Area Office

\textsuperscript{11} Family Networks is a program of Family Interactive.

Prior to the next Family Team Meeting, the Social Worker and Family Networks Facilitator met with the youth and family to seek their input as to what they would like to see addressed at the meeting. The hope is that this will become office-wide protocol.

II.2. LISTENING TO YOUTHS’ WANTS AND NEEDS

Another strategy that teams identified to help prepare youth appropriately for participation in case planning and decision-making was to help youth identify information that may need to be addressed and use this information to set expectations.

The Lawrence Area Office had their Social Workers review service plan goals with youth during visits. They hoped to strengthen the relationship between workers and adolescents and better understand what youth needed to achieve their goals. The value of youth input was recognized and one youth stated that he felt that these questions should be asked every one to two months as they helped him "be reminded of what he is working on."

Other teams tested alternative ways to prepare youth for this type of active participation.

A Snapshot of a PDSA:
NEW BEDFORD AREA OFFICE – PREPARING YOUTH FOR FOSTER CARE REVIEW MEETINGS

In order to ensure that adolescents felt they had a role in their case planning, the New Bedford Area Office tested inviting the youth to their Foster Care Reviews and having the Foster Care Reviewer meet with the adolescent alone prior to the meeting. The goal of this initial meeting was to offer a venue for the youth to disclose any pertinent case information that he felt uncomfortable disclosing in front of his Social Worker, resource family, or parent.

The Reviewer met with the adolescent before the review and asked four questions:

1. Do you have any concerns or issues you would like to address that you don't feel comfortable discussing in front of your parent, foster parent, or Social Worker? If so, would you like me to address it in the meeting?
2. What’s the most important issue you would like to have addressed today?
3. Have you ever attended a Foster Care Review before or any other case management meetings?
4. How does it feel to be sitting in this meeting today?

The Reviewer felt the process was effective and stated he was willing to try it again and possibly incorporate the process into his daily format.
Other teams were even more detailed about how they asked youth what they wanted and needed.

**A Snapshot of a PDSA:**

**Fall River Area Office – Assessing Progress Toward Adult Self-Sufficiency**

Fall River used PDSAs to implement the Assessing Progress Towards Adult Self-Sufficiency practice. The plan was for the Ongoing Social Worker and the Adolescent Specialist to meet before a Foster Care Review with youth and other significant caretakers and adults in their lives to discuss each of the ten areas listed below:

1. Sibling/Biological Family Contact Plan (including safety plan)
2. Identification and Encouragement of Child’s Strengths and Interests (including sports, arts, languages, camps, community service, areas of educational strength and interest, etc.)
3. Education Planning (including identification of post-secondary goals, maintaining good attendance and grades, credits toward graduation, courses of study geared toward goals and interests, MCAS performance/prep, counseling, special needs, academic support)
4. Vocational/Employment and Career Counseling and Placement
5. Housing
6. Expertise in Daily Living Skills (including budgeting and home management, communication and self-advocacy skills, problem solving and planning for the future)
7. Physical and Mental Health Care (including health insurance, family planning, sexual health, substance abuse, mental health counseling, etc.)
8. Information and Training on Accessing Community Resources and Public Benefits/Services
9. Identification and Completion of Referrals to Other State Agencies (DMH, DMR, Mass Rehab, Educational System- 688, DTA, SSI, etc.)
10. Relationships with Caring Adults (lifelong connection, mentor, etc.)

The team hoped to better identify services and supports needed by adolescents to help achieve self-sufficiency and permanency and establish responsibility for how adolescents would connect to the identified services and supports.

Following the initial PDSAs, the Adolescent Outreach Worker and Social Workers decided to continue using this process to help youth think about their situations and goals and to share the methodology with the Family Networks Lead Agency staff to help with youth in Independent Living programs.
In the Lynn Area Office, where a similar practice was tested, Social Workers now apply the practice of ensuring that all youth in placement have a life support plan in all cases from the start of Voluntary Requests for Services, certain placement cases, and within the Adolescent Units. They also hope to share this practice with partner agencies.

Another promising practice was preparing youth adequately for court hearings such that their voices could be heard directly by Judges. The Lynn Area Office tested a series of PDSAs in this practice area.

**A Snapshot of a PDSA:**

**LYNN AREA OFFICE – PREPARING YOUTH TO MEET WITH THE JUDGE**

Lynn focused efforts on the Adult Self-Sufficiency/Permanency Hearing Project. In this test, youth turning 17 met with the Counsel and the Social Worker prior to the Permanency Hearing to prepare for the meeting with the Judge. During the meeting, the youth, the Social Worker, and the Counsel identified the adolescent’s goals, wishes, plans, and progress in the ten key areas described in the Fall River snapshot above.

Conducting this meeting prior to the Hearing benefited all parties in the following ways: 1) the adolescent was involved in service planning; 2) the Social Worker was engaged in identifying how to meet the needs of the youth; and 3) the Counsel was better prepared for the Hearing. Most importantly, the adolescent was better prepared to meet with the Judge and the Judge was able to hear directly from the adolescent.

At the final Learning Session of the BSC, the Harbor Area Office was beginning to explore this area with a test to help them better understand what young adults think is important in order for them to establish permanency and maintain independence. They were asking a small number of adolescents what three things they expected from DSS when they turned 18. Their hope was to educate both themselves as well as adolescents regarding realistic expectations and those services and supports needed to maintain permanency.
II.3. Giving Youth the Information They Want

Youth want to be heard when they have something to say; they want to be asked about their own wants and needs; and they want to be given information and not kept in the dark. Youth at the Learning Sessions told repeated stories of being placed in homes with little to no information about the placement. Their voices expressed the anxiety, fright, and anger that anyone would feel being placed with total strangers. Many teams took these messages and turned them into PDSAs to prevent these situations from occurring in the future.

The Springfield Area Office asked questions of youth prior to entering care for the first time. The goal was both to learn more about their needs and expectations as well as to ease the transition for the adolescent as well as the placement resource. Attleboro used a similar approach, but focused on providing information directly to the adolescent about the placement resource.

A Snapshot of a PDSA:

Attleboro Area Office – Providing Youth with Information About Foster Homes

The Attleboro team wanted to give youth an overview of the foster home in order to lessen anxiety for the youth prior to placement. They felt that this would help give the youth some concrete information and visual references about the foster home prior to the actual physical placement in the home.

The Social Worker and Family Resource Worker worked together to present the "Info Sheet" to the youth and the Family Resource Worker was able to answer some additional questions for the youth.

The result was a more relaxed youth entering the home. Through this test the team learned that they also need to be sensitive to the concerns and needs of foster families. They are doing this as they expand this practice through numerous forums to include all of their foster homes.

Not only is this type of information important prior to a first placement, Dimock Street found that it is equally important when a youth is transitioning from a residential placement to a foster home.

A Snapshot of a PDSA:

Dimock Street Area Office – Preparing Youth for Foster Placement

Dimock Street created and tested a "Getting to Know Foster Parent" questionnaire. They hypothesized that the more the youth and foster parent knew about each other in advance, the better the determination would be regarding the appropriateness of the placement.

In the days leading to a step-down, a worker from the residential
placement met with the youth to prepare him for what to expect from the foster home. With the help of the worker, the youth came up with questions that would help him get a sense of what type of home he was going to be transitioning into (e.g. if there were pets in the home, if the youth would have his own room, if there were other children in the home, how far the home was to school, cultural norms around food, language, etc.).

The foster mother provided background information about her home and parenting style. In addition, the foster mother was able to get an idea of the youth’s likes and dislikes as they related to cultural values. As a result, the foster mother could be respectful of these and she made an effort to prepare cultural dishes. She was also conscious of his upbringing in terms of how his mother’s cultural role differed from how she raises children.

Ultimately, the questionnaire proved to be incredibly helpful in facilitating a dialogue between the foster parent, youth, and Social Worker.

Listening and responding to needs in language that youth and families can understand is critical to gaining trust and eventually working together to identify goals and supports needed for ongoing permanency. Thus, it is clear that youth and those important to them are more likely to participate and ultimately achieve successful permanency when they feel listened to, heard, and respected.
III. USING BROAD METHODS TO IDENTIFY POTENTIAL CONNECTIONS AND RESOURCES

A third theme that emerged from this work was the need for offices to use multiple methods and practices to identify potential connections and resources for youth. A key aspect of adolescent permanency is ensuring that all youth, regardless of their ultimate legal status, have a family, lifelong connections, and relationships. In order to do this, youth must receive support in identifying these connections, developing these connections, and ultimately in maintaining these connections.

In addition to these connections becoming lifelong relationships and supports, these connections may also become possible placement resources for the youth. But only through practices that systematically and rigorously identify and explore these connections can they be developed into such. The three practice areas in this thematic area in which successful PDSAs were tested include:

III.1. ASKING ABOUT CONNECTIONS EARLIER AND MORE OFTEN
III.2. “MINING” CASES AND IMPROVING DOCUMENTATION
III.3. USING INFORMATION FROM YOUTH TO CULTIVATE POTENTIAL RESOURCES

III.1. ASKING ABOUT CONNECTIONS EARLIER AND MORE OFTEN

The idea of asking about connections as early as possible in the life of a case has been shown to be critical in helping youth identify individuals who may be lifelong connections for them. Practice is often focused on identifying lifelong connections only when youth are turning 18 and getting ready to leave the foster care system, but practices that focused on this identification early on and then maintained this focus over time were explored by several teams.

Several teams, including the Arlington Area Office, initiated an “Emergency Form” to be filled out by youth and significant others in their lives in order to assist in the identification of connections and relationships.

**A Snapshot of a PDSA: Cape Ann Area Office – Identifying Connections at the Point of Assessment**

Cape Ann decided to initiate the identification of these possible lifelong connections at the point of assessment. Although initially families were worried about these questions, once the team shifted to asking “who would be contacted in an emergency?” families answered without question.

In addition to identifying possible lifelong connections, the team discovered that many potential kinship resources were identified as well.
Some teams are now attaching an Emergency Form with this information to the CHINS\textsuperscript{12} petition that can be completed in the office and/or at court. Additionally, teams tested asking other questions of youth at various points in the life of the case to obtain this type of information.

**A Snapshot of a PDSA: Lawrence Area Office – Asking Youth Who They Consider Important**

Lawrence tested several PDSAs focused on asking youth at various times in the life of the case who they consider “important” to them. To do this, youth were asked to name three people they viewed as supports in their lives.

As a result, youth shared with Social Workers who they felt they could look to for support and therefore they identified possible people with whom they wanted to maintain connections.

Many PDSAs were tested in which a variety of questions to identify possible lifelong connections were asked of youth. Many other PDSAs were tested on strategies for gathering this information that required even more participation on the part of youth.

**A Snapshot of a PDSA: Maine – Creating a Life Road Map**

Maine worked with youth to identify their current and former relationships by creating a road map of their “life journey.” This PDSA recognized that multiple placement changes/transitions in foster care often sever prior relationships. If young people are guided to identify important connections, they may be able to strengthen and re-establish some of these relationships. Through the process, Social Workers would also learn new skills in supporting youth.

In this PDSA, youth identified those individuals with whom they hoped to reconnect. Workers then held a meeting to plan how they would contact the people the youth identified. This meeting determined what form of contact would occur and who would be responsible for each part of the plan.

The ultimate goal was that the youth would establish contact with at least two of the people on the list and the Social Worker would take an active role in facilitating the connection. If successful, both the youth and the Social Worker would be excited about the outcome and share it with other Social Workers and youth resulting in more Social Workers pursuing connections for youth in this manner.

In the initial PDSA, the youth identified more extended family than expected and created a wonderful map. The team learned that certain barriers inhibited the youth's willingness to advocate for herself in
pursuing important relationships and that Social Workers typically have a limited scope of family and other important relationships at their disposal. Working together in a strategic manner assisted all those involved to discover and reestablish important relationships.

Similar to the development of these Life Road Maps, many teams, including the **South Central Area Office**, employed ecomaps to assist youth in the identification of significant connections in their lives. The team from Greenfield advanced this concept by including entire families in the process.

**A Snapshot of a PDSA:**  
**GREENFIELD AREA OFFICE – CREATING ECOMAPS TO IDENTIFY RESOURCES**

Greenfield tested several PDSAs of working with youth and their families in various settings and points in care to generate ecomaps. The goal was to demonstrate that meeting with the youth and family up front may well change the dynamics of placement and being able to engage.

In each case, youth were able to identify potential connections through their ecomaps. And this helped identify more possible resources up front as well. Including families in the process garnered greater support for the joint desired outcomes.

The Cambridge Area Office went one step further by testing practices that would help youth support, develop, and plan to maintain these connections over time, once they had been identified.

**A Snapshot of a PDSA:**  
**CAMBRIDGE AREA OFFICE – CONDUCTING TEAM CONFERENCES FOR TEENS IN TRANSITION**

Cambridge tested Team Conferencing for Teens in Transition. The plan was to have youth in transition collaborate with their Workers to identify their own support systems. The focus of the Team Conferencing was to help youth build a safety net for themselves as they approached their 18th birthday and assist teens in maintaining long-term connections.

The Family Group Conference (FGC) Coordinator along with the Adolescent and Assessment Supervisors came together to develop a FGC packet to assist adolescents who were in transition. The packet included the "About Me" form and a referral form on which the youth identified people who they considered part of their support system.

The format of Team Conferencing for Teens was:

I. Introductions and purpose of the meeting
II. Brief history given by teen and/or his/her Social Worker
III. Strengths
IV. Break to share a meal together
V. Concerns/Needs
VI. Team planning time: participants were asked who would be available to do what and a determination was made of how people would keep in touch over the next few months
VII. Writing of plan
VIII. Wrap up

The team learned that they needed to start the Team Conferencing when youth enter the Department’s custody, rather than waiting until it is time for the transition to occur. They planned to identify youth from all Units in the Area Office to participate in this practice.

Cambridge then used some key questions to further cement the relationships between the youth and the identified connections.

A Snapshot of a PDSA:
CAMBRIDGE AREA OFFICE – DEEPENING RELATIONSHIPS WITH IDENTIFIED CONNECTIONS

Cambridge focused a great deal of attention on helping youth identify significant people in their lives and then find ways to spend time together developing interests. The youth then worked on answering the following questions together with these connections:

1) When you leave DSS, where will you live?
2) Do you have someone in your life you can turn to? Who is it?
3) What are your plans for the future?
4) How do you plan to support yourself?

The team learned that of the original youth chosen, all were able to identify permanent connections. They are now spreading this PDSA to other youth and Social Workers in the office.

The Fall River Area Office offered Family Group Conferencing with the goal of establishing connections with those who can support youths’ efforts towards gaining independent living skills. The Hyde Park Area Office also employed Family Group Conferencing but with a slight twist. They first focused on whether youth knew what their DSS Service Plan Goal was and then turned the focus to whether they had connections and supports to help them reach this goal.

III.2. “Mining” Cases and Improving Documentation

Two other ways that teams worked to identify potential connections and resources were 1) to “mine” cases; and 2) to use non-traditional interview techniques to track connections. Both methods appear to show promising results.
The Brockton Area Office, Rhode Island, and Maine used interns to carefully review cases and meet with adolescents to help to determine significant others in their history. Some then met with those individuals identified to further explore their relationships with and interest in the youth.

The Cape and Islands Area Office combined the forces of the Family Resource and Kinship Workers to interview the youth, family and do record reviews.

The Lynn Area Office conducted intense case reviews and interviewed former Social Workers.

The Lowell Area Office tapped the Case Management Kinship Unit to work with the family triad to create and foster permanency.

### III.3. Using Information from Youth to Identify Potential Resources

Beyond identifying potential lifelong connections, the information obtained through the mining of case records and through conversations with the youth was also used to identify possible placement resources.

#### A Snapshot of a PDSA: Attleboro Area Office – Asking Youth About Placement Desires and Concerns

Attleboro tested including youth in the identification of their own placement resources. When a teen was court-ordered out of his home and into placement, Social Workers from the Adolescent Units asked the youth the following questions to help identify potential resources:

1) “What adult would you call if there was an emergency and your parents were not available? (If adolescent responds, ask for a phone number and the nature of the relationship)

2) Besides your parent(s), what adult would you talk to when you have a problem? (If adolescent responds, ask for a phone number and the nature of the relationship)

3) Thanks for answering these questions. We are going to contact these people as possible placement resources for you. By answering the questions, you have given us some avenues to explore before we place you in substitute care with the Department. Do you feel like you have had some input or say in the options that DSS will consider as we work on a placement for you?”

Through this PDSA, they learned that youth need the opportunity to talk about concerns regarding out-of-home placement prior to asking the questions. This made it easier to focus on the questions and identify
Once identified, Social Workers communicated with potential resources to establish their level of interest in the youth. The Social Workers involved in the process talked to other Social Workers to share the success of working with youth from the start to identify and reach out to potential resources.

The Haverhill Area Office asked Intake Supervisors to complete forms that identified potential kinship and other resources. The form was created and printed on bright pink paper to be readily recognized by Workers to track kinship/resources over time. Holyoke realized great success by asking what they called “non-traditional” questions.

**A SNAPSHOT OF A PDSA:**
**HOLYOKE AREA OFFICE – USING NON-TRADITIONAL QUESTIONS**

Holyoke hypothesized that the likelihood of sustained placement permanency would be increased if placements were identified directly by youth. To this end they developed a ‘List of Placement Resources.’ The list was then entered in the case file as a one-page summary of the resources youth identified as potential placements. The page was printed on red colored paper to maximize the visibility of it when other Social Workers were reviewing the record.

This ‘List of Placement Resources’ was compiled from answers received either through traditional or “non-traditional” questions. These questions were randomly posed in the midst of conversations during regular home visits. The following are examples of the questions used when talking/visiting with the youth:

**Traditional Questions:**
- Are there any individuals/relatives/acquaintances that you would like the Department to look at as potential placement resources for you?

**Non-Traditional Questions:**
- Where did you spend your birthday?
- With whom did you spend a holiday?
- Where would you spend your perfect vacation and with whom?
- So, what did you do over the summer? Did you go to the beach? Who went along?
- Who do you invite over your house for a sleep over?

The non-traditional questions were the ones that produced responses that were subsequently placed in the case file on the red one-pager. They felt as if they got a great deal more information with these questions and now plan to spend more time engaging their Extended Team and the entire office in spreading this practice.
Asking youth and families directly was the practice tested most widely, but other offices tried asking others who knew the families.

**A Snapshot of a PDSA: North Central Area Office – Asking Reporters About Possible Connections**

North Central had the Intake Screener ask reporters about potential resources at the time of the report. They hypothesized that by asking questions of a reporter regarding potential resources, they would get information that they normally do not get when they ask a youth or family who is in the middle of a crisis and cannot either think about it or is too emotional to do so. The questions included:

1) Is this an intact family? If not, do you know where the other parent lives?
2) Do you know who the friends are that this youth hangs out with?
3) Do you know of anyone in this youth’s life who might be willing to step forward to be a resource for her/him?

It was decided that this will be repeated for all future reports and will be included in the Area Office’s training for mandated reporters.

And through intensive work on a specific case, one team was able to identify several practices that, when used together, improved outcomes for youth based on identifying and maintaining connections.

**A Snapshot of a PDSA: Rhode Island – Working With the “B” Twins**

The Rhode Island team worked intensively through several cycles to secure a better outcome for a set of twins in their care. Initially, the team worked to identify those connections valuable to sustain and support. Building the relationship through direct and ongoing communication with the adolescents and their connections proved critical to the successes gained. The team employed a number of strategies to identify and strengthen these critical relationships including:

- Assigned interns to mine cases for references to potential connections;
- Held a team meeting with the twins and those they identified as important to them to identify potential resources;
- Encouraged visitation with those important to the twins and negotiated with placement resources to allow visits to occur;
- Coordinated and provided transportation and calling cards to enhance communication with significant and potential resources;
- Recognized that all relationships have the potential to support the
twins even if they are not long-term placement options; and
- Included the twins in ongoing discussions so they fully understood options and circumstances.

In these ways, the team supported the twins and allowed for an open discussion of realistic options and timeframes. Ultimately, through the combination of these promising practices, relationships for these twins were identified and connections maintained.

The “About Me” form (described on page 10) was adapted and used by numerous offices to both better include the voice of youth and help identify potential resources. Teams tried using the form with youth of varying ages, at different times in the life of cases, and in various settings. In every case, using the form was deemed beneficial to youth, families, providers and Workers. The Fall River Area Office learned that the "About Me" form can be used as a tool for both identifying prospective foster parents and as a recruiting tool to show foster parents that the youth's answers are typical for teenagers. This helped foster parents see adolescents in a more positive light.

The many examples provided above indicate the depth to which teams tested the use of broad methods to identify lifelong connections and potential resources. The sheer volume of work in this area illustrates teams' desire to work with youth and others to help find permanent solutions. In many of the examples provided, simplifying the processes was key. Going back to the history of the case, talking with youth and families in a more simple and direct manner, asking more questions more often – all of these tests yielded promising results. Moving away from bureaucratic jargon and paperwork and instead relying on clinical expertise that involves direct conversations with youth and families is what clearly demonstrates the most promising approaches in this work.
IV. Establishing and Maintaining Ongoing Support

While engaging youth and helping them identify and maintain connections with people who are important to them is critical to this work, youth and their families must also receive supports for permanency to be successful. This includes supports necessary to keep families stable and out of crisis (both birth families and resource families), supports to help youth maintain connections to other youth in similar situations, supports to help youth find and make their voices heard, and supports to provide youth with information about their choices in life. The most promising practices tested in this theme are organized as follows:

| IV.1. Providing Supports to Divert Placements |
| IV.2. Providing Supports to Maintain Placement Stability |
| IV.3. Improving Communication with Resource Families |

IV.1. Providing Supports to Divert Placements

The value of communication is the main theme in this subset of practices. Teams tested the effects of talking with teens, families, resource families, Social Workers, and other partners to better understand the strengths, needs, and goals of all parties.

A Snapshot of a PDSA: Holyoke Area Office – Using Mediation to Support Intact Families

Holyoke used mediation to support intact families. They hypothesized that mediation techniques would improve communication between the parents/guardians and adolescents, and that increased communication would contribute to the overall sustainability of placements within family settings. It could ultimately divert families from needing DSS intervention at all.

In this test, families inquiring about Applications for Voluntary Services were referred to mediation. (When a certain level of risk was detected, the Office would implement other steps, including but not limited to accepting the application, referring to the court for filing of a CHINS petition, Collaborative Assessment Program referral, or filing of a Care and Protection Petition.)

Over the course of the BSC, several families were referred for mediation and none of them returned to the Department’s attention for services. As a result, the Office is looking at how this can be implemented on a larger scale, specifically in terms of working with probation to refer cases to mediation prior to referring families to the Department.
Section III: Promising Practices in Achieving Permanency for Adolescents

A Snapshot of a PDSA: Lowell Area Office – Connecting Families with Services Early in the Life of the Case

The Lowell Office wanted to connect families directly to services. They thought that if they were able to meet with families earlier in the life of the case and provide immediate referrals, it would strengthen the family and potentially avoid out-of-home placements.

The team tested this idea by conducting a Family Team Meeting during the first few weeks of the assessment. Then services were provided in a timely manner.

This was successful and all of the Office’s Investigations Units now practice this. The team will now review existing assessment cases that might be able to benefit from a Family Networks referral and compare the time frames of when these meetings are scheduled. They will also test this practice with other new adolescent cases and will share the practice with other Supervisors and Assessment Workers.

At the time of the final Learning Session of this BSC, the Lowell Area Office was in the early stages of testing strategies to divert families from placement services and better support them earlier with a specific focus on preventing out-of-home placements due to truancy issues. This was occurring through diversion at court as well as better training for school personnel with regards to Family Networks services, family-centered practice and the Department’s Working with Families Right from the Start initiative.

IV.2. Providing Supports to Maintain Placement Stability

As much as the goal of any child welfare agency is to prevent placement whenever possible, when placement was necessary teams wanted to add an extra focus on supporting those placements to prevent any disruptions. Again, ongoing communication between the youth, the placement resource, and the DSS staff appeared to be key.

A Snapshot of a PDSA: Brockton Area Office – Teaming Between Workers to Focus on Placement Stability

Brockton assigned a Family Resource Liaison to work together with the Ongoing Social Worker with the goal of increasing "ownership" for placement stability. The Liaison teamed with the Ongoing Social Worker around identifying a stable placement for the youth.

"We learned that with all new placements either at home or in care, communicating on a daily basis provided much needed support to families to help maintain the placement."

- Pittsfield Area Office
The Office established these teams and they developed and reviewed roles and responsibilities. The Office plans to make this a "permanent" change.

The team made another staffing adjustment in addition to this teaming practice. As a test, they assigned an Adolescent Outreach Intern to be a Secondary Worker for six adolescents in need of adolescent outreach services. This would allow youth to have more than one Worker to rely on and go to for services and supports.

Both of these practices are intended to better support youth in care.

While the Brockton model focused on peer support in its staffing, Framingham and the Robert Van Wart Center explored peer support for resource families.

**A Snapshot of a PDSA: Framingham Area Office and Robert Van Wart Center – Sharing Experiences Between Resource Families**

Framingham tested PDSAs aimed at working with experienced adoptive parents to allow them to share their experiences with post-adoption support services with newer adoptive parents and families. The goal was two-fold: (1) to identify the most appropriate way to reach out to "new" adoptive families; and (2) to better learn about services needed and develop them accordingly.

The Robert Van Wart team worked with foster parents who became guardians to acquire some insight into needs of families who adopt or take guardianship. Through their tests, the team determined that as a matter of practice, they need to examine and address the following things:

1. Need for information sharing at time of placement;
2. Formal "Disclosure" with families taking guardianship;
3. Routinely providing families achieving permanency with information about Adoption Journeys and other possible supports; and
4. Examination of how DSS can remain available as a support to the family.

The Pittsfield Area Office noted success with another strategy focusing on maintaining placement stability – that of providing increased support from Department staff for resource families in the first few weeks following a placement.
A Snapshot of a PDSA:  
**Pittsfield Area Office – Contacting Resource Families for Support Following Initial Placements**

For the first two weeks following a new placement, a Social Worker in the Pittsfield Office contacted the resource family every day. Following the initial two weeks, she contacted the resource family weekly. In addition, the Worker was in touch weekly with the school. The hypothesis was that if DSS provided these kinds of supports, the placement would be less likely to disrupt and the work with the youth and family could focus on permanency, rather than on repeated placement changes.

This process was tested many times and, as a result, the majority of the placements remained stable. The resource families involved in these tests reported feeling supported by open lines of communication.

What was not expected was that the awareness by staff of the strengths as well as the needs of both resource families and the youth would increase significantly. The team learned that with all new placements either at home or in care, communicating on a daily basis provided much needed support to families to help maintain the placements.

The team planned to do this for all adolescent placements and possibly any child placed who may be at risk of multiple movements.

The Brockton Area Office also learned that providing extra supports to resource families could have additional benefits. They actually increased the number of resource families available for youth by recruiting, training, and supporting homes that demonstrated specific skills or interests in older adolescents. The additional supports included coordinating visits among the youth’s Social Worker, Therapist, the Adolescent Outreach Worker, and the Family Resource Worker. The families are also invited to support groups, PAYA training, and other pertinent trainings. This practice demonstrates that ongoing communication and coordination with resource families can greatly benefit the family, youth, and the Department.

**IV.3. Improving Communication with Resource Families**

The most important support the Department can provide to support placements, as identified by resource families, is frequent communication with Social Workers and treating resource families as true partners to best serve the children and youth in their care. To this end, several teams worked with youth and families prior to placement to better identify expectations and desired services. Some used “About Me” forms (described on page 10), completed by youth, to share with resource families. And by holding inclusive meetings before actual placements occurred, teams hoped that everyone involved (resource families, youth, Social Workers, and Family Resource Workers) would be on the same page regarding expectations.
A SNAPSHOt OF A PDsA:
COASTAL AREA OFFICE – FAMILY TEAM MEETINGS TO IDENTIFY SUPPORTS

The Coastal team tested providing support to a foster placement by conducting a Family Team Meeting prior to the placement. The purpose of this meeting was to identify supports for the foster parent to prevent a placement disruption.

The result was numerous services being put into place before the placement even occurred. The team determined that this would also be an excellent practice for youth placed in shelters when movement to a foster home was a planned event.

The Family Resource Unit and the Ongoing Social Worker planned to continue to collaborate with the Family Networks team to organize these meetings in a timely manner.

The Lawrence Area Office decided to hold meetings whenever a youth needed to be placed in a foster home, not just prior to the initial placement. This has become regular practice in the office. The Lynn Area Office now includes information about the youth in the Child Placement Agreement and workers strive to educate resource families about how to best meet the needs of the youth prior to placements being made.

The common thread throughout this thematic area, once again, is communication – immediate and ongoing. Teams learned that providing timely access to information and services as well as including families, youth, and others as partners in care can result in supports and services that may divert placements entirely, prevent placement moves, and provide entrée to new placement resources for adolescents.
V. Engaging Youth in Mentoring, Training, Planning, and Policy Development

After working closely with youth as colleagues on BSC teams rather than as “clients” in specific cases, many teams realized that youth could provide a perspective and input that was critical to the agency’s work on a much broader level than initially realized. While the purpose of this BSC was primarily to focus on the case-practice level of work, staff decided that these perspectives had to be included and utilized on a much wider scale. There are three primary practice areas that emerged in this theme.

V.1. Engaging Older Youth as Mentors
V.2. Using Youth as Trainers
V.3. Including Youth to Inform Policy Discussions and Decisions

V.1. Engaging Older Youth as Mentors

There are no greater experts on the needs and strengths of youth in placement than youth who have experienced the system firsthand. As a result, many teams looked to develop mentor situations or programs in which youth who had already turned 18 and left the foster care system could support those youth who were still in care.

Youth voice is essential for case planning as well as agency planning. But it can also be a powerful tool in talking with and supporting other youth. Many teams explored the use of youth mentors and using messages and language developed by youth to talk to their peers. Two teams used these ideas to encourage youth leaving foster care at age 18 to remain in care so that they could continue receiving the Department’s services and support.

A Snapshot of a PDSA: Framingham Area Office – Engaging Older Youth as Mentors for Youth Leaving Foster Care After Age 18

Framingham is advancing practice in this area through the establishment of youth advocacy and peer consultation programs. This PDSA focused on two things: (1) the ability of older youth to guide/educate younger youth in making informed decisions relative to remaining in care after the age of 18; and (2) the effect it has on younger youth facing the same decisions.

The goal of this practice was for youth under 18 to be better equipped to make decisions as to whether or not to continue working with DSS past the age of 18 as a result of learning about adolescent services from older youth (18+) who are currently working with the Department. Initial results are positive and the team continues to test this strategy.
A Snapshot of a PDSA:
Plymouth Area Office – Encouraging Youth to Remain in Care After 18

In an effort to better understand the rationale behind youth’s decisions about remaining in the Department’s care after the age of 18 and see if there are barriers that could be removed, the Plymouth team conducted a survey with a youth leaving foster care at age 18. The team hoped that by asking the older youth a series of questions, they could be sure that the youth had thought carefully about why he wanted to leave care at 18. The goal was to get that youth to at least speak with another youth before a final decision was reached, and ultimately to allow the case to remain open for a time following his leaving placement. The following questions were asked:

1. What would it take to change your mind about not signing in?
2. What are your fears about remaining in DSS care?
3. What do you hope to achieve by not signing in?
4. Is there any compromise that can be made? (e.g. Would you agree to your case remaining open?)
5. What is your definition of “successfully” leaving the DSS system?
6. Would you be willing to talk to another youth who made the decision to stay in care at 18 or who came back into care after leaving?

After the first PDSA, the team found the test to be too large, so they broke the survey down into three separate parts: (1) Asking the questions, (2) Having a youth-to-youth conversation, and (3) Providing information to the youth. The team also learned that they need to have more (written) information available for the youth and that they have to meet with all parties, including the placement resource and possibly a Youth Mentor, and not just the youth to discuss the plan.

For the next cycle, the team collected a series of letters from youth who have aged out. This time, in addition to asking questions of a teen approaching age 18 related to why he would or would not like to remain in DSS care and continue with services, the team added a Youth Mentor and the Written Information packet for the youth. This provided the youth a chance to talk to a youth who had come back into care and to have an opportunity to review data and information about outcomes for youth who leave care without a permanent plan. The youth was then asked the following questions:

1. What do you think about the statistics you were shown and your situation?
2. How do you think your experience will be different?
3. Does it make a difference for you to see the reality of what has been documented?
4. Who do you identify as support?
5. What do you think of a Bridge Home?
Showing youth these data had a profound effect. The combination of talking to a Youth Mentor coupled with the written material seemed to be a powerful motivator for the youth to remain with DSS after age 18. The team has decided to spread this practice to all youth in care without permanent plans prior to their 18th birthdays.

V.2. Using Youth as Trainers

Youth who have first-hand experience with DSS possess an understanding of the system that cannot be taught in any other way. Being able to communicate these experiences to new Social Workers was identified as an important way to value youths’ experiences – both positive and negative – and ensure that the Department’s Social Workers would develop a more complete and human picture of the youth and families they were serving and supporting.

The Dimock Street Area Office had youth tell their stories to staff in an effort to better understand how traumatic it is for a youth to enter foster care. The presentation was very powerful and staff came away with a better understanding of the traumatic nature of placement. As a consequence, the team is now working to make transitions for youth less painful.

The Maine team took an even more comprehensive approach to this issue.

**A Snapshot of a PDSA: Maine – Engaging Youth as Trainers for Staff**

Maine explored having youth serve as trainers for staff. The goal was not only to include youth in their own voice, but also to help Caseworkers gain new practical ideas for ways they could support siblings in care.

Feedback received from the staff survey validated the importance of the training. The training made the need for sibling connections particularly prominent for Workers.

The team expected staff to be impacted by the comments from youth, but was impressed by the intensity of the impact. The overwhelming response supported the hypothesis that staff needs reminders to make the work more “real.” These reminders have the greatest impact when heard directly from the youth.

They are now planning to re-survey the staff after a period of six months to see if they have done anything differently over the past six months as a result of the presentation. In addition, they will schedule the presentation on a regular basis to have youth discuss a variety of issues with staff.
V.3. Including Youth to Inform Policy Discussions and Decisions

With the depth of experience held by youth who have been in the Department’s care, crafting Departmental policies without them at the table would be a greatly missed opportunity. There may be scheduling or logistical challenges in making sure youth can participate, but the wealth of knowledge and expertise they bring to the table is irreplaceable. Moreover, once a youth is present for these types of discussions and decisions, it becomes impossible to “go back” to doing it without them. Teams learned this in a variety of ways.

**A Snapshot of a PDSA: Plymouth Area Office – Inviting a Youth Panel to a Continuous Quality Improvement Team Meeting**

The Plymouth Area Office invited a panel of youth to participate at their Continuous Quality Improvement (CQI) team meeting. The goal was twofold: (1) to help youth understand that their voice is valued; and (2) to help the CQI team and other staff members value the youth voice.

Results of this PDSA indicated that the youth's participation was a positive experience for both youth and staff. Youth felt that sharing their ideas with their peers and adults in the room was important and that their voices were heard. The CQI team learned how powerful it is when the youth are in the room, sharing their thoughts and experiences. Staff members who attended the meeting were moved by the youth and it engendered a sense of excitement in the office.

Plymouth plans to set up forums where the panel can speak with other youth in care. This will allow a sharing of ideas about permanency and will allow youth to feel they have more of a voice and that it is being heard. It will also help the youth build a wider support network.

Other offices are focused on including youth in program and policy reviews by engaging youth over 18 to help the Department identify services and supports needed for youth who are leaving foster care at or after age 18. Additionally, many offices have either established or are enhancing the participation of Youth Advisory Boards to better inform their practice.

**A Snapshot of a PDSA: Park Street Area Office – Developing a Youth Advisory Board**

Park Street developed a Youth Advisory Board to assist youth in gaining a clearer understanding of permanency while participating in various structured activities. A secondary focus of the Board was to allow youth to take an active role in the decision-making process, which would encourage their commitment regarding future endeavors.

Adolescent Workers and youth in the office were responsible for the development, monitoring and implementation of the Board. The Board
discusses various topics, including:
- What does permanency mean to you?
- What do you think DSS can do to assist you in preparing for your future after leaving DSS?

Results indicated that there is a need for more education around permanency – for both youth and Workers. Youth were honest and forthcoming with the questions asked.

The Board continues to meet and share developments with Workers and collateral agencies. All will continue to work together to educate one another on the issue of permanency.

As noted previously, once called to participate, the value of youth involvement on a broader level cannot be dismissed. The teams that tested employing older youth to inform practice with younger adolescents, train workers, and contribute to policy discussions unanimously reported positive results. Furthermore, youth are now viewed as essential to the Department’s overall decision-making process.
VI. PROVIDING EDUCATION AND INFORMATION TO FAMILIES, STAFF, AND PARTNERS

As described in Themes II and IV, providing information and education to youth and is a critical step in planning for permanency. As this BSC progressed, teams began testing hypotheses that included providing information and education about permanency to staff and partner agencies as well. Overall, teams focused tests on increasing the number of meetings and information exchange between new resource families, youth, Social Workers, and Family Resource Workers to prepare resource families and better meet the needs of youth. The major categories of strategies tested were:

VI.1. INCREASING COMMUNICATION BETWEEN WORKERS, YOUTH, AND FAMILIES
VI.2. PROVIDING INFORMATION TO RESOURCE FAMILIES AND OTHER PARTNERS
VI.3. TRAINING OF COMMUNITY PARTNERS TO BETTER SUPPORT YOUTH AND FAMILIES

VI.1. INCREASING COMMUNICATION BETWEEN WORKERS, YOUTH, AND FAMILIES

A challenge that was identified directly by youth participants at the first Learning Session was a lack of communication between youth and their Social Workers. The youth felt as if they were sometimes treated as “file folders” rather than as youth with urgent needs. Teams heard this message and immediately various teams tested ways to increase communication with youth through returning calls in a more timely manner, changing voice mail messages to reflect coverage, providing Supervisors and/or other Workers to cover calls, providing “contact cards” with unit names and numbers, and utilizing new technologies, e.g. e-mail and blogs.

A Snapshot of a PDSA: Cape Ann Area Office – Providing Information About the Caseworker to Youth

While many teams were testing practices that provided Workers with more information about youth in their own words, the Cape Ann team introduced a twist on this practice by providing information about the Social Worker to the youth before they met for the first time. The hypothesis was that having this information in advance would help construct an easier, less intimidating, and more trusting meeting between the Social Worker and a new adolescent client.

Workers developed a “Bio Sheet” to share with a new adolescent client. They are in the process of implementing this new procedure throughout their CHINS Units in order to help adolescents build more positive, open, and up-front relationships with their new Social Workers.
A similar practice focused on communication between Social Workers and the families of the youth. Teams tested a variety of practices that encouraged more open and responsive relationships.

A Snapshot of a PDSA:
New Bedford Area Office – Supporting Families of Youth Through Improved Communication

New Bedford hypothesized that open communication between families, youth, and the Department would build trust and help families to feel more supported. To this end, the supervisor of the CHINS Unit called the parent at intake and introduced himself, gave her the name of her Worker and provided contact information.

This was tested with five families and the response was positive. Families appreciated the opportunity to ask questions and felt that DSS responded quickly to their application or court referral. The New Bedford team plans to continue this practice.

As a separate practice, but closely related, New Bedford also used a PDSA to test the use of a Problem/Complaint Form for youth to express issues or concerns with their Social Workers, collaterals, parents, resource families, or general case management. This helped show that the Department truly considered youth to be their “clients” – not just “cases.”

Using technology allowed teams to experiment further with improved communication.

A Snapshot of a PDSA:
Plymouth Area Office – Returning Calls Quickly

The Plymouth team benefited greatly from using technology to enhance rapid response. They hypothesized that intake callers would feel less anxiety, more listened to, and more respected as partners in the family crisis if their calls were answered in a timely manner. This, in turn, might help diffuse crises and possibly even divert placements.

The plan was to give the office cell phone to one Adolescent Intake Worker for one day and require them to check their office voice mail throughout the day and respond within four hours or less to all new intake calls. After several cycles, the team learned that the callers do feel responded to and that rapid response does go a long way to ease anxiety and possibly prevent abrupt placements.

VI.2. Providing Information to Resource Families and Other Partners

Similar to opening lines of communication with youth and families, resource families and other Department partners also expressed a desire for more responsive and open lines of
This desire to improve communication was not only expressed by foster parents, but by adoptive parents as well, as they often lack information about services and supports provided by the Department, particularly after youth turn 18. Thus, ways to provide critical information to adoptive parents with children turning 18 were explored.

**A Snapshot of a PDSA:**
**Framingham Area Office – Providing Information to Adoptive Parents About Youth Turning 18**

Framingham tested the effectiveness of having an Independent Living Specialist meet with an adoptive parent whose youth was currently living in a residential placement and would be turning 18 soon.

The Specialist informed the parent of options available to the youth upon turning 18. The adoptive parent reported feeling better prepared to have discussions with her child around what his options would be upon turning 18. The parent also felt a sense of inclusion in the process and reported feeling better prepared to be a permanent resource to the youth.

**VI.3. Training of Community Partners to Better Support Youth and Families**

At the beginning of the BSC, each office was encouraged to invite community partners as full members of their Core BSC Teams. While the work that the Department does with youth was at the forefront of this BSC, staff realized that there are many partners in the community that interact with youth and families in critical ways.

**A Snapshot of a PDSA:**
**Attleboro Area Office – Helping Providers Hear the Family Voice**

In the Attleboro Area Office, following a broad-based community-wide training about the role of families in the decision-making process, a plan was developed and tested to meet with a family who came to the Court to file a CHINS on an adolescent family member. At this intake, the family was presented with a number of home-based service options that could be provided. The family and Court Worker strategized with the DSS Worker about what interventions would work best and referrals for those services were completed during the intake process. This meeting resulted in avoiding the CHINS filing and associated placement and the family

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**[Sharing information at the outset]**
"...proved to be helpful in facilitating a dialogue between foster parent, youth, and worker."
- Dimock Street Area Office

"Collaboration between families, courts, probation, schools and DSS can help avoid out of home placement."
- Lowell Area Office
Instead applied to the Department for voluntary services.

Although this PDSA was deemed successful, the team learned that it would take a consistent effort on the part of DSS to remind Probation to follow this procedure. As a direct result, the Adolescent Supervisor and the Assistant Chief Probation Officer are working together with their staffs to make a generalized change in this area.

Families will continue to be included in the planning process beginning at the intake level. As the Area Office continues to work with other agencies, they plan to continue to advocate for the inclusion of families in the decision-making process.

The ongoing goal of this practice is to have increased efforts by Probation to involve DSS at the initiation of the CHINS petitions.

A second test that focused its efforts on reducing out-of-home placements through these partnerships looked toward providing more information about the Department and partnering with the schools.

A SNAPSHOTS OF A PDSA: Lowell Area Office – Community Fact Sheet to Reduce Out-of-Home Placements

In the Lowell Area Office, the team felt that families and community partners did not have a complete understanding of the CHINS process. Thus, a CHINS/DSS fact sheet was developed for families and community members to improve their understanding and ultimately help to facilitate their decision-making about what will best assist families.

This was tested and repeated with several families. They also tested it in multiple languages, including Khmer and Spanish. And the fact sheet was also provided to a number of different partners, including police officers and schools.

Other teams felt they needed to gain a better understanding of the values and practices of providers and partners in the community. In the Framingham Area Office, a Social Worker and adoptive parent met with a Residential Program Director to share ideas of how families can stay involved once an adolescent is placed in care. A number of questions aimed at identifying the underlying values and practices of the residential provider were asked. It was learned that this particular Program Director encourages maintaining connections in numerous ways. This team will continue to meet with other Program Directors to discuss how they can work to keep families involved.

Similar to practices tested in Theme III, community partners also found new roles in helping identify and maintain connections for youth. This was true particularly for youth placed in residential settings.
A Snapshot of a PDSA:  
Maine – Working with Group Homes to Maintain Connections

In Maine, the BSC team was interested in working with group homes to collaborate and join in efforts to find permanency for adolescents. Their goal was to educate staff from group homes and engage them in the process.

The team started by educating Bridge Home staff about the need for permanency for adolescents. These Bridge Homes were then asked to assist by completing genograms and family trees with the youth placed in the home.

These tests were successful and Bridge Home staff were excited about joining with the BSC team. The hope is to meet with staff from all the Bridge Homes in the area and further expand the tests to explore ways to include the Bridge Homes in recruitment efforts as well.

“They [the group homes] were excited about joining with us and even offered to help us in recruitment efforts because they were so impacted by the statistics around the number of older children in foster care and the lack of homes.”

- Maine

Another key issue identified was staffing to support adolescent needs. The Department has created the position of “Adolescent Outreach Worker” in 15 Area Offices across the state to work specifically with adolescents to assist them in developing the skills and supports they will need as they transition to adulthood. Because there simply are not enough of these workers to support all adolescents, the Haverhill Area Office explored the possibility of having staff from their partner Lead Agency educate and train adolescents not eligible for Adolescent Outreach Services. They thought this would allow “non-traditional” adolescent outreach participants to gain the information they needed to formulate plans for their own permanency.

The tests undertaken in this thematic area demonstrate the critical importance of engaging all partners toward the goal of adolescent permanency. Teams learned that when youth, families, and partners feel heard, they are more likely to actively participate in service planning. Other teams learned that transitions and placement stability can be enhanced when communications with resource families are open and ongoing. And finally, others learned that providing community partners with information about Departmental values, goals, and practices can aid in diverting placements as well as easing transitions.
SUMMARY OF PROMISING PRACTICES EMERGING FROM THIS BSC

In addition to the PDSAs focused specifically on developing lifelong connections and identifying and supporting permanent living situations that were highlighted in this report, many teams also tested ways to assist youth in furthering their abilities to develop life skills. Although life skills development alone does not result in adolescent permanency, some of these tests merit special mention, as when these supports and skills are combined with lifelong connections and permanent living situations, they form the core of true permanence for adolescents.

- The Pittsfield Area Office established a “Homework Club” that included six to ten adolescents who met after school, four days a week to complete homework. Youth attended and received snacks and prizes donated by local vendors. Through this practice, youths’ grades improved and youth were supported to achieve success.

- The Worcester West, Worcester East, and Springfield Area Offices conducted successful Youth Job Fairs in conjunction with involvement from local community employers. Teens learned how to fill out applications, networked with potential employers, developed interview skills, and received information on training opportunities.

- The Park Street Area Office tested youth, family, and Social Worker understanding of ‘Independent Living’ as a goal in order to better inform all parties of definitions, services available, and identify areas requiring further development.

- Both the Fall River and Plymouth Area Offices were among those that helped youth prepare for permanence through ensuring that youth had the three forms of identification critical to living independently or moving beyond the Department’s care.

As described and detailed throughout this report, participating teams were able to develop and test numerous practices to improve permanency for adolescents on many levels. These practices are in various phases of implementation – some are just starting to be tested at the local level, while others have already begun to be spread statewide. But in the spirit of the BSC, this process will continue. This will allow youth, families, and Social Workers – those individuals closest to and most impacted by the work – to determine what practices are most effective within each Area Office. As the Regional and Central Offices of DSS continue to determine which promising practices are ready for implementation and spread, they must consider how best to share these practices across the state. These practices should incorporate the essence of the key lessons learned in this BSC:

- Youth voice is critical on all levels of this work;
- Creativity should be used to identify potential connections and resources;
- Youth need support to maintain lifelong connections;
- Education and support must be provided for partners internal and external to the Department; and
- The work of the adolescent permanency clinical ‘experts’ in each Area Office and across the state must be validated.
The Breakthrough Series Collaborative on Adolescent Permanency was a success on many levels. The methodology itself is designed to allow for the rapid transfer of knowledge through smaller tests of change in targeted areas. And the results from these tests of change in Massachusetts DSS Offices across the state, as well as in pilot sites in Rhode Island and Maine, yielded innovative ways to work toward permanency for youth.

Furthermore, the organizational structure adopted through the use of the BSC methodology promoted the full potential and partnership of youth, families, Social Workers, Supervisors, DSS leaders, and community partners. Together these successes improved the relationships between the Department’s many constituents, as well as the permanency work done by the Department.

Going forward, the work of the Department should focus on how to capitalize on these successes and maintain the momentum of this year-long initiative. Additional focus should be given to those areas of challenge in implementing the BSC to its fullest potential, most notably measurement and the use of data to monitor improved outcomes.

This section briefly outlines potential next steps to be considered in the overarching areas of youth engagement, adolescent permanency practice, and the BSC methodology. As with the body of the report, these areas overlap and intersect with one another. Strong practice can only be accomplished when Social Workers have the support of management; management can only implement valuable changes when Social Workers and Supervisors are included in meaningful ways; and the core values of the Department will only be demonstrated when youth, families, and partners are at the table for all discussions and decisions.

The Value of Youth Voices

Very early on Massachusetts learned the value of youth participation on teams. The excitement generated by having youth participate was noted over and over throughout the Learning Sessions. As the BSC progressed, teams began to test how different populations of youth could be included in more specialized ways. Older adolescents were recognized for their expertise and for sharing the lessons learned from being consumers of the system. Their experiences were shared with Social Workers, families, providers, and other youth faced with similar life-changing decisions.

Youth demonstrated that they desire to be active participants in their own case planning, as well as to help formulate practice and policies for those who follow in their footsteps. The statewide understanding that youth are ready and willing to participate can be seen in the representation of youth in multiple levels of the organization and across the entire state. In reflecting on the impact the youth voice had in this BSC, one youth at the final Learning Session declared in a panel presentation that “things are like a whole lot…better” now than when this work began in November 2005.
Massachusetts already has plans in place to ensure that the participation of youth continues at all levels. At the final Learning Session, based on the recommendations of the youth participating, the state made a commitment to host and support a statewide Youth Summit. The goals for this youth-led Summit are to reunite those youth who participated in this BSC, engage additional youth across the state in this work, and develop youth leaders who can help sustain this momentum going forward.

**Recommendations for Continuing to Support Youth Voice**

In addition to the Youth Summit, the state should also consider the following to ensure youth voices are engaged, heard, and continue to be magnified.

- **Continued Participation of Youth on BSC Teams**: The Department should explore the availability of stipends to reimburse youth for their time, respecting the fact that attending meetings and participating on conference calls takes away from their school and work obligations. Meetings should be scheduled when youth can attend. And youth should be continuously “part of the loop” and updated on work that occurs in the office between meetings and calls.

- **Development of Leadership Training for Youth**: A cadre of youth leaders should be developed and supported across the state to ensure that youth voice can be a part of all work that happens in the Department – both in terms of practice and policy.

- **Staff Training about the Importance of Youth Voice**: Training should be provided to Social Workers, Supervisors, and Managers about the importance of engaging and hearing youth voices throughout all aspects of case planning and decision-making. As much as possible, youth themselves should be engaged and supported to participate directly in these trainings.

- **Youth Inclusion in All Levels of the Department**: Youth should be included in all state-level policy, planning, review, and decision-making meetings. As the national Foster Care Alumni Association says, “nothing about us without us.”

**Supporting the Continued Collaborative Learning Environment**

The requirement for each Area Office to comprise its own core team for this BSC highlighted the importance of including many levels of constituents, and their unique contributions to this work. The voices and experiences of youth, resource families, community providers, and sister agencies are invaluable and irreplaceable in the planning for adolescents. The participation of DSS Social Workers, Adolescent Workers, and Supervisors not only has the

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"I think it is incredibly moving to hear the stories of the people with whom we work -- youth, parents, ourselves, and our collaborators. It was great and amazing to me that so many people from Central Office were involved. This helps to see our work and definition of permanency expanded and valued!!"  
- Supervisor
capacity to better the lives of those individual families they serve, but also is needed to ensure their clinical expertise is used to improve overall social work practice. Managers must actively support and lead, especially when small tests of change demonstrate dramatic improvements in practice to ensure that the promising practices can be spread and will be sustained over time.

In addition to the composition of the Core Team, the entire structure of the collaborative learning environment created through the BSC had tremendous value. The “shameless stealing” that occurred across teams allowed successes to be spread rapidly and facilitated camaraderie around the work that made this BSC feel more like a “movement” than a “project.”

**Recommendations for a Continued Collaborative Learning Environment**

The Breakthrough Series Collaborative methodology demonstrated concrete results that should be recognized and supported through mechanisms that will foster, sustain, and continue the successes. Moreover, the collaborative learning environment created through this BSC has many elements that should be sustained not only to continue to accelerate improvements in the area of adolescent permanency, but also to apply to other practice areas in the Department.

- **Continue Support for BSC Teams:** The state should continue to support the teams that participated in this BSC such that they can continue their creative and successful work. Additionally, resources should be explored to ensure that this work is supported over time. Offices may want to consider expanding their teams to further cement this work. As teams are expanded across the state, it is essential that teams continue to reflect the diversity of populations served and include youth, families, and partners as full members.

- **Expand the Use of the BSC Method:** The state has many teams at various levels focused on a variety of issues. Based on the successful use of the BSC method, the state should consider encouraging these existing teams to utilize the BSC methodology to help them prioritize their work around central themes and make actual changes and improvements in practice. Similarly, Social Workers, Supervisors, and Managers across the state should be trained on how to use the BSC methodology as a practice improvement tool in their day-to-day work with children, youth, and families.

- **Connect This Work to Continuous Quality Improvement:** Being that Continuous Quality Improvement (CQI) is at the core of DSS’ learning organization, the work done in this BSC provides a classic example of CQI in action. Teams developed priorities based on their own strengths and needs, tested ideas, studied the results of those tests, and adapted their tests as they spread successes. As the Department’s CQI work evolves and develops, the work done through this BSC, along with those who participated as faculty and team members, should be embraced as a model.

- **Link and Integrate Department Initiatives:** The GAP, in concert with executive leadership of the Department and the Area and Regional Office teams, should continue to ensure that the Department’s initiatives are clearly connected. Clarifications and
guidance should be offered to staff, youth, and families regularly to demonstrate the relationships and connections between the Department’s work in service and support of improved outcomes for children, youth, and families.

CONTINUING TO IMPROVE ADOLESCENT PERMANENCY PRACTICE

Shortly after the formal conclusion of the BSC, the statewide Commissioner’s Leadership Group on Adolescent Permanency (GAP) recommended revised language for the state’s Service Plan Goals. These revisions were based directly on the lessons learned from teams in this BSC. As of November 2006, these Service Plan Goals were approved by the Department’s Executive Staff and were moving toward full statewide implementation. The most significant aspect of this language revision is that each of the six stated goals now explicitly names “permanency” as the plan.

Through this BSC, the Department has numerous promising practices in adolescent permanency as well as a new way of thinking about and implementing change. Based on the excitement engendered through this BSC and with the supports described in the section above to allow this work to continue, the Department has the opportunity for additional promising practices to emerge.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ONGOING TESTING OF PROMISING PRACTICES RELATED TO ADOLESCENT PERMANENCY

The teams that participated in this BSC achieved significant successes. This work should continue to be supported, as detailed below.

➢ **Formalize a Statewide Priority Statement:** The Declaration developed at Learning Session 3 by a group of Area Office Managers should be refined and distributed statewide. Additionally, a brief statewide priority statement about adolescent permanency should be developed and distributed to serve as a reminder for staff about the importance of this work.

➢ **Recognize and Validate Social Work and Supervisory Expertise:** Adolescent permanency work in the Department achieved a renewed level of attention and visibility through this BSC. Managers at all levels of the Department must ensure that this work does not fall into the background as competing priorities move to the forefront.

➢ **Continue Periodic Conference Calls:** These calls should be based on issues, questions, and challenges raised by the field. The All-Collaborative Conference Calls focused on “myth busting” served to answer concrete procedural and policy questions that were very helpful to the field. They clarified long-held, but often inaccurate beliefs, and also demonstrated the responsiveness of Central Office to the field.

➢ **Develop, Distribute, and Use Data:** Data related to adolescent permanency should be distributed on a regular basis. These data should be available on an Area Office level and
active support should be provided to help staff understand the data and connect them directly to practice changes. Data should be reviewed at all level to assess improvements and to continuously reassess priorities.

**RECOMMENDATIONS FOR SPREADING PROMISING PRACTICES**

Based on this report, many promising practices may be ready for statewide implementation. Below are some key considerations in determining how and which practices to spread.

- **Communicate Decisions About Spread:** The GAP has been designated as having the key responsibility in connecting with the Area Office and Regional Office teams. Decision-making about which practices will be spread must be clear and transparent for staff at all levels.

- **Open Communication Channels:** Clear communication around permanency initiatives and promising practices related to permanency must flow both ways – from the Area Offices up to the state level and from Central Office down to Area Office staff. Additionally, clear channels between the Department, youth, families, and partners must also be established.

- **Develop Clear "Criteria" for Spread:** The GAP may want to consider developing some clear and basic criteria for practices to be spread. For instance, because the voices of youth are so critical, one criterion for spreading a practice may be related to the role that youth play in the practice: how they are engaged, prepared, and/or included. Without specific criteria being met, the GAP may decide that the practice is not yet ready to be spread statewide.

- **Share Lessons Learned:** Regions will be conducting quarterly meetings to discuss changes tested, lessons learned, and ongoing challenges. These meetings should be well-documented and shared across the state in as close to real time as possible.

- **Balance Statewide Standardization and Local Flexibility:** One of the key considerations for statewide implementation will be to balance local flexibility with standardization. Standardizing one promising practice may be necessary only at the overall strategy level while for other practices standardization may be deemed necessary down to a very detailed level. Making determinations about which practices require what level of standardization will be an ongoing challenge for the state.

- **Identify Gaps in Practices Being Tested:** Another key responsibility for the state will be to continuously review areas in which adolescent permanency practice needs to be improved but where no promising practices are being tested. This will ensure that improvements related to adolescent permanency continue.
CONCLUSION

The Massachusetts Department of Social Services was a pioneer in the intersection between child welfare and true organizational improvement by supporting a formal Breakthrough Series Collaborative to improve practice across the state. While other BSCs had been supported in child welfare over the previous five years, all required outside foundation funding to support staffing and participation from teams. Yet DSS utilized its own internal staff and was able to engage every Area Office across the state to participate in this time-intensive, yet incredibly rewarding work.

Through this BSC, the state achieved remarkable results. Not only were promising practices related to adolescent permanency tested across the state, but critical relationships were forged that can now be relied upon to drive this work forward.

As the multi-level teams met together over the course of this BSC, the energy, commitment, and expertise grew exponentially. Social Workers and Supervisors who have been doing this work for years were renewed, refreshed, and validated. Managers were re-inspired as leaders – beyond their standard Departmental title of “manager.” Community partners were treated as true partners rather than contractors or providers. Families were respected, heard, and responded to. And perhaps most importantly, youth who had first-hand experience with the child welfare system emerged as the true teachers and leaders – providing inspiration, ideas, and their own tests of change – to ultimately improve outcomes for those youth who follow them in years to come.

Together, this diverse group, over a period of less than one year made actual changes to child welfare practice that ultimately impacted many youth and families. This BSC demonstrated that making improvements in a state social service bureaucracy does not have to feel like “trying to turn the Titanic.” Instead, when individuals representing various roles who are passionate, committed, and experienced are given the space and support, they will do what they entered this field to do… namely to improve the lives of children, youth, and families.

“NEVER DOUBT THAT A SMALL GROUP OF THOUGHTFUL, COMMITTED CITIZENS CAN CHANGE THE WORLD. IN FACT, IT IS THE ONLY THING THAT EVER HAS.”

- MARGARET MEAD
1 Participation from the 29 Area Offices in Massachusetts was fully sponsored and supported by the Massachusetts Department of Social Services. The teams from Rhode Island and Maine were sponsored and supported by Casey Family Services and the New England Association of Child Welfare Commissioners and Directors.


6 The Breakthrough Series Collaborative methodology was developed in 1995 by the Institute for Healthcare Improvement (IHI) and Associates in Process Improvement (API) to address the gap between best practice and what practice really looks like in healthcare. It has been used extensively in the field of healthcare since that time to achieve dramatic and sustainable results that ultimately improve outcomes for patients. The BSC method was adapted for child welfare in 2000 by Casey Family Programs, an operating foundation focused on child welfare issues.

7 Although the state’s data system contains a great deal of information related to placement, the specific measures recommended as an accompaniment to the national Framework for Change were not available over the course of this BSC. As a result, teams used proxy measures, such as snapshots of placement locations, placement stability, and times to adoption finalizations on a periodic basis.

8 See http://www.fyi3.com/fyi3/binder for more information about the About Me Form and other forms that can be used to help youth voice their opinions. Retrieved online on December 13, 2006.

9 Foster Care Review meetings are held every six months for every child and youth in the care of the Department. The appropriateness of the goal and the progress toward that goal are reviewed by a panel consisting of a DSS Manager, citizen volunteer, and independent DSS employee.
10 Permanency Planning Conferences are internal DSS meetings used to determine if a change in a child’s goal is warranted. The DSS Social Worker, DSS Supervisor, a DSS Manager, and a DSS Attorney are part of these meetings.

11 Family Networks is the mechanism that the Department of Social Services uses to procure services for families, including out-of-home care.

12 “CHINS” (Child In Need of Services) is the current Massachusetts law covering truancy and non-delinquent behaviors of children over the age of 12 years.

13 Working with Families Right from the Start is a DSS practice and policy initiative aimed at designing a practice model which embodies a family-centered, strength-based approach to the delivery of DSS services.

APPENDIX A: FRAMEWORK FOR CHANGE

PERMANENCE FOR YOUNG PEOPLE
FRAMEWORK FOR CHANGE

This framework was developed and discussed at a national Expert Meeting co-sponsored on June 7-8, 2004 by the National Resource Center for Foster Care and Permanency Planning at the Hunter College School of Social Work and Casey Family Services through the Casey Center for Effective Child Welfare Practice. The purpose of this framework is to guide child welfare agencies across the country to help young people achieve and maintain permanent family relationships. It neither prescribes nor recommends best practice models; rather, it proposes six key components of successfully identifying and supporting permanent family relationships for young people in out-of-home care.

The belief and value that every child and young person deserves a permanent family relationship is paramount in this work. Permanence is not a philosophical process, a plan, or a foster care placement, nor is it intended to be a family relationship that lasts only until the child turns age 18. Rather, permanence is about locating and supporting a lifetime family. For young people in out-of-home placement, planning for permanence should begin at entry into care, and be youth-driven, family-focused, culturally competent, continuous, and approached with the highest degree of urgency. Child welfare agencies, in partnership with the larger community, have a moral and professional responsibility to find a permanent family relationship for each child and young person in foster care.

Permanence should bring physical, legal and emotional safety and security within the context of a family relationship and allow multiple relationships with a variety of caring adults. At the same time, young people in out-of-home care must be given opportunities, within the family and community environment, to learn the array of life skills necessary to become independent and interdependent adults. Ensuring that children and young people in foster care have both permanent relationships AND life skills for independence is critical to future well-being.

Permanence is achieved with a family relationship that offers safe, stable, and committed parenting, unconditional love and lifelong support, and legal family membership status. Permanence can be the result of preservation of the family, reunification with birth family; or legal guardianship or adoption by kin, fictive kin, or other caring and committed adults.

Philosophy
This youth permanency framework is built upon seven key foundational principles. These principles express the overarching values that must guide all policies, programs, practices, services and supports for young people. They are interrelated and work together in a dynamic, synergistic way. While these principles are presented in a sequential order, this order does not reflect a preferential order or each principle’s respective worth or relevance. Each principle is critical and should be reflected in all policies, programs, practices, services and supports of the agency.
All permanency policies, programs, practices, services and supports should be developed and implemented in ways that:

1. Recognize that every young person is entitled to a permanent family relationship, demonstrate that the agency is committed to achieving that goal, and include multiple systems and the community at large in the effort to identify and support such relationships.

2. Are driven by the young people themselves, in full partnership with their families and the agency in all decision-making and planning for their futures, recognizing that young people are the best source of information about their own strengths and needs.

3. Acknowledge that permanence includes: a stable, healthy and lasting living situation within the context of a family relationship with at least one committed adult; reliable, continuous and healthy connections with siblings, birth parents, extended family and a network of other significant adults; and education and/or employment, life skills, supports and services.

4. Begin at first placement. Efforts to achieve timely permanency through reunification with the young person’s birth family must begin as soon as the young person is placed, while concurrently engaging in contingency planning with family involvement regarding the range of permanency options that can ensure stability and continuity of relationships if continued out-of-home placement is needed.

5. Honor the cultural, racial, ethnic, linguistic, and religious/spiritual backgrounds of young people and their families and respect differences in sexual orientation.

6. Recognize and build upon the strengths and resilience of young people, their parents, their families, and other significant adults.

7. Ensure that services and supports are provided in ways that are fair, responsive, and accountable to young people and their families, and do not stigmatize them, their families or their caregivers.

Components
The seven key principles described above can be translated into practice through six component areas of the work of the agency. Work done in each component should reflect the core values defined by the key principles. In order to develop an effective and comprehensive system of permanence for young people, child welfare agencies should address all six of these components. Dramatic improvements in the overall system of identifying, supporting, and maintaining permanent family connections for young people in out-of-home placement will only occur when improvements in each of the six individual components are achieved.

1. Empower young people through information, support, and skills (including independent living skills) to be fully involved partners in directing their own permanency planning and decision-making.
Subcomponents:
A. Staff value, support, and provide opportunities for young people to advocate for themselves, young people receive preparation that enables them to acquire the skills necessary to do so, and communication with them is honest, direct, and respects them as true partners.

B. Agencies place young people in positions where they are in charge of driving discussions and options and they receive training, preparation, services and support from child welfare agencies, multiple systems and the community at large to do so.

C. Staff are trained and supported in using specialized permanency planning skills that assist young people in addressing their fears, feelings, family issues, hopes, dreams, and aspirations.

2. Empower a wide range of individuals to participate in permanency planning, beginning with birth family and including extended family, tribal members, past, present and future caregivers, other adults who are significant to the young person, other systems with whom young people are involved, and other community members.

Subcomponents:
A. Young people and individuals identified by them, including birth parents, extended family, caregivers, tribal members, and others who care about them are meaningfully included and supported in participating in all meetings, case planning, and decision-making as true partners.

B. Agencies respect and accommodate the needs of young people and individuals identified by them, including birth parents, extended family, caregivers, tribal members, and others who care about them, to enable and support their participation as true partners.

C. Young people are supported in maintaining, identifying, seeking out, and developing relationships with significant connections, including birth parents, siblings, both paternal and maternal kin, and other significant caring adults (such as past caregivers), including those that may have occurred earlier in life.

D. Multiple systems within the community, including health, mental health, education, recreation, job training, juvenile justice, family court, faith-based organizations and the business community are engaged in the permanency planning process, where appropriate, for individual young people.

3. Consider, explore and implement a full range of permanency options in a timely and continuous way.

Subcomponents:
A. Agencies, young people, and their families together identify a full range of actual and available permanency options without imposing limitations based on the age of the youth, beginning with an extensive identification of the family of origin.

B. Agencies articulate to young people, their families, and their caregivers the full range of actual and available permanency options and the implications of each.

C. The full team (including young people, family members, child welfare staff, staff of other systems with whom young people are involved and other community stakeholders) receive training and support on a full spectrum of options and are provided opportunities to express and work through their values related to permanency.

D. Concurrent planning for multiple options and relationships is employed early, regularly and on an ongoing basis for all young people, integrating a plan for family permanency together with a plan for the development of life skills and the provision of supports and services.

E. The permanency option decided upon together with each team (including young person, family members, and other significant adults) is based on the young person’s individual situation, needs and preferences; represents his or her best interest; and is reassessed regularly until a plan is achieved that includes a permanent family relationship as well as life skills, supports and services.

F. Agency infrastructure and resources value and support the consideration of all potential family permanency outcomes as they relate to meeting the best interests of the young person.

4. From the beginning, continuously and concurrently employ a comprehensive range of recruitment options.

Subcomponents:
Recruitment from Existing Connections and Relationships
A. Young people are asked regularly and systematically about people in their lives who could assist in helping them plan for their future and/or serve as permanent resources.

B. Young people are provided with the skills and opportunities to interact with multiple systems and community members in ways that help build permanent relationships.

C. Multiple strategies are employed to identify potential permanent family resources and significant adult connections, including a review of the entire case file, as well as conversations with multiple sources, such as the young person, birth parents, siblings, extended family members, tribal members, former and current caregivers, teachers, prior case workers, and other individuals in the community who care about the young person.

D. Youth-specific recruitment strategies specific to each young person’s network of relationships are used to simultaneously engage individuals identified by young people in
a joint planning process and in a process of mutual exploration of the extent and level of permanent family commitment they could provide.

Recruitment of “New” Resource Families

E. Youth and those who care for them are educated on possible recruitment strategies for new resource families, including relevant considerations regarding confidentiality, sharing of information and protection of the youth from exploitation.

F. Youth-designed, self-promoting recruitment strategies and processes are employed, depending on the youth’s preferences and level of comfort.

G. All recruitment messages are shaped by the voices of young people and families who have lived/experienced the continuum of permanency relationships.

H. An array of methods and media are used to raise awareness about the needs of young people, as well as to communicate recruitment messages to the community.

I. A pool of potential permanency resource families who reflect the cultural, racial, ethnic, linguistic, and religious/spiritual backgrounds of the young people needing placement exists and is continually replenished through targeted recruitment efforts.

J. A pool of potential permanency resource families who have a demonstrated knowledge of, commitment to, and concern for young people and can parent young people with the unique needs, characteristics, and issues represented in the population exists and is continually replenished through targeted recruitment efforts.

5. **From the beginning of placement, provide services and supports to continuously ensure that young people and their families have every opportunity to achieve and maintain physical, emotional, and legal permanence.**

Subcomponents:

A. Young people, in partnership with agencies, make decisions about obtaining services and supports, which are made available through clearly established, consistent processes.

B. Birth family and tribal members, caregivers, other significant adults in a young person’s life, and service providers involved with the youth are involved in decisions about obtaining services and supports, which are made available through clearly established, consistent processes.

C. Services and supports are provided to young people and their parents or their permanent families in ways that are:
   1. urgent – recognize the essential priority of assuring love and commitment to young people while meeting their well-being needs, including their educational needs;
   2. comprehensive – address all aspects of a young person’s well-being, including health, mental health, education and life skills;
3. continuous – available from the day of entry into care to beyond the achievement of a permanency goal, regardless of age;
4. universally available – are available regardless of permanency goal, educational or employment choice, living arrangement, placement location, or permanency outcome;
5. customized – meet the unique needs of young people, birth families and permanent families and are assessed and adjusted regularly to reflect progress and changes;
6. culturally appropriate – value and honor the culture of the young person and his/her birth family and permanent family; and
7. accessible – provide access to the full range of services and supports in a timely and convenient manner.

D. The financial needs of young people and their families are recognized, sources of funding to meet their needs are identified, and assistance in accessing such funding is provided, regardless of legal status.

E. Community members and community agencies are involved in providing and advocating for supports and services to young people and their families.

6. Collaborate with other systems that serve young people and families to engage young people and families as true partners and to provide services, support and opportunities during and after placement.

Subcomponents:
A. Agency staff and partners in other systems receive training, education, and support to address their fears, feelings, assumptions, and beliefs about permanency and positive youth development to support a culture of youth and family partnership.

B. Young people, their families, and others who care about young people are directly involved in the development and delivery of all agency and cross-system training and education about permanency and positive youth development to support a culture of youth and family partnership.

C. Young people, their families, and the systems that serve them (including courts and attorneys) have a common understanding, language and set of beliefs about permanency definitions and work to expand permanency options with a focus on youth-defined options.

D. Agency staff, together with young people and families, engage both traditional and non-traditional partners in the community to broaden awareness and to advocate for the need for life skills and permanence for young people in out-of-home care.

E. Young people and families are continuously involved in designing, implementing, and evaluating the systems that serve them.
F. Agency staff, together with young people and families, continuously identify and address critical system, cross-system, and policy changes needed to develop an effective and comprehensive system of permanence for young people.

The development of this Framework was sponsored and supported jointly by The National Resource Center for Family-Centered Practice and Permanency Planning at the Hunter College School of Social Work (a Service of the Children’s Bureau ACF/DHHS and Casey Family Services Center for Effective Child Welfare Practice.)
The following individuals served as the Faculty for this Breakthrough Series Collaborative on Adolescent Permanency. These Faculty represented many perspectives and levels of expertise on the issue of adolescent permanence and provided support for individual Area Offices and for the overall BSC.

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APPENDIX C: PDSAS INCLUDED IN REPORT

The following Plan-Do-Study-Act cycles (PDSAs) were tested as part of this BSC and cited specifically in this report. This is not a complete list of all PDSAs tested by participating teams, as there were over 200 PDSAs documented over the course of this BSC. Instead, this list reflects only those PDSAs that were described in the body of this report.

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APPENDIX D: ABOUT ME FORM

The following form was developed by Foster Club to allow youth entering placement to tell their stories and provide information about themselves in their own words. It was adapted and implemented by Area Offices throughout the state as part of this BSC.