

Illinois Waiver Lets Older Youth Choose Permanency Without Waving Good-bye to Transition Services

By June H. Dorn

Older youth in the child welfare system traditionally have faced a stark choice: Either age out of foster care, which may qualify them to receive transition services; or achieve permanency through adoption or guardianship, but forego the benefits of transition services.

The State of Illinois has begun to challenge that choice and to measure the State's impact on permanency options for youth age 14 and older.

In 1996, Illinois became one of the first States in the nation to receive a child welfare waiver from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (USDHHS) for a five-year demonstration of federally subsidized, private guardianship as a permanency status under Title IV-E. Because of this waiver, the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services (IDCFS) was permitted to offer subsidies to Title IV-E eligible children placed with families who assumed private guardianship. These children would otherwise have remained in foster care.

This program was a direct parallel to the Title IV-E Adoption Subsidy Program. It contributed significantly to the number of permanencies achieved for children from the child welfare system in the peak years of 1997-2002. During the first five years of the waiver demonstration, 6,822 children and youth in the Illinois child welfare system were transferred to subsidized guardianships; and 10,218 children and youth achieved permanency through this option through November 30, 2006.

The initial waiver program was considered a success in terms of overall numbers of youth moving to permanency and in cost savings to the State. However, the percentage of youth ages 14 through 17 who achieved permanency during this period was lower than expected. Less than 25 percent of the subsidized guardianships occurred for youth in their mid-teens. Meanwhile, 34 percent of these guardianships occurred for youth ages 10 through 13.

Feedback from caseworkers, caregivers and youth themselves indicated that both adoption and guardianship for teens carried a disincentive: the loss of transition services that are available to youth who remain in the care of the State and age out of the system. There was

reason to believe that caseworkers and court staff were advising older youth to remain in the system because these transition services were considered more valuable than permanency with an adoptive or guardian family.

To evaluate the impact of making transition services available for older youth as part of their permanency options, the IDCFS proposed that the USDHHS extend Illinois' original waiver program to include these services for older youth moving to subsidized guardianship or adoption.



The USDHHS granted the waiver extension in January 2004, allowing the demonstration to continue as the Enhanced Subsidized Guardianship and Adoption Program (ESGAP) through December 2008. Terms of the waiver extension not only retain the original Guardianship Program but also expand it to test whether offering transitional support to youth age 14 and older will enhance permanency for these older wards.

The Enhanced Service Package offers the following services to youth who are age 14 or older at the time that they are adopted or transferred into a subsidized guardianship:

- **Youth in College:** This program provides a stipend of \$444.85 per month plus a medical card to each qualifying youth. It supports youth who are pursuing higher education or vocational training.
- **Employment Incentive Program:** This program provides a \$256 monthly stipend and a medical card for each qualifying youth working at least 20 hours per week. It prepares youth for self-sufficiency.

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- **Life Skills Training:** This training is designed to teach independent living skills through a formal curriculum. It may consist of either group or individual instruction.
- **Housing Cash Assistance:** This cash outlay helps qualifying youth to obtain or to maintain stable housing.
- **Education and Training Vouchers:** This voucher plan provides up to \$5,000 (per fiscal year) per youth to pay tuition for qualifying youth who are attending a post-secondary education or vocational training program *and* who are in care or have been placed in adoption or subsidized guardianship after reaching age 16 or older. Under the extended waiver, these vouchers are being offered to youth in the ESGAP demonstration group who are adopted or moved into guardianship at age 14 or older.
- The ESGAP began in July 2005, in three pilot sites: Peoria; East St. Louis; and the Cook Central Region, including the west side of Chicago and suburbs. It was implemented statewide in April 2006.

Westat, a research and program evaluation corporation is conducting the evaluation of the ESGAP. Program administrators anticipate that 3,000 youth statewide will be eligible to participate in either a demonstration group or a control group (1,500 in each group), testing whether making post-permanency transition programs available to older youth will impact their options for permanency significantly and favorably.

By offering this program, Illinois is recognizing that older youth should not be faced with the difficult decision of choosing between having a family and having the benefits of services that prepare them for adulthood.

June H. Dorn is Statewide Post Adoption and Guardianship Administrator in the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services. For more information about the Illinois Enhanced Subsidized Guardianship and Adoption Program, please contact her at (312) 814-6858 or Jdorn@idcfs.state.il.us.