



Finding Family

We **CAN** find permanent families for foster youth. Here's how.



Keeping the Promise of Permanency

A forever home for every foster child by Brittany Wesely

Foster care is intended to be temporary, but has become a long-term way of life for far too many abused and neglected children.

“Permanent, nurturing families are the birthright of every child; yet, every year, thousands of children enter foster care as a result of abuse and neglect,” says Gail Johnson Vaughan, founder and executive director of Families NOW, a nonprofit advocacy organization that works to improve permanency outcomes for children in foster care. “Far too many [foster youth] experience a heartbreaking cycle of temporary placements and ultimately leave care to face life without the safety net of a family.”

Nearly 10,000 California children have been in foster care for more than five years. Each year, almost 4,000 turn 18 or age out of the system without a family. The longer children are in foster care, the less likely they are to achieve a permanent family.

Families NOW plays a strong advocacy role, changing policy and practice to allow child welfare organizations to move more children out of care and into forever families. To do so, Families NOW focuses on three main priorities: 1) increasing provision of proven specialized youth permanency services; 2) increasing access to mental health services provided by clinicians who understand the unique issues facing adoptive and guardianship families; and

3) improving recruitment and retention of foster and adoptive families.

“As we’re talking about achieving permanency for waiting children, most child welfare professionals think of what we call family-finding,” Johnson Vaughan says. “Finding a family is important, but it alone doesn’t address the biggest barrier to permanency: the grief and loss the children carry.”

Families NOW knows that all adoption stems from loss. While placing foster children into permanent families is vital, Johnson Vaughan says children with unresolved loss are at unnecessary risk of further disruption without proper treatment for psychosocial difficulties caused by trauma and chronic maltreatment. Adoptive families may be overwhelmed by their children’s emotional and behavioral manifestations of prior loss, particularly when conventional parenting practices fail to meet their unique needs.

“If we want these youth to risk being part of a family, specialized permanency practices need to be child-centered and address the child’s history of trauma, separation and loss, and be enhanced to include better mental health services,” Johnson Vaughan says.

In order to ensure that permanent placements are successful, children must first receive adequate care that addresses the effects of the trauma they experienced. Parents must be trained



Photo by Tony Nguyen

about how to support the children and connect them to adoption-competent, trauma-focused clinical mental health services when needed.

It is without question that the foster system provides a necessary lifeline that protects thousands of children each year. Nevertheless, when the state assumes custody of a child, it is the government’s responsibility to ensure that the child’s well-being is enhanced by the support and stability of a permanent family, whether that happens through reunification, legal guardianship or adoption.

The work of healing foster children who have been wounded by neglect

and abuse starts with the child welfare system, but it doesn’t end there. We all bear a collective responsibility to return these children to wholeness and ensure that the future is bright for all children in foster care.

Read on to discover how you can join the effort and be part of the solution for children in need.

We need to address trauma if we want these kids to progress.

Gail Johnson Vaughan
Founder and director of Families NOW



FAMILIES NOW

Founded in 2007, Families NOW (formerly Mission Focused Solutions), is a statewide nonprofit advocacy organization that opens the doors to permanent families for children in foster care.



Vision

Each child formerly involved in foster care is thriving in a permanent family and living out his or her potential as a productive citizen. Families NOW effectively changes beliefs, policy and practice to deliver lifelong impact that spans generations.



Strategies

Through influence and advocacy, Families NOW:

- Shifts mindsets about foster youth
- Removes legal and policy barriers that prevent permanent placements, and
- Facilitates the development and implementation of effective strategies for private and government agencies.



Thirteen-year-old Angela enjoys riding and caring for horses with her adopted mother, Stacey Rivera. Angela spent most of her life in foster care before she was adopted in June 2014.
Photo courtesy of Stacey Rivera

A Forever Home

Former foster youth finds happiness through adoption

by Mike Blount

For most of her life, 13-year-old Angela says she felt alone. The former foster youth remembers feeling hopeless.

“I didn’t care what happened,” Angela says. “I felt like no one was there for me.”

Angela had been holding out hope that she would eventually be reunited with her biological parents. When social workers asked her to pick out a potential foster family from a catalog in June 2013, she was steadfast against adoption. Then she met Stacey Rivera.

“Even at the hardest times, she is the best decision that I’ve ever made.”

Stacey Rivera,
Adoptive parent

“I have always wanted to adopt an older kid,” Rivera says. “I came in to Sierra Forever Families to look at a catalog and picked Angela, but my request never went out. I put out a flier about my home that went out, and social workers matched me to Angela because she was looking for a single mom who would let her have multiple animals and teach her to ride a horse. It was perfect.”

Angela fondly remembers visiting Rivera’s ranch for the first time. She’s always been drawn to animals,

and she fell in love with the horses instantly. She also really took to Rivera. Her sense of humor often made Angela laugh. Normal things like watching television programs together just felt right to her.

“She was really kind to me,” Angela says. “She welcomed me right into her family. I had a really good feeling about her.”

She began spending more and more time with Rivera. At first, she would visit on some weekends. Then she came to visit every weekend. A year later in June 2014, her adoption was finalized.

Angela says she is much happier now. When she first moved in, Angela had been reading at a first-grade level. Today, she reads at a fifth-grade level and is on honor roll. She’s also been able to travel to see more of California — something she has always wanted to do.

“When I was in foster care, I couldn’t travel at all,” Angela says. “So far, I’ve gone to Hollywood. I liked Universal Studios and the La Brea Tar Pits. This summer, we’re going to Disneyland.”

Rivera says she’s been amazed at the difference permanence has had in Angela’s life.

“It really has affected how she sees herself,” Rivera says. “When I met her, she was kind of lost. She had no one to believe in her. It’s been amazing to see her gain more confidence and do well in school. She’s very bright.”

If all goes well, Rivera is hoping to finalize the adoption of Angela’s brother Sam later this year. She says the family is doing great, and that her life has been enriched by having Angela in it.

“Even at the hardest times, she is the best decision that I’ve ever made,” Rivera says.

IMPACTS OF PERMANENCY

Permanent families make a big difference in preparing children for successful adulthood and providing a safety net as they make that transition. Studies show many positive impacts for foster youth who have a permanent family through adoption or guardianship. Compared to foster youth who do not obtain permanent homes, adopted children are:

50%

higher-performing in terms of academic ability and achievement

23%

more likely to complete high school

21%

less likely to be suspended or expelled from school

20%

less likely to become parents as teens

15%

less likely to abuse alcohol and drugs

32%

less likely to be incarcerated

24%

more likely to be employed

SOURCE: “The Value of Adoption,” Mary Eschelbach Hansen. American University, Department of Economics working paper, Dec. 2006.

FINDING A FOREVER HOME

When pursuing a path to permanency for foster youth, it's important to not only find loving homes, but to provide specialized support and mental health services to address any issues that may reduce the child's ability to achieve permanence with a family.

Families NOW guides counties and private agencies through the implementation of specialized youth permanency programs that address complex trauma issues and facilitate the development of attachment.

Taking a child-centered approach

To ensure a successful family placement for the foster child, the programs take a child-centered approach by first helping the youth understand his or her past, realizing the present situation and developing plans for the future.

Addressing the harm of trauma

Youth permanency workers build a relationship with the youth and establish trust, address the youth's grief and loss, involve the youth in important decisions, and build on the youth's strengths.

Finding permanent families

The child and the service providers first look for people already in the child's life who may be interested in adoption, legal guardianship, or providing a lifelong parent-like relationship.

Providing ongoing support

Once a meaningful connection to a committed adult is made, service providers support the permanent family to assure they are adequately prepared to meet the youth's needs.

The Goehring family from left to right: Kaitlin, Kevin, Maricela, David, Emilio, Sandi and Alondra. Parents Sandi and Kevin feel fortunate to be able to provide a permanent home for their children.

Photo courtesy of Sandi and Kevin Goehring



'Why We Chose to Adopt'

Couple explain motivation for opening up their home

by Mike Blount

When Sandi and Kevin Goehring began considering adopting a child, they both had initial fears. Sandi, 44, says she worried about biological relatives coming back into the picture, while Kevin, 47, says he worried about several things.

"We knew early on in our marriage that we wanted to adopt," Sandi says. "We both have adopted siblings. We knew there were so many kids waiting for homes. But so many people want to give you their scary horror stories — that an adopted child is going to have problems or would never attach to you. It gets old after a while."

Sandi says she and her husband quickly overcame those fears after they began fostering their first child. Sandi now jokes that they have a "full house."

The Goehring family adopted three children: Emilio, 10, Maricela, 9, and Alondra, 16. They are caring for a fourth foster youth, 3-year-old Jay. They share custody with Jay's biological parents. They also have two biological children. When the couple decided to adopt Alondra, Kevin says they jumped right in.

"We first adopted two children, and after a couple of years of everything working well, we decided with Alondra to not be fearful," Kevin says. "When you adopt a child, you fill out a form that asks you if you're willing to take a child with special needs, or one that has been abused or neglected. We answered 'yes' every time."

As a child who has a developmental delay, Alondra requires supervision almost 24 hours a day. She suffers from anxiety and has trouble adapting to new situations.

The Goehring family received support from Sierra Forever Families while they were fostering Alondra. Families NOW works with organizations like Sierra Forever Families to expand access to mental health services and improve outcomes for foster youth. Sierra Forever Families focused on helping Alondra with emotional attachment to her new family. They also

helped Sandi and Kevin understand how to care for a child with special needs.

"Whenever you have abuse or neglect, you don't trust anyone," Sandi says. "Alondra has a lot of trust issues. She often expresses her anger and frustration in inappropriate ways because she doesn't have the emotional ability to understand her feelings. She also needs help with daily things like getting dressed and eating appropriate food. She needs a lot of care."

There is no age that you no longer need a family. Everyone needs someone who is going to be there for the rest of their life.

Sandi Goehring,
Adoptive parent

Valley Mountain Regional Center currently provides wraparound support for Alondra's care, including a child care provider for 20 hours a week. Even though there are challenges, both Sandi and Kevin feel fortunate to be able to provide her and her siblings a permanent home.

"I believe that older children, in general, need to have permanency throughout their life," Sandi says. "There is no age that you no longer need a family. Everyone needs someone who is going to be there for the rest of their life."

Every Step of the Way

Adoption support
services help youth
transition to a new
family by Mike Blount

LEGISLATION SPONSORED BY FAMILIES NOW

Romel Brown and her husband have known their adopted son Isaiah since he was first born. They were his godparents. They spent almost every weekend with him. They also knew that he had an unstable home life, and at any time, he might need their help. That time came during his freshman year of high school.

"He came over to our house during the weekend and he was acting strange," Brown says. "We knew something was going on. He asked us if he could stay with us longer. That's when he began living with us."

Brown says Isaiah wanted a safe environment where he could receive love and affection. He also wanted to be able to graduate from high school and receive a good education. He began living with the family in December 2011. The couple started the process of adopting him a few months later.

Because Isaiah was going through a huge transition, the couple sought counseling services through Sierra Forever Families. Brown says the counseling he received helped him immensely.

"They have such a wonderful staff and they have been such a wonderful asset to his life," Brown says. "Teenagers do not always want to share everything with their parents. They helped him in areas we could not reach him with."

Because of [Sierra Forever Families], he's a completely different person now. They stepped in and just did a tremendous job.

Romel Brown,
Adoptive parent

Brown says the counseling was effective because the staff at Sierra Forever Families was genuine and accessible.

"The counselors give you their cell phone number and you can talk to them whenever you need," Brown says. "Because of [Sierra Forever Families], he's a completely different person now. They stepped in and just did a tremendous job."

Executive Director of Sierra Forever Families Bob Herne says services like counseling for foster youth are so important because they drastically improve outcomes. Within four years of emancipation from



Romel Brown finalized the adoption of her son Isaiah in 2013. Brown says the counseling her son received before and after the adoption helped him deal with the frustration and anger he was feeling.

Photo by Tony Nguyen

foster care, more than 50 percent of youth have not finished high school.

"You can't expect them to be able to handle adult life without that guidance," Herne says. "Not every child gets the mental health support that they need to be successful. Legislation affects the ability for children to have and use these services."

Isaiah recently graduated from high school and will start community college in fall 2015. He's also a competitive track athlete and is No. 1 in the state in track hurdles, according to Brown. He plans on transferring to a state college and becoming a teacher or architect after he graduates from community college.

Isaiah's adoption was finalized on October 31, 2013. Brown swells with pride when she talks about her son.

"He's always been such a wonderful child," Brown says. "He loves people just like I do. He's a helper and he loves to help people. He's very active in our church. He always goes the extra mile. I'm just so overjoyed as a parent."

AB 1790 — Now Law

In 2014, the California State Legislature passed Assembly Bill 1790, to increase the stability of adoptive, guardianship, and kin families by increasing the number of adoption-competent mental health professionals to meet their unique needs.

The bill created a Stakeholder Group to identify the barriers to adoptive and guardianship families receiving mental health services by mental health professionals with specialized training and expertise in clinical adoption issues. The barriers have been identified and recommendations on how to mitigate them have been proposed. The California Department of Social Services will report results to the state legislature by the end of January 2016. Families NOW will create a guide for implementing the recommendations for use by counties and mental health professionals.

AB 519

Passage of Assembly Bill 519 will remove the option to place children under age 16 into long-term foster care. It requires that no youth be deemed "unadoptable" without first receiving child-centered specialized permanency services. These services address the child's history of trauma, separation and loss that can reduce the child's ability to achieve a permanent family.

To find out more or view sample support letters, visit www.FamiliesNOW.org.

Partnering for Permanence

by Mike Blount

Pilot programs help find homes for older foster youth

Families NOW has helped make California a leader in the nation in creating programs that help foster youth find permanency. According to the Midwest Study by Mark Courtney and other research, youth who emancipate from the foster care system without a permanent connection are at high risk for poor outcomes. Families NOW works with other organizations to help foster youth make lasting connections in their lives. Here are two pilot programs that focus on improving outcomes by adopting a new model:

GETTING RESULTS FOR FOSTER YOUTH

Families NOW has a plan for improving access to permanency for foster youth, with proven success:

- In its first 5 years, Destination Family helped more than **75%** of youth cases attain a permanent connection.
- Roughly 30%** of Destination Family youth achieved legal permanency through guardianship or reunification.
- The San Francisco Permanency Project helped more than **50%** of cases achieve permanency.



Destination Family

Started in 2003 as a collaboration between Sierra Forever Families, Sacramento County Child Protective Services and Nevada County Child Protective Services, Destination Family concentrates on overcoming barriers to permanence for older children and teens. Those barriers may be as simple as a social worker believing the youth is too old to need a permanent family or as complex as post-traumatic stress. The goal of the program is that no youth will leave the foster care system without a permanent connection to an adult who accepts a lifelong parenting role.

“Destination Family represented a huge philosophical shift in both of those counties that continues today,” says Bob Herne, executive director of Sierra Forever Families. “All children can and should get a permanent family.”

According to Herne, more than 75 percent of youth in the program have achieved this connection since the inception of the project in 2003. Herne says the program will be adding more resources in Sacramento County this year, which will allow staff to be able to work with 100 children at a time.

“There is a time where we may be able to see where foster care can really be temporary,” Herne says. “I think that really could happen in my lifetime and that’s exciting.”



San Francisco Permanency Project

San Francisco Permanency Project is a public/private partnership between Family Builders in the Bay Area and San Francisco County Human Services Agency that began in 2006. Jill Jacobs, executive director of Family Builders, says the program focuses exclusively on finding permanent families for youth in foster care.

“We read the child’s entire file — front to back — and research the child’s history to find anyone who’s been in contact with the child,” Jacobs says. “We also talk to the youth to find out who they think would be a good parent for them. The difference in finding permanency for an older youth is finding someone they know. Who has a connection with them already?”

However, locating and identifying the family is where the work just begins. Our project works with the youth clinically to help them work through the trauma they have experienced. We also work with the families to prepare them for parenting youth that have experienced trauma. Parenting adolescents is always a challenge; parenting youth that have experienced trauma raises the bar significantly for the families who parent children in foster care. They need to be prepared and supported.

San Francisco Permanency Project staff use a number of tools to find appropriate resource families for foster youth, including researching social media and interviewing family members, coaches and other people in the child’s life.

Jacobs says county social workers often have a lot of things on their plate, so having an organization to concentrate on permanency has been a huge boon to the county. Since the program began, staff have found permanency for more than 50 percent of the youth they have worked with.

“We really work hand-in-hand with child welfare workers,” Jacobs says. “There are so many people involved in the life of a child, and we try to reach all of them.”

Inspiring Change

Better outcomes for youth by Brittany Wesely

There is a solution to the crisis facing thousands of foster children in need of a permanent home. Through advocacy and support services, Families NOW helps counties develop and implement effective specialized youth permanency programs and remove budget barriers to increase the number of youth in foster care who achieve permanency.

EDUCATE

Families NOW improves permanency outcomes by:

- Introducing innovative concepts
- Dispelling barrier beliefs
- Sharing success stories, model programs and compelling fiscal methodologies

Families NOW does this work by engaging in direct advocacy and providing fiscal and implementation guides, webinars, trainings and county-specific support.

Policy and practice

Families NOW addresses and shifts mindsets that impede permanency. They remove legal and policy barriers and facilitate the development and implementation of effective fiscal and programmatic strategies.



Funding model

The financial cost of keeping a California child in foster care can be up to \$118,000 per year. Moving the child from a high-cost foster placement into a permanent family is not only good for the child, it generates big savings for the county. Families NOW provides clear fiscal documentation of potential and actual savings and how those savings can be reinvested to sustain and expand specialized youth permanency programs at no net cost to the county.



ENGAGE

Families NOW builds relationships with key leaders and stakeholders to effect needed legislation and policy change leading to expansion of specialized youth permanency services throughout the state. They aid in county-specific program development and share lessons learned to avoid pitfalls encountered in pilot programs.



IMPLEMENT

Families NOW provides support to counties and private agencies to help them take action to improve outcomes for foster youth.

Create and expand programs

Once the decision to provide specialized youth permanency services has been reached, Families NOW assists the county through an array of decision-points, including whether to provide services in-house or work with an external partner, and provides support to design and implement a successful program.

Identify funding

Families NOW advises the county on strategies to obtain start-up program funding through existing or new county resources, venture philanthropy, government grants and allocations or social impact bonds. Once the program has begun, Families NOW advises the county on how to evaluate the program's success and reinvest savings to sustain and expand their specialized youth permanency programs.



A STORY OF SUCCESS

The Families NOW process gets results. Using Families NOW methodology, Sacramento County sustained a grant-funded collaborative youth permanency program for older foster children. Since partnering with Families NOW in 2010, the program now provides specialized youth permanency services to more than 100 youth and has secured a full return on investment of county dollars.

Connecting Foster Children With Forever Families

Dear Reader,

Thank you for listening to our story. The children who wait in foster care touch my heart. I hope they touch yours, too. So many have given up hope. Families NOW's mission is to restore their hope by opening the doors to permanent families for all children in foster care.

Influence and advocacy are the keys we use. We partner with policy makers, legislators and child welfare decision makers, providing an uncompromising voice that permanency is possible and offering practical tools for making it happen. Perhaps the hardest key to turn is in the door we label "barrier beliefs."

Decades of effective child-centered specialized permanency services are dispelling the myths that cause children to languish in foster care. No youth is too old to want and need a family. Children with every circumstance and characteristic are finding permanent families. Families stepping forward to open their hearts and homes are receiving the adoption-competent mental health services and support they need. Counties pay for the specialized permanency services with the savings they accrue from moving youth out of costly foster care into permanent families.

Families NOW has played an important role in shifting mindsets to make these things happen. The work is far from done. There are rays of hope throughout our state, but still far too many youth leave care without the safety net of love and belonging that a family provides.

We cannot do it alone. We hope the stories we have shared will make you want to help. The keys to those doors are in your hands as well as ours. You can find out more about our work on our website and Facebook pages (please "like" us when you visit). We welcome your calls and emails.

Families NOW and the children thank you,



Gail Johnson Vaughan,
Executive Director

GET INVOLVED

- Consider providing a permanent home for a child
- Assist in advocacy efforts
- Inquire about Families NOW Board and Committee membership
- Volunteer for a public policy internship



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