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Hunting for Grandma

Family finding strategy connects foster kids with relatives and permanent homes.

By Martha Shirk

Campbell, Calif.

Like many children in foster care, the one on Kevin Campbell's mind this morning has no known relatives. But as Campbell peers intently at his computer screen, a de facto family tree takes root.

Right there, in the same home for 22 years, is a 76-year-old grandma, Campbell says as he looks at a list of relatives compiled by a people-finding firm. And there are at least 25 names here. This child has a family.

That's the payoff in "family finding, a set of people-locating strategies with the potential to connect tens of thousands of foster children with relatives who can give them permanent homes, or at least a sense of connectedness.

Developed five years ago in Washington state, family finding, or intensive relative search, is being implemented in foster care agencies as quickly as Campbell can train new trainers. In states as varied as Illinois, North Dakota and California, the process is changing the practice of social workers who once despaired of finding the relatives of children in long-term foster care. In some jurisdictions, the technique is also being used to forestall placements in foster care.

"It is my dream that the expanded use of family finding will literally dry up the foster-care system," Judge Leonard P. Edwards of the juvenile court in Santa Clara County, Calif., said in a speech at the U.S. Supreme Court in November 2004.

Family finding has been greeted with enthusiasm in part because of the federal government's increasing pressure on states to move foster children into permanent homes. In addition, evidence has been building that long-term foster care harms children.

Pat Reynolds-Harris, executive director of the California Permanency for Youth Project, calls family finding "the kind of breakthrough that child welfare needs.

For years, we bought into the idea that many of these young people don't have family, she says. But when we search, we often find many family members, some of whom are very interested in making the connection with the young person, and maybe even becoming the caregiver.

Learning from The Red Cross

Family finding is the brainchild of Campbell, 41, who became vice president of strategic planning and service innovation at EMQ Children & Family Services here last July, after eight years with Catholic Community Services of Western Washington (most recently as director of intensive resources).

Through most of his career, Campbell has specialized in foster care's saddest cases: teenagers with little prospect of being returned to their parents or adopted. Campbell calls them "the loneliest people on Earth.

"They are the kids who are universally described as 'hard to place,' he says. All I could do was find them another foster family. And I knew in my heart that the 38th foster family wasn't going to turn out much different from the 37th.

Having grown up in a large family, Campbell always knew that another relative would step in if his parents couldn't care for him. Where are all the relatives of children languishing in long-term foster care? he wondered.

Convinced that children need families to thrive, Campbell obsessed over how to connect children in foster care with long-lost relatives.

While driving to work in Tacoma, Wash., seven years ago, Campbell heard a National Public Radio report about the International Red Cross family-tracing techniques, which reunite families separated by international conflicts and natural catastrophes. If they could reunite families separated by wars and natural disasters, why couldn't they reunite families separated by the child welfare system? he says he asked himself.

Campbell invited Red Cross officials to describe their techniques to foster care workers in Tacoma. Using the resources they described, including the vast genealogical archives of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints and commercial Internet-based services, Campbell then began looking for relatives of some youth in the care of his agency, which provides social and mental health services to families and children.

For every child for whom he searched, he found relatives who were willing to step into the child's life. Campbell taught the techniques to some colleagues, who had similar success.

In 2000, Catholic Community Services began a concerted effort to find safe, stable and permanent families for foster children with serious behavioral problems and multiple failed placements. Treating each case as a medical emergency, team members combed files for the names of relatives. They interviewed children about relatives and even unrelated adults to whom they felt connected. Then they used commercial Internet-searching services to find those adults, as well as relatives whom the children didn't even know.

Over the next few years, Campbell says, the team found relatives for all but one of nearly 500 youth for whom it conducted searches. He says 85 percent of the youth were reunified with their parents or placed with relatives. The agency's success led the Washington legislature in 2003 to require intensive relative searches for all children in foster care.

In the first family-finding project outside Washington, EMQ brought Campbell to Sacramento County in 2002 to train the agency's social workers to find family connections for 30 youths in treatment centers and group homes. Within six months, all 30 had moved to family settings, most with parents or other relatives, according to a report on the project.

The next year, EMQ applied the strategy in Santa Clara County, working with the county Department of Children and Family Services. That project found durable family connections for 24 of 27 youth, according to a report from the county agency. Convinced of the strategy's usefulness, the county created a Relative Finding Unit to identify potential family placements for children in care or entering care.

The Strategy Spreads

The strategy began attracting national attention in 2003, when Campbell gave an impassioned presentation at a conference in San Francisco hosted by the California Permanency for Youth Project.

I was really struck by the disaster metaphors he was using, recalls Gerald Mallon, executive director of the National Resource Center for Family-Centered Practice and Permanency Planning, based at the Hunter College School of Social Work in New York City.

What an apt way of describing the needs of children in long-term foster care. Our job is to expose states and tribes to promising practices that we think might promote permanency, and I decided I really wanted to support this.

Mallon arranged for Campbell to speak at several conferences, hosted a Webcast on family finding and ran an article about it in his center's newsletter, which has a national circulation of 5,000.

Requests for training came in, and Campbell hit the road as a consultant for Mallon's center, which is funded by the Children's Bureau of the U.S. Administration for Children and Families to provide training and technical assistance to child welfare agencies. Last year, Campbell conducted trainings in North Dakota, Pennsylvania and Utah. This year, he says, he has booked training sessions in Washington, D.C., Oklahoma, Colorado, Oregon and all the New England states.

Campbell and other trainers from EMQ's Family Partnership Institute are also training child welfare workers throughout California, through the California Permanency for Youth Project, which is financed largely by the Stuart Foundation.

Wherever he goes, Campbell says, he asks agencies for "their 30 hardest cases, the ones they worry the most about. At the end of the training, if all we do is help 30 kids, it would be time well spent. But my goal is to empower the agency to do things differently after I leave.

Among the results so far:

During four days of training in Ward County, N.D., last year, Campbell "came up with approximately 580 potential family connections for 40 kids, says Don Snyder, the state's foster care administrator. Everybody was shocked at the possibilities. County workers placed several children with relatives, and more placements are in the works. "We just had two grandfathers in different states learn they had grandchildren, Snyder said. Snyder plans to bring Campbell back in February to help roll out family finding across the state.

Stanislaus County, Calif., uses family finding for children coming into foster care and those about to age out. At the county's Community Services Agency, a permanency specialist and an Internet researcher work full-time to find and cultivate prospective permanent connections for youth. In less than a year, the agency says, it has found lifelong connections adoptive parents, legal guardians, or adults committed to enduring relationships for almost 250 children.

From January through June last year, Alameda County, Calif.'s Children and Family Services Agency used family finding to move 36 youth from group homes to the homes of relatives or adults with whom they had strong emotional bonds.

Obstacles

A techie by nature who carries two BlackBerry handheld computers even while hiking, Campbell is continuously fine-tuning the strategy. Initially, he combined reports from multiple commercial services to derive leads. But early last year, he met with officials of US Search.com, the service he prefers, and negotiated a more useful product.

Campbell emerged from the meeting with a special Web portal for child welfare agencies (www.ussearch.com/familyfinders/.com), a template for a streamlined report and a reduction in the turn-around time for an inquiry to 20 minutes, from two days.

US Search also halved its fees for child-welfare agencies, to \$10 for a basic search, which provides a current address and address history for a single name, and \$25 for a comprehensive search, which also provides the names of up to 25 possible relatives, friends and neighbors. US Search also agreed to assign a live search agent to each request from a child welfare agency.

Often the people we are looking for may fly below the radar of many public record sources, says Clif Venable, one of the company's family-finding specialists. By using an experienced search agent on each case, and by using multiple databases, we can get the most out of the available information sources.

There are, however, some barriers to institutionalizing family finding.

Some social workers still look askance at the relatives of foster children. There is this notion that 'the apple doesn't fall far from the tree,' that because a parent had done a bad thing to the kid, then all the relatives are probably bad, too, Campbell said.

In some cases, the suspicions are well-founded. Not every relative is fit to care for a child or interested in taking on the responsibility.

For that and other reasons, not every search yields a placement. Six months after a 2004 family-finding pilot project in Illinois, the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services reported sustainable family connections for only 12 of 25 targeted youth. Even so, the department believes the strategy has promise and is planning to integrate family finding into casework for all older foster youth who don't have active family contacts.

Another problem Campbell often encounters is reluctance among caseworkers to connect children with their fathers or paternal relatives. We assume a connection to mothers, but the father has to prove it, he says.

There are technological and resource barriers as well. In Monterey County, Calif., social workers aren't allowed to use the Internet at work, so Campbell arranged for them to initiate searches through US Search by fax or phone.

Also, social workers with large caseloads don't have time to search aggressively for lost relatives. Designating staff to do it full-time, as Stanislaus and Alameda counties did, takes money. Alameda County's six-month project cost about \$570,000 in county and federal funds for personnel and overhead.

However, the county believes it will save \$6.1 million in county and federal funds over the next four years. That's largely because paying relatives to care for children is much cheaper than placing them in group homes, according to the county's final report on the project.

In jurisdictions with tight resources, Campbell foresees using trained volunteers, including interns, retired social workers and Court-Appointed Special Advocates (CASAs) to search for relatives.

Finding a child's family is one thing. The greater challenge, Campbell says, "is what you do when you find them. What do you say to a grandmother who hasn't seen her grandson in 14 years?"

The relatives who are found must be thoroughly vetted. Agencies must provide resources to support the relatives involvement with the child, whether that means flying them in from another state or providing intensive in-home services to help the child integrate into the family. In a few states, including California and Illinois, relatives who care for foster children are eligible for monthly stipends, easing the burden of housing, feeding and clothing the child.

Even though finding extended family members requires spending money, it ultimately saves money, as Alameda County's experience shows. Most importantly, Campbell believes, children do better when they live with people who love them than when they live in institutions.

The challenge is how we reinvest our resources and transform agencies from providing placements with licensed strangers to providing families with the supports they need to care for their own children, Campbell says. The social workers, to a person, tell me, This is the work I came into social work to do.

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How Family Finding Helps Kids and Families

While the power of search technology is what initially intrigues most foster care workers about family finding, it's the power of the subsequent family connections that has persuaded many of them that the strategy should be integrated into standard casework.

Even if the family connections don't lead to placements, they can provide youths with an important sense of belonging, or a place to go for holidays. Every one of us needs people who we can be connected to for the rest of our lives – parents, aunts, uncles, siblings and family finding has given us a way to get that for these youth, says Crystal Luffberry, a manager for the Community Services Agency in Stanislaus County, California.

Child welfare agencies provided these examples of connections that family finding forged for youths who had been separated from relatives during years in foster care:

A young man who aged out of foster care in Stanislaus County enlisted in the Army, but worried that he had no adult relatives to draw strength from during his deployment. "He had zero adult family members in his life, absolutely no one who would keep in contact with him, Luffberry says.

Through an Internet search, an agency worker located an out-of-state uncle. The uncle put him in touch with at least eight other relatives and told us, 'We will build this network and keep him connected, Luffberry says. She regrets that the search tools weren't available earlier in the young man's life.

A youth who had been in foster care in Orange County, Calif., for 10 years tried to kill himself shortly after learning that he would no longer be able to see his sister, the only family member with whom he had contact. While the boy was hospitalized, Kevin Campbell of EMQ Children &

Family Services ran a family search and located a grandmother, a step-grandmother and an aunt. All remembered him fondly, though none had had contact with him for years.

Within an hour, Campbell says, the step-grandmother sent the youth an e-mail telling him how much she loved him and recalling their fun times together. She and the other relatives began visiting him weekly, as well as calling and e-mailing. The youth now goes to school regularly, has stopped trying to injure himself and is responding to therapy for the first time, Campbell says. He says social workers are arranging for the youth to move to a group home close to the aunt, with the goal of eventually moving in with her.

As a 17-year-old neared emancipation from foster care in Alameda County, Calif., his social workers worried about what would happen to him without family support. When he was an infant, his parents' rights were terminated. He was later removed from an adoptive mother because she abused him, and over the next 12 years, he lived in seven foster or group homes.

I've got nobody, nobody who's kin to me, he told a county worker, according to a county report. The worker learned that his mother had died, but she located his father, who had been sober and employed for many years. The youth has since met five older siblings and was making travel plans to meet four younger siblings.

The county report quotes group home staff as saying the youth walks on clouds these days and that seeing him change since he learned he has a family is like watching a miracle unfold.

Aside from helping individual youths, Campbell says, these connections are also important for the family members, many of whom wondered for years what had happened to the children.

Every person you talk to in the search, you're doing something for, he says. You're letting them know something about what happened to that child, and in doing that you're giving that family the opportunity to heal and develop trust with the government and honor relationships between family members.

Martha Shirk