

## **Family Finding Policy Analysis**

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In 2022, in the state of Virginia, there were over 4,800 children in foster care; however, only 32% of these children were able to return to their birth family (UMFS, 2022). When these foster children have nowhere to go because they do not have placement, there is an increased possibility of the youth sleeping in governmental agencies or in the hospital until placement is found (Masters, 2022). VDSS requires foster care workers to continuously engage in family finding efforts, and this is often done independently. Family Finding is a statewide policy that is implemented at the local level. Between 2019- 2020, ACDSS recognized that due to the increase in worker caseloads and the decrease in available non-kinship foster care placements, foster care workers were unable to engage in family finding alone; this is still a social and systemic problem.

In 2008, The Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act was passed by President Bush. The goal of this act was to find and support relative caregivers, assist in improving outcomes for children in foster care, and improve motivation for adoption. This act also mandated local departments to find relative placements for every child entering foster care in the United States (*The Case for Kinship Care: UMFS Kinship Care White Paper*, 2022). The target population for this policy is any child who is at-risk of out-of-home placement or displaced in the Child Welfare system. However, this bill can have a much deeper effect in the Commonwealth, as it affects state policy and funding. This policy was established due to the abundance of foster children. Also, this act addresses the lack of kinship placements for children through prevention efforts and when children are at risk of entering foster care. To support these efforts, in the Virginia Department of Social Services (“VDSS”) Child and Families Services

Manual, various family engagement strategies are identified as best practice. One form of family engagement is Family Finding.

Family Finding was developed by Kevin A. Campbell to find and engage relatives and natural supports, respectively known as kin and fictive kin, of children who are at risk for out-of-home placement or who are currently in foster care, to help ensure permanency. Knowing that a child's well-being is most effective in the context of a strong family network, the Family Finding process of identifying kinship placements promotes safety, well-being, and permanency (Perez, 2020). There are no income qualifications for Family Finding to occur.

Family Finding is critical to decrease loneliness, cultivating relationships with family members, and allows children to have an increased sense of belonging. While attempting to eliminate the barriers to placement, the mission of Family Finding is to identify and locate relative placement options by verifying paternity, assessing family needs to ensure placement success, maintain sibling connections, assist with preparing placement, and identify family and community supports (Perez, 2020). As a result, children and families are less likely to experience the significant trauma of youth living with resource families who are considered a "stranger" to the family system. This is a service that is integrated into policy by VDSS and internal processes at Albemarle County Department of Social Services ("ACDSS").

Two protocols were created to address emergency family finding needs: Emergency Family Finding Response Team ("EFFRT"), and Non-Emergent Family Finding efforts. Both processes utilize similar family finding techniques and strategies to significantly decrease the risk of at-risk youth needing to be placed in non-kinship placements. The difference between the protocols is the timeline in which the youth will be at risk of out-of-home placement.

An EFFRT is necessary when it is a crisis situation. An EFFRT would include if a child has been removed, no family finding has been completed, and the 5 Day Hearing is coming up. Similarly, if the youth is placed in respite care and only has 14 days at the respite placement. EFFRT's may also be necessary if court is occurring within the next 14 days and there is the recommendation of removal and foster care. An EFFRT should not be pursued if a Protective Order is being sought and there is a risk of foster care, and the worker wants assistance making a backup plan. Additionally, an EFFRT should not take place if there is a recommendation for removal in court but there is a plan for placement. An EFFRT may also be necessary when the County attorney reviews the affidavit and feels the court will not support the department's non-removal recommendation. Lastly, EFFRTs should be completed when there is a disruption in placement and the only option is congregate care. If it is determined that there is a Family Finding need but it does not meet the emergency criteria for EFFRT, a non-emergent Family Finding process should be conducted (Perez, 2022).

Non-Emergency Family Finding prevents foster care or further placement disruption for youth currently in foster care by widening the family circles to increase external protective capacity and reduce risk of future abuse/neglect/foster care including identifying, establishing, and maintaining these connections for the youth. This process also aids in identifying kinship foster care placements (for youth imminently entering care or already in care but who are not in a kinship placement), relative placements for youth, and/or locating non-custodial parent after a worker has exhausted all steps required of them in policy (Perez, 2022). If a kinship placement cannot be identified, outside organizations are contacted to provide foster care placements.

This policy benefits the agency's youth and caregivers, as they can share important individuals in their lives and with whom they want to be connected, giving them control of the

decisions that are affecting their lives. When engaging with relative or kinship adults, supportive relationships are established, and these individuals can help to meet the child(ren)'s needs. The information found about the child's family allows them to develop their self-identity. When kinship placements are found, there is both a decreased amount of time that a child is in foster care, as well as a decreased chance of a child entering foster care due to having the necessary natural supports (Perez, 2020). Additionally, this policy benefits the agency through analyzing individual outcomes to assist with future funding efforts. "Studies have found that a relative placement is almost twice as stable as care with non-relatives" (Louisell, n.d.). The costs associated with Family Finding have shown to save County money compared to the cost of raising a child within the child welfare system by thousands of dollars (Louisell, n.d.).

The Family Finding protocols that were created, align with the values addressed in the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act, which consists of valuing the connection between the child and their family/supports, the importance of human relationships, and that all children are deserving of being safe, having their needs met, and permanency. Every child deserves a relationship with their family, which enables children to identify with their relatives.

Family Finding and systems theory are interconnected as both emphasize the importance of relationships within a complex system. Systems theory states that individuals are a part of other small systems, which makes up a larger system, and when changes occur in one part of the system, the entire system can be affected (*What is systems theory?*, 2023). Similarly, Family Finding recognizes the importance of familial and external social relationships in supporting an individual, specifically those who are at-risk of out-of-home placement or foster care. Systems theory serves as a guide for understanding the complexities of familial relationships and leading

efforts to family finding. By applying the systems theory framework, those engaged in family finding practices can identify and interact with family members and other supports to create a system of support for the child, promoting safety, permanency, and well-being.

This policy aligns with the student's own personal and professional values. The student believes in the importance of family and connection, as well as how these supportive relationships can affect an individual's life. Through Family Finding, the student is identifying a support network that the client can rely on, which will impact the trajectory of the clients' lives and increase protective factors. As a social worker, it is the student's responsibility to advocate for the client and the familial ties that are deemed to be significant. Family Finding allows the student to engage with clients, recognize the importance of family connection and nurture these ties, as well as facilitate and implement a person-in-environment framework for the client that will allow them to grow. These family finding efforts will contribute to the student's success in creating worthwhile outcomes for the families that are being served.

As family finding can be extremely beneficial in connecting individuals with family members and creating a support network for the child, it can also have adverse effects. If Family Finding efforts are unsuccessful, children may feel disappointed or unwanted. If a child reconnects with extended family members and these relationships are not sustainable, it could lead to further trauma. When estranged relatives are reintroduced, it could cause anxiety and tension within the family. If funding is only put into Family Finding, other services may be affected, impacting other members of the community. It is critical that individuals consider the risks involved when family finding and the effects that it may cause to individuals, families, and to society.

While this policy is extremely beneficial in finding family members for youth who are at risk of out-of-home placement, families of migrants, asylum seekers, refugees, and immigrants have a unique set of challenges such that equitable Family Finding efforts cannot be made. While traditional family finding protocols are still attempted, there are many efforts that cannot be conducted, as there are not adequate resources provided by VDSS for local departments to do sufficient work. For example, cold calls are a requirement of Family Finding. Thus, cold calls may be conducted to contact the country of origin to obtain birth certificates or relatives. However, if there is an emergent need for Family Finding, the shortened timeline inhibits the workers ability to reach the appropriate personnel of the embassy.

It can be suggested that within implementing this policy, the foster care workload policies should be revised for foster care workers to have more capacity for Family Finding tasks. Given that these foster care workers have been in regular communication with the family and know the details of the youth and their history compared to the Family Finder alone, time should be given for them to contribute to Family Finding tasks. The student should consult with the director of the agency to advocate for changes to foster care workload policies. The director, then, as a representative in a work group at the state level, can present the proposal on behalf of the local agency. Policies are reviewed on an annual and as needed basis; therefore, suggestions can be addressed at these times. By implementing Family Finding practices, there will be some additional costs upfront originating from the public, state funds. However, counties that have implemented these practices recognized that they are saving money long-term by connecting these children with permanent relationships and relied less on out-of-home placement. There are also emotional and psychological benefits for children (*Family Finding & Engagement Fact Sheet*, n.d.).

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