

**Title:** Supervisory Training to Enhance Permanency Solutions (STEPS); Site Visit Report  
**Award #:** 90CW1130  
**Cluster:** Training of Child Welfare Supervisors in the Effective Delivery and Management of Federal Independent Living Service for Youth in Foster Care  
**Grantee:** Department of Social Services, State of Massachusetts  
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**Project Website:** [www.steps-umms.org](http://www.steps-umms.org)  
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## SUMMARY

The Supervisory Training to Enhance Permanency Solutions (STEPS) curriculum helps supervisors develop techniques to lead, support, and positively engage caseworkers in facilitating foster youths' successful transition to adulthood. Developed by the Massachusetts Department of Children and Families (DCF) in partnership with the Office of Foster Care and Adoption at the University of Massachusetts Medical School, the STEPS training program is targeted to DCF social work supervisors, equivalent personnel in other State agencies, and staff of contracted program providers to improve their skills and support for youth aging out of the foster care system. The curriculum was developed with input from DCF staff and other providers, youth, foster parents, and an advisory board that provided expertise and insight throughout the project.

The STEPS curriculum is organized into six 6-hour modules that are delivered over the course of 1 year, so participants may apply the skills at work and share their experiences at the next training. The curriculum emphasizes the need for supervisors to use a strengths-based approach when working with their staff and with youth and families. The six modules address:

- Positive youth development
- Community ties and lifelong connections
- Education and workforce
- Mental and physical health needs
- Public safety and the juvenile justice system
- Implications for practice

The final module consists of a facilitated discussion of the need for integrated practice when working with youth. Emphasis is placed on a team-planning and decision-making process that includes the youth, family members, significant adults, professionals, and other "power brokers" whose collaborative efforts can help youth achieve their permanency goals and successfully transition to adulthood. The program also employs a unique assessment tool, the Adolescent Implicit Association Test, designed to help supervisors identify unconscious biases they may have about youth in care and examine the practice implications of those biases for their work in child welfare.

The six modules of the STEPS curriculum were delivered five times in various regions of Massachusetts, reaching a total of 484 participants, 35 of whom attended all six modules. Several evaluation efforts for the project are underway, including a process evaluation and pre- and post-training surveys and interviews. Preliminary findings indicate an overall positive trend in participants' responses, with a majority of participants

reporting they would recommend the training to their colleagues. Participants also felt the information sharing and open dialog that occurred during training sessions helped stimulate practice improvements within and across units.

To increase the dissemination of lessons learned during the training, all participants received tools and materials to use with their staff. The project also offers a website featuring the entire STEPS curriculum, an updated manual of State-specific resources for youth, an events calendar, information on promising practices, and more. Also, project staff members are adapting the curriculum to target other professionals that touch the lives of foster youth, including educators, medical and legal professionals, and foster parents.

Reprinted from *Children's Bureau Express*, "Site Visit: Youth Permanency Training for Supervisors" (<http://cbexpress.acf.hhs.gov>).

## PROJECT DESCRIPTION

**Abstract:** (adapted from the *Compendium of ACYF Funded Programs* from its website at [www.steps-umms.org](http://www.steps-umms.org), and from the Office of Foster Care and Adoption's website at [www.umassmed.edu/adoption](http://www.umassmed.edu/adoption).)

The Department of Social Services (now the Massachusetts Department of Children and Families (DCF)) has formed a partnership with the Center for Adoption Research (now the Office of Foster Care and Adoption) at the UMass Medical School. Together they plan to develop and implement a training and capacity building project that would enhance and strengthen a systemic approach to help youth who are aging out of the DCF foster care system make a successful transition to adulthood and achieve self-sufficiency. The program targets DCF social work supervisors, equivalent personnel in other State agencies, and staff of contracted program providers to improve their skills and knowledge about appropriate programming and support for these youth. The project includes support for leadership and policy development in building a transition system, and it includes curriculum development and a major dissemination component. Project objectives are to:

- Educate DCF supervisors to support caseworkers in positive youth development philosophy and practice
- Educate DCF supervisors in cultural competency and provide them with the tools to identify opportunities to connect with culturally competent services
- Help supervisors assess youth's readiness for independent living (IL) services and develop local systems and connections that will help youth make the transition to young adulthood
- Help supervisors acquire the skills to identify and assess options for permanency, including family connections, support services, and community resources
- Help youth foster and maintain meaningful, familial, and lifelong connections
- Enable supervisors to develop skills to help them identify areas and affects of stress on youth in foster care
- Connect training efforts at area offices and in local communities to leadership development of youth initiatives

- Evaluate outcomes and disseminate best practices, methods, and curricula locally, regionally, statewide, and nationally
- Involve youth in decision-making regarding their own needs and opportunities

DCF is the State agency mandated to receive and respond to child abuse and neglect reports and to provide an array of services to children and families across the Commonwealth. The primary mission of DCF is to protect children who have been abused or neglected in a family setting or by a caregiver. The department seeks to ensure that each child has a safe, nurturing, and permanent home.

The Office of Foster Care and Adoption is part of Commonwealth Medicine and the UMass Medical School. The office is driven by the principle that every child deserves a loving family, and is dedicated to developing training and translate research that will help families and professionals improve the lives of children in adoptive and foster families. Among the office's core competencies related to education, training, research, program development, and evaluation are the following:

- Curriculum and training development focused on foster care and adoption for social service staff, clinical caseworkers and psychologists, medical professionals, educators, and families
- Quantitative and qualitative analyses of child welfare programs and policies including research design, data instrument design and collection, complex statistical modeling, and results interpretation with policy implications
- Program evaluation and quality improvement including needs assessments, focus groups, and survey-based analyses
- Professional development and education for caseworkers, medical professionals, and families

**Need for This Service** *(adapted from information and materials provided by the grantee during and following the site visit and from information included in the Program Announcement)*

Youth represent about 30 percent of the nation's foster care population, and about 20,000 young people age out of foster care annually. Often these youth have no permanency connections, no high school diploma or GED, little employment history or stability, and an overall lack of IL skills. They face numerous challenges: crime (as victims or as perpetrators), homelessness, early parenthood, juvenile prostitution, mental and physical health issues, drug/alcohol abuse, and poor social support systems.

About 600 youth age out of foster care in Massachusetts each year, many of them without a permanent family connection and with the same challenges and risks as transitioning youth across the country. Within the first 2 to 4 years of exiting foster care:

- Only 50 percent have completed high school.
- Less than 50 percent are employed, with 62 percent having difficulty maintaining a job for more than 1 year.
- Thirty percent have no access to health care.
- Sixty percent of females have given birth.
- Fifty percent experience hardships such as homelessness, hunger, and housing instability.
- Less than 20 percent are self-supporting, and 32 percent to 40 percent end up on public assistance.

- Twenty-five percent of males and 15 percent of females report being victims of physical violence.
- Twenty-seven percent of males and 10 percent of females had been incarcerated at least once.
- Thirty-three percent demonstrated mental health issues.

Half of young adults in Massachusetts ages 18 to 24 continue to live at home, and most in that age range rely on their families for financial support and guidance. Adolescence clearly does not end at age 18, yet many youth aging out of foster care do not have permanent families or connections to rely on for support and guidance. Recognizing the need to better prepare these youth for the transition from foster care, DCF had already undertaken numerous initiatives that focused on adolescent permanency through providing youth-focused services based on a sound understanding of positive youth development before this program announcement was released.

The work of the Supervisory Training to Enhance Permanency Solutions (STEPS) Project built on those earlier initiatives, which included:

- **Massachusetts Breakthrough Series Collaborative on Adolescent Permanency:** This was a 1-year statewide collaborative on adolescent permanency that included three 2-day meetings for all participants. Each county identified a participant team with at least one youth as a member. Information on adolescents transitioning from foster care was used to help staff understand the importance of permanency for these youth and the fact that they must start working on permanency from the point that a child enters foster care. They cannot continue to wait until the youth is 15 or 16 years of age. Additionally, the system must become youth-driven, collaborative, solution-focused, and empowerment-based. The Office of Foster Care and Adoption participated in the Breakthrough Series. It shared documents and materials and chronicled the issues and ideas that surfaced through the use of its Extranet.
- **Permanence for Teens:** To enforce the idea that every child deserves a family, DCF stimulated a systemwide paradigm shift to the fact that permanence for teens is possible and is a priority. It can be accomplished through youth empowerment, youth engagement, youth involvement in action planning, building support with foster parents, and assisting youth with identity development. The goal is to find permanency, not just to teach permanency.
- **Redefinition of "Continuity and Permanence" for Youth:** To promote the importance of continuity and permanence in the lives of foster youth, the pursuit of permanency in Massachusetts now includes working with youth to secure and enhance the following:
  - Stability, predictability, and constancy of caring adult connections
  - Connections to birth family, sibling relationships, and important peer relationships
  - Youth's ability to understand his/her culture and life history
  - Long-term relationships and connections the youth needs to feel an optimal degree of social, emotional, and legal security and stability
  - Broad definitions of family in order to meet the youth's need for lifelong, meaningful relationships
  - Relationships that are enduring, not time-limited
  - A combination or network of enduring connections that satisfy a youth's need for long-term security and stability

- **Outreach Workers:** Chafee monies were used to create Outreach Worker positions—secondary caseworkers who see each youth weekly. Outreach Workers teach IL skills with a perspective on youth using a positive development approach, and engaging them with meaningful questions such as: "Where do you want to go in life?" "What do you want to do?" "Who do you want to be?"
- **Commissioner's Leadership Group:** This group of managers from across the State grew out of the work of the Breakthrough Series Collaborative and has been meeting since 2005, when that initiative ended. Throughout the process, the commissioner has made his support for adolescent permanency very clear and has encouraged thinking and planning outside the box.
- **Regional Youth Counsel:** This group also has been meeting on a regular basis and is developing a Bill of Rights for Foster Youth.

**Goals of the Project** (*adapted from information and materials provided by the grantee during the site visit*)

The goal of the project is for supervisors to develop techniques to lead, support, and engage caseworkers positively in facilitating youths' successful transitions to adulthood.

Objectives are the following:

- Supervisors will have a holistic perspective about the needs of youth in foster care.
- Supervisors will learn specific supervisory techniques to engage and support caseworkers in managing adolescents in foster care and preparing them for young adulthood.
- Supervisors will have opportunities for continuous self-reflection regarding older youth and their potential for permanent relationships.

## **SITE VISIT HIGHLIGHTS**

The site visit took place on September 23, 2008, and consisted of a 1-day meeting with several members of the project team, including the Director of the Office of Foster Care and Adoption at UMass and the Principle Investigator for this project; the Project Director; a representative from Adoption Support Services at the Department of Children and Families (DCF); a former DCF supervisor who now works with the Project Director; the Research Coordinator for the project; and the Director of Adolescent Services at DCF.

The meeting consisted of a comprehensive presentation by team members on the following topics:

- Massachusetts Permanency Practice
- Supervisory Training to Enhance Permanency Solutions Curriculum
- Strength-Based Resources for Working With Youth in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, a Resource Guide
- Implicit Association Test
- Project Evaluation
- Project Dissemination

Information shared during this meeting is incorporated throughout the following sections of this report.

## **LESSONS LEARNED**

### **Unique and Innovative Features**

- This project is a unique partnership between the Massachusetts Department of Children and Families (DCF) and the UMass Medical School, Office of Foster Care and Adoption. The office is driven by the principle that every child deserves a loving family and is dedicated to developing training and translating research that will help families and professionals improve the lives of children in adoptive and foster families.
- The multidisciplinary training offered through this project is unique in that it targets DCF social work supervisors, equivalent personnel in other State agencies, and staff of private providers, making it a true collaborative effort on behalf of adolescents in foster care.

### **Challenges** *(adapted from information and materials provided by the grantee during the site visit)*

- Participants listed lack of resources and time, staff reluctance, office policy/practice, and caseload size as barriers they face when addressing permanency needs of older youth.
- Encouraging attendance was difficult in this environment. Caseloads are high and there are no mandated trainings beyond two basic courses.
- The curriculum had to be adapted to meet the needs of different cultures in six regions of the State.
- Encouraging youth who participated to share positive as well as negative experiences in foster care was a challenge.

### **Strategies for Success** *(adapted from information and materials provided by the grantee during the site visit)*

- A collaborative process of team planning and decision-making that includes youth, family members, other significant adults, professionals, and other power brokers has the potential to support the youth's transition from the foster care system. Permanency for youth cannot be achieved without involving the entire team, including the youth.
- The youth voice must be heard in planning the youth's future. A youth presence is very powerful in training, but because the youth cannot always attend, creative ways to include the youth voice are crucial. One effective way to do this is to show digital stories: short, video autobiographies produced by current and former foster youth that pass the youth's story on during training and other forums.
- Strong facilitators for this curriculum are critically important.
- The subject matter should be available to professionals in all disciplines that touch the lives of foster youth. We can teach doctors and teachers what they need to know about foster youth so they can be more effective as doctors and teachers working with those youth.
- Peer-to-peer learning works really well with problem solving.

- Preliminary focus groups with DCF staff, youth, providers, and foster parents helped to inform the curriculum and to ensure that it would meet the needs of the participants.

## OUTCOMES

### Summary of Activities and Accomplishments

- **Focus Groups:** To prepare for developing the curriculum, focus groups were held with Department of Children and Families (DCF) staff, youth, providers, and foster parents. Information and recommendations collected during those focus groups was used to inform the curriculum.
- **Advisory Board:** An Advisory Board with broad representation from across the State, including youth, was convened by project staff. The board had significant input into the curriculum development, and throughout the life of the project reviewed and made recommendations.
- **The Curriculum:** In its introduction, STEPS (Supervisory Training to Enhance Permanency Solutions) is described as an energizing, interactive, and reflective curriculum that incorporates adult learning theory. STEPS was developed to "enhance supervisory practice in supporting and guiding the efforts of social workers as they strive to achieve permanency and life long connections for youth in care. ... The goal of the project is to enhance supervisory support in this critical area of service. ... The program offers supervisors a strength-based approach to working with both their staff and youth and families to respond to critical needs in service panning. It builds on knowledge and skills that participants already possess, and strives to deepen their understanding of the impact of informed strength-based management practice. "
  - The material is presented by expert facilitators, and participating supervisors receive binders containing tools and materials to reproduce and use with their staff. Throughout each module participants are asked, "What are you going to do when you get back to work tomorrow?" to stimulate thoughts and plans for how they will apply what they learn in the training.
  - Six training modules focus on a specific area of need for youth in foster care and include a topical presentation, activities to use with staff members, and facilitated discussions. Each module is about 6 hours long, which totals 36 hours of training delivered over a 1-year period. Participants return to work, assess the training, try out elements, then come back and discuss what worked, what didn't work, and why.
  - The curriculum consists of the following:
    - *Module 1: Positive Youth Development*  
Supervisors learn the developmental and cultural needs of adolescents and the importance of assisting foster youth to develop a sense of competence, usefulness, belonging, and power. Strength-based case management and caseworker supervision are explored. Participants discuss strengths needed by the youth and strengths needed by supervisors to help youth.
    - *Module 2: Community Ties and Life-Long Connections*  
Supervisors learn strategies to foster relationships with social

work staff and how those strategies can translate to working with youth to build sustainable relationships and community connections. They learn to stop pathologizing foster youth and to help them develop healthy characteristics.

- *Module 3: Education and Workforce*  
This session includes an overview of the educational system and how to navigate it. Supervisors learn strategies to lead and support caseworkers' efforts to foster and advocate for opportunities for youth to secure educational and vocational skills. It also includes checklists for job interview preparation and financial preparation. It explores the impact of placement instability on foster youths' educational outcomes.
- *Module 4: Mental and Physical Health Needs*  
This session is presented by mental health professionals and physicians and focuses on normalizing foster youth and their behavior. Because a part of the adolescent brain is not fully developed, all adolescents make bad decisions and engage in risky behavior. The session also explores the fact that health problems in foster teens occur more often and are more severe than they are in peers who are not in foster care. Supervisors obtain a greater understanding of the importance of physical and mental health for youths' successful transitions to adulthood and the unique needs of adolescents in foster care.
- *Module 5: Public Safety and the Juvenile Justice System*  
Representatives from the Department of Youth Services facilitate this session, which explores the risk factors for youth of early offending. Supervisors learn strategies to support caseworkers' use of strengths-based management approaches with youth involved in the juvenile justice system in an effort to prevent them entering the adult justice system. Attorneys from the Children and Family Law Practice also present on what happens to children and families in the juvenile justice system and the legal supports they need.
- *Module 6: Implications for Practice*  
Supervisors have the opportunity to reflect on the information and skills acquired in Modules 1 through 5 and to share thoughts and practical strategies with colleagues about practice implementation. The discussion is facilitated by representatives from Casey Family Programs. Many participants entered this module feeling overwhelmed, which led to discussion of the need for integrated practice. Facilitators helped participants think about how to empower others and mobilize other resources in the youth's life.
- **Integrated Practice:** In integrated practice, the supervisor and the caseworker do not have to work more, but rather, need to work differently. Permanency for youth cannot be achieved without involving and mobilizing the entire team. A collaborative team planning and decision-making process includes youth, family members, and other significant adults as well as professionals and other power brokers. Significant team members are identified by the youth, and the youth is the center of the planning process
- **The Training:** The six modules of the STEPS curriculum were delivered five times in various regions of the State to 484 participants, 35 of whom attended all

six modules. Regional Directors attended the training and gave supervisors opportunities to discuss local challenges and to get their Regional Directors' support. The breakdown of participants by module is as follows:

- Module 1 - Positive Youth Development: 116
  - Module 2 - Community Ties: 99
  - Module 3 - Education and Workforce: 75
  - Module 4 - Physical and Mental Health: 72
  - Module 5 - Juvenile Justice: 62
  - Module 6 - Implications for Practice: 60
- **Implicit Association Test:** STEPS training was built both to provide content instruction and to focus on the effects supervisors' and caseworkers' attitudes toward adolescents can have on child welfare practice. The Adolescent Implicit Association Test (IAT), which was developed through collaboration between the project staff and staff of Project Implicit and Harvard University, was designed to help supervisors identify and consider unconscious associations or biases they may have about adolescents in general and adolescents in foster care in particular. Supervisors who take the test bring to the surface any hidden personal biases and examine the implications of those biases for their work in child welfare. (For more information on Project Implicit and the IAT, see the Project Implicit website at <https://implicit.harvard.edu>.)
  - **Resource Manual:** Project staff developed a thorough and sophisticated resource binder, entitled "Strength-Based Resources for Working with Youth in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts." The binder is divided by the six regions of the State, and each region is further divided into color-coded sections, each of which includes available resources for each region in Basic Needs; Housing; Health and Wellness; Education; Job Training and Employment Assistance Programs; Transportation; Recreational, Arts, Cultural, and Leisure; Faith-Based Programs; and GLBTQ Community Programs. The last tab in the binder includes telephone numbers for hotline and website links. The resource binder, current at the time of printing, refers a user to the STEPS website for frequently updated information. A hard copy was distributed to each DCF office, and each participant in the training was given a copy.
  - **Website:** The project's website at [www.steps-umms.org](http://www.steps-umms.org) contains the entire STEPS curriculum; supervisors and managers can use it to train their staffs. It also contains the complete resource guide, "Strength-Based Resources for Working with Youth in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts," information on the history of the project, an events calendar, a listing of promising practices in achieving permanency for youth, and contact information for the project staff.

**Evaluation** (*adapted from information and materials provided by the grantee during the site visit*)

There were three evaluation activities: a process evaluation, pre- and post-training surveys, and supervisor interviews.

- **Process Evaluation:** A survey was distributed, filled out, and collected at each training session; 441 were received. Training leaders summarized and reviewed the data. The majority of respondents indicated that they would recommend the training to their colleagues, with module-specific responses ranging from 70 percent to 96 percent.

- **Pre- and Post-training Survey:** This survey was distributed at the start of Module 1 and at the conclusion of Module 6 of the training. It was designed to identify pre- and post-training differences in participants' responses in the areas of Competency Level, Importance Placed upon the Issue, and Frequency of Supervision. One hundred and six pre-training and 58 post-training surveys were collected. Results indicated a positive trend, with 25/26 response values increasing in the measured areas.
- **Supervisor Interviews:** A random sample of 15 of the 35 participants who had attended all six training modules was interviewed about their training experience. Interviews were transcribed for qualitative analysis, which is still underway. Results of the interviews will be included in the grantee's final report.
- **Additional Findings:** In particular, participants noted how the training promotes dialogue among DCF peers and how that interaction stimulates ongoing peer-to-peer learning and provides opportunities to alter practice among supervisors and caseworkers, both within a single unit or office and across other units within DCF. They also reported an increase in sharing and learning about innovative programs, new resources, and innovative approaches to incorporating adolescent permanency objectives as standard practice.

**Dissemination** (*adapted from information and materials provided by the grantee during the site visit*)

- Project staff conducted presentations and workshops at the following national conferences:
  - Child Welfare League of America (CWLA) Training Conference, Portland, OR (9/08)
  - Georgetown Institutes, Nashville, TN (7/08)
  - Pathways to Adulthood, Pittsburgh, PA (5/08)
  - Peer-to-Peer Grantees Meeting, Tulsa, OK (2/08)
  - CWLA National Conference, Washington, DC (2/08)
  - CWLA Training Conference, New Orleans, LA (12/07)
  - Pathways to Adulthood, Minneapolis, MN (5/07)
  - Pathways to Adulthood, Portland, OR (5/07)
- Project staff launched a website at [www.steps-umms.org](http://www.steps-umms.org) where all training materials and the entire curriculum are housed. The site will be live and active at least 4 to 5 years beyond the end of the grant.
- Project staff provided a complete binder that contained the curriculum and all program materials to all training participants. They also provided copies to all DCF area offices and encouraged its use by managers and supervisors.
- Project staff developed a Statewide Resource Guide and distributed it to all DCF area offices as well as to all training participants.
- An article was submitted for peer review and possible publication.

**Sustainability** *(adapted from information and materials provided by the grantee during the site visit)*

- At the time of the site visit, the project team was adapting the curriculum to target other disciplines that touch the lives of foster youth to offer the training on a fee-for-service basis to schools, medical and legal professionals, and foster parents.
- A significant percentage of the supervisory workforce has participated in the STEPS training. This group now has the knowledge, skills, and means for passing on what they've learned to the caseworkers in their units. The supervisory workforce is fairly stable in Massachusetts, so they will be able to affect attitudes and practice in the years to come.
- Given the Commissioner's commitment to child welfare and to permanence for youth, the Massachusetts Strategic Plan is sure to emphasize permanency for youth.
- The grantee purchased the domain of the project website ([www.steps-umms.org](http://www.steps-umms.org)) so that it will remain live and active for at least 4 to 5 years after the project ends.

**ATTACHMENTS**

- Office of Foster Care and Adoption at the UMass Medical School: Mission, Vision, and Values Statement
- Supervisor Interview Questions

**Office of Foster Care and Adoption Education and Policy  
at the UMass Medical School:**

**Mission, Vision, and Values Statement**

**Our Mission**

Based in a public medical school, the Office of Foster Care and Adoption Education and Policy is dedicated to developing practical responses to improve foster care and adoption policy and practice by conducting research, policy analysis, and education and training programs.

**Our Vision**

In five years, the Office of Foster Care and Adoption Education and Policy will be recognized as a leading research and education resource in the commonwealth, and as a national model for effective university and state agency collaboration, to improve policy and practice for children, birth, foster, and adoptive families, and professionals involved in foster care and adoption.

**Our Values**

**Collaboration:** We cultivate strategic partnerships to serve the public good.

**Excellence:** We strive to attain the highest quality outcomes in all our efforts.

**Innovation:** We spearhead research and continuous learning opportunities to create meaningful solutions.

**Integrity:** We commit to a spirit of collegiality with an emphasis on the highest ethical standards of honesty, fairness, and sensitivity.

**Diversity:** We are responsive to the needs of diverse populations and families.

## **Supervisory Training to Enhance Permanency Solutions (STEPS)**

### **Supervisor Participant Interview Questions**

- What, if anything, did you take away from the STEPS training Program?
- Did the information provided at the STEPS training change your supervisory practice in the area of adolescence permanency? If so, how?
- What was your favorite part of the training program?
- What was your least favorite part of the training program?
- Can you talk a little bit about how STEPS fits into the larger picture of youth permanency initiatives in Massachusetts?
- Did the training give you any new ways to approach permanency issues with your workers?
- Which modules were most relevant to your work/training needs?
- Have you used the resource binder since the training ended?
- Have you ever accessed the STEPS material online?