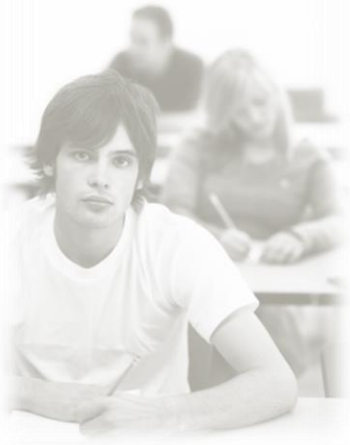


National Capital Region

Annual Report on Foster Care

2014



METROPOLITAN WASHINGTON
Council of Governments

About the Report

The Metropolitan Washington Council of Governments (COG) is a regional organization of Washington area local governments. COG is composed of 22 local governments surrounding our nation's capital, plus area members of the Maryland and Virginia legislatures, the U.S. Senate, and the U.S. House of Representatives.

Each year COG surveys child welfare systems in the National Capital Region. The purpose of the annual survey and report is to educate the media, general public, and other important stakeholders, of recent trends occurring in the region's foster care systems.

The members of COG that participate in this regional survey and report are the District of Columbia, Frederick, Montgomery, Prince George's and Charles Counties in Maryland, and Arlington, Fairfax, Loudoun, Prince William Counties, and the City of Alexandria in Virginia. Foster care data, when available, will also be presented on the following independent Cities: Bowie, College Park, Gaithersburg, Greenbelt, and Takoma Park in Maryland, and the Cities of Fairfax, Falls Church, Manassas and Manassas Park in Virginia.

This report is intended as an educational tool to inform those who may be unfamiliar with the foster care system and update those who are. The desired outcome is that readers of this report will become more involved in the foster care system as advocates for vulnerable children and families in our communities.

The highlights of the survey are:

- The region received 57,911 calls alleging child maltreatment. Of those calls, 10,294 were investigated, and 9,690 were accepted for an alternative or differential response.
- Over 2,300 children were diverted from entering the system.
- The number of children in foster care has declined by 46% over the past 6 years.
- Six out of ten children in foster care are 11 years old and above.
- Most children in care (64%) have been in the system for three years or less.
- Public agencies had 1,699 licensed foster homes on December 31, 2014 to care for the 2,678 children in the system overall.
- More children aged-out of foster care last year (296), than were adopted (233).
- 1,539 youth between the ages of 18 and 24 were counted as being homeless during the Federal Point in Time Count commissioned by the Housing and Urban Development Agency (HUD) on January 28, 2015; six percent reported aging out of foster care as the impetus for them being homeless.

Responding to Reports of Child Abuse and Neglect

All states have statutory requirements that define child abuse and neglect. Child Protective Services (CPS) hotline workers, housed at social service agencies across the region, receive calls alleging child abuse and neglect, and must make a determination, based on the information received, if the report meets their state's statutory criteria for further investigation.

Data on the total number of calls received in 2014 indicates that collectively CPS hotline workers across the region received 57,911 calls alleging child maltreatment. Of those calls, 10,294 were investigated and 9,690 were accepted for an alternative or differential response.

Differential response, also known as dual track or alternative response, allows Child Protective Services to recognize the variation in the types of child abuse and neglect complaints received and utilize more than one method to respond to those complaints. The practice of differential response is typically employed with low and moderate risk cases that did not meet the safety threshold for an investigation. Best practices show that collaborative partnering with families increases engagement and the utilization of services. This leads to an assessment of the needs of the family and services that serve to strengthen and preserve families.

The types of cases that warrant an investigation, rather than differential response, pose imminent danger to the child, such as: sexual abuse, physical abuse, and severe neglect. In the course of an investigation, a CPS social worker determines whether the safety risk is high enough to remove a child from their birth home through extensive interviews

Within hours of a removal, allegations of child abuse and neglect are brought before a family court judge. When a judgment is made in the case, the abuse or neglect charges are substantiated or unsubstantiated. There are also instances where the judge rules that the child be returned home or with relatives while the family receives supportive services.

Whenever agencies are able to safely do so, community-based intervention services are put in place, and children remain in their homes while services are administered. When low-risk cases come to the attention of social services, there are many benefits to sustaining a family connection. From a fiscal standpoint, there are savings in foster care placements and case management but it is also important to note that the emotional and psychological toll of removing a child from their birth home is avoided.

Preserving Families within their Communities

The US Health and Human Services Administration's definition of Family Preservation states that "(preservation) services are short-term, family-based services designed to assist families in crisis by improving parenting and family functioning while keeping



children safe (and in the birth home).¹ Family Preservation services in our region vary by county. Most agencies in the region, and especially counties in Maryland, utilize a family-centered practice “as way of working with families, both formally and informally, across service systems to enhance their capacity to care for and protect their children².” By embracing this approach, families in crisis may receive: shelter care, food assistance, transportation vouchers, day care vouchers, mental health assessments, mental health therapy, substance use assessment, work force training, and parenting classes as a means to preserve the child in the home. These services may be directly provided by public child welfare agencies, but are more often provided by private agencies.

In addition to family preservation, the technique of diversion is another program employed by agencies to keep children within their own extended family members’ homes. In contrast to family preservation cases, diversion cases are severe enough to constitute removal, but instead some major intervention or placement arrangement is secured, usually with a relative or fictive kin, such as Godparents. Often family involvement or partnership meetings (FIM or FPM) are the conduit for conversations with extended kin that result in diversion. Besides FIM or FPM meeting, some counties such as Charles County utilize a Family Finder as a means of locating and connecting relatives with children who are being diverted from entering foster care. Kinship Navigators also were used to provide supportive services to these families such as access to support groups, connections to legal advocates, and case management. In the National Capital Region during 2014, over 2,300 children were diverted from entering the system.

Placing Children in Foster Care

Children enter the foster care system when a child welfare system determines that the risk is too high to leave a child at home or in the care of relatives and the court agrees with that decision. The emotional toll and trauma experienced by a child when they are placed in foster care cannot be underscored enough.



Agencies such as DC Child and Family Services Agency have focused on creating a

trauma-informed system of care that recognizes the gravity of the loss and grieving process each foster child endures and equips caregivers, social workers, and staff at all levels to effectively support children as they move through the system. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services’ Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA)

Jurisdictions	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014
District of Columbia	2264	2103	2007	1744	1430	1215	1068
Frederick County	140	175	157	142	148	128	108
Montgomery County	575	546	516	498	433	385	375
Prince George's County	608	599	592	595	593	515	462
Charles County	106	113	110	105	95	105	81
City of Alexandria	181	167	126	126	97	85	87
Arlington County	147	133	115	101	87	93	82
Fairfax County	394	370	337	326	289	252	246
Loudoun County	87	97	83	64	51	59	66
Prince William County	99	91	110	115	126	124	103
Total	4601	4394	4153	3816	3349	2961	2678

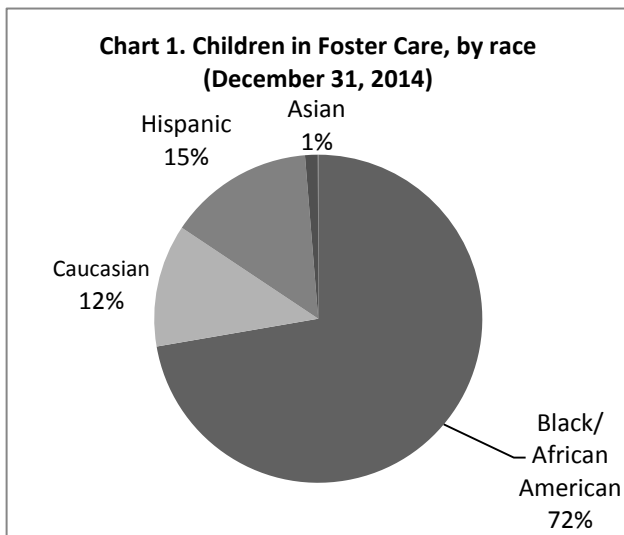
¹ US department of Health and Human Services, Administration of Children and Families, Child Welfare Information Gateway website: <https://www.childwelfare.gov/supporting/preservation/>

² Child Welfare Information Gateway, <https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/famcentered/>

recognized six outstanding projects from across the nation—including in our region, CFSA and the DC Department of Behavioral Health (DBH), for their partnership in creating a trauma-informed child welfare system³. Fortunately in the region, fewer children have entered care in the past several years due to aggressive and effective use of family preservation, prevention, and diversion programs.

The number of children in foster care has declined by forty-six percent over the past 6 years. On December 31, 2014, there were 2,678 children in foster care compared to 4,601 children in the system on December 31, 2008. The number of children entering the system has also declined. In 2014, 1,038 children entered foster care as compared to 1,468 entries in 2008. Most children in care (64%) have been in the system for three years or less.

In terms of demographics, most children in the system on December 31, 2014 were older African American children. Agencies in the region continue to see an overrepresentation of African American children in foster care.



Agencies in our region strive to recruit culturally competent foster parents, especially those who are willing to accept older children. Six out of ten children in foster care are 11 years old and above. Agencies in the region also focus their recruitment efforts on attracting local parents who are interested in other difficult to place children that are prevalent in the foster care system, such as large sibling groups and children with special medical needs.

Jurisdiction	< 1	1 - 5	6 - 10	11 - 15	16 -21	Total
District of Columbia	37	230	174	212	415	1068
Frederick County	8	26	16	18	40	108
Montgomery County	17	80	38	77	163	375
Prince George's County	10	55	41	85	271	462
Charles County	5	14	9	20	33	81
City of Alexandria	4	26	18	19	20	87
Arlington County	6	17	13	18	28	82
Fairfax County	7	48	47	44	100	246
Loudoun County	2	10	12	18	24	66
Prince William County	3	13	12	28	47	103
Total	99	519	380	539	1141	2678
Region Percentage	4%	19%	14%	20%	43%	100%

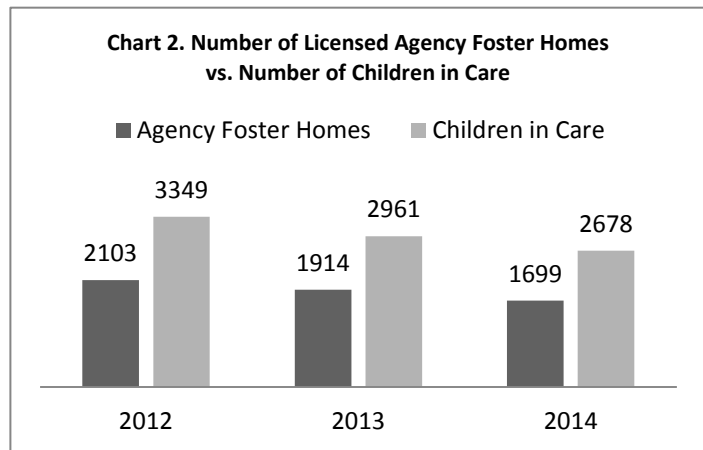
³ DC Child and Family Services Agency, Office of Public Information, May 7, 2015

Recruiting Homes for Special Needs Children



In child welfare, the term “special needs” does not necessarily mean a child with medical or physical disabilities. Rather, it is used by states to refer to children for whom it is more difficult to recruit permanent homes. These children are therefore eligible for federal financial assistance when they are adopted.

In our region the vast majority of children in foster care fit the definition of being special needs due to their race, age, and membership in a sibling group. Utilizing federal financial assistance toward special needs adoptions as an incentive, agencies aggressively recruit homes for these children, who are also most at risk of leaving the system without a family.



Harnessing creative recruitment strategies, collectively, agencies had 1,699 licensed foster homes on December 31, 2014. Agency foster homes are recruited through public media outreach like Wednesday’s Child, but mostly through word of mouth. Adoption match parties and exchanges events also help agencies target families who are ready to adopt older children. Arlington County has achieved good results by hosting summits with religious leaders and clergy about the need for foster and adoptive parents in the county. Fairfax County employs existing foster parents who are paid a small stipend to serve as ambassadors to recruit on the agency’s behalf. All agencies use the “Families Like Yours” customized videos created by COG to attract and retain good foster parents. These videos highlight outstanding parents identified as Foster Parents of the Year, and expose their stories on traditional and social media to recruit other people like them.

All of these recruitment strategies have helped agencies sustain children in families during their time in foster care rather than congregate care homes. On December 31, 2014, 2,678 children were in foster care and on average fifty-three percent of these children were placed in families⁴ while seventeen percent were placed in congregate care.

Extensive attempts are made to avoid placement in congregate care settings. The ultimate goal for all agencies is to place children in the least-restrictive, most family-like setting.

Agencies in our region aim to rely less on congregate care homes because children in group care are more likely to age-out of the system without any permanent connections. If a child is placed in a foster

⁴ The sum of Agency Foster Home, Private Foster Home (privately purchases homes), Relative/Kinship, Pre-adoptive, and trial home visit were used to calculate the number of youth placed in families.

home, their permanency outcomes are far better due to the number of connections they have in the community and the greater likelihood that a foster family may allow the child to stay in their home past their 18th or 21st birthday.

Table 3. Placement Type on December 31, 2014

Jurisdiction	Agency Foster Home	Private Foster Home	Relative/Kinship	Congregate Care	Pre-Adoptive Home	Trial Home Visit	Independent Living	Run Away	Other
District of Columbia	13%	43%	23%	5%	5%	0%	5%	3%	4%
Frederick County	19%	19%	12%	29%	11%	9%	1%	0%	0%
Montgomery County	24%	18%	13%	21%	8%	6%	5%	1%	4%
Prince George's County	13%	44%	14%	11%	2%	1%	7%	3%	5%
Charles County	20%	18%	11%	20%	10%	9%	10%	2%	0%
City of Alexandria	23%	51%	3%	7%	0%	12%	3%	0%	1%
Arlington County	22%	32%	5%	16%	5%	15%	4%	1%	0%
Fairfax County	23%	43%	3%	11%	5%	5%	9%	0%	1%
Loudoun County	28%	10%	8%	24%	16%	8%	2%	2%	2%
Prince William County	56%	7%	4%	21%	2%	3%	4%	1%	2%
Regional Average	24%	29%	10%	17%	6%	7%	5%	1%	2%

There are certainly cases where congregate group or institutional placements are warranted due to behavioral and psychological issues. Agencies also work to shorten each child’s length of stay in these facilities, and create opportunities for children to do what is called “step down.”

Frederick County Department of Social Services and Loudoun County Department of Family Services, have created unique opportunities for youth who have been deemed psychologically-ready to leave a more restrictive institution or group home, and “step down” into a family foster home. These two counties have hosted matching events where the children can interact and meet licensed families who may accept them in their homes. The children that participate in these “step-down” matching events are typically older children who are most at risk of leaving the system without a forever home should they stay in a congregate care setting.



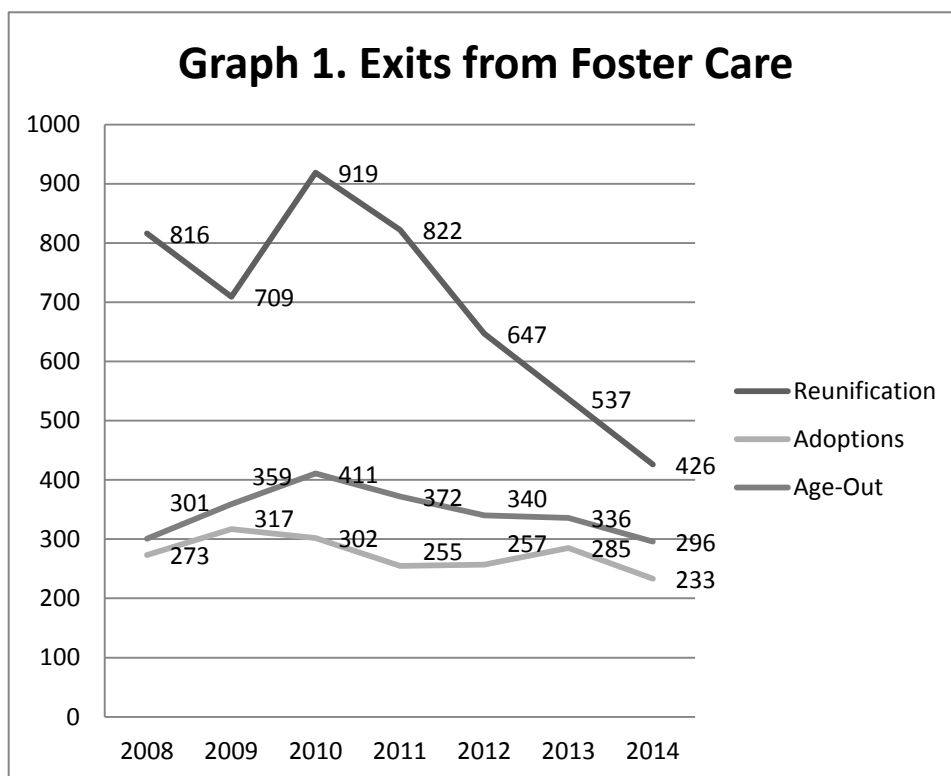
It is important to note that in all instances retention of foster or adoptive parents is extremely important. All states across the country sponsor Foster Parent Month ceremonies in May, and Adoption

Month ceremonies in November. However, year-round retention programs are critical to ensure the longevity of placements.

DC Child and Family Services institutionalized a unique retention program referred to as, The Mockingbird program, which provides DC foster parents with a system and community of support that includes respite care, community outings, and peer to peer training, from other parents who are also fostering, and are geographically close-by.

Transitioning Youth out of Foster Care

More children aged-out of foster care in our region than were adopted in 2014. It is important to note that the vast majority of adoptions occur by foster parents or people who had a former relationship with the youth. Identifying excellent foster parents, those who purposefully bond with the children that are placed in their homes, directly impacts the permanency outcomes of the children during their tenure in foster care. It also increases the likelihood that children will not age-out foster care without a permanent home.



Preparing Youth who will Age-Out from Foster Care



Children exit foster care when they are reunified with their birth family, secure guardianship with a foster parent or relative⁵, are adopted, or age-out from the system on their 18th or 21st birthday. The latter is the type of exit all agencies strive to diminish.

During 2014, 296 children aged out of the system. On December 31, 2014, 483 children had a non-permanency goal, Another Planned Permanency Living Arrangement or Long-

Term Foster Care, which means they are at-risk of leaving the system without a family on their 18th or 21st birthday. As previously mentioned, youth who are in congregate group care or institutions on their 18th or 21st birthday are more likely to age-out and are most at risk of becoming homeless.

Housing in the National Capital Region is at a premium. The number of affordable housing units is not keeping pace with demand or wages. This conundrum causes a very vulnerable population of youth at the pivotal age of 18 or 21 to be challenged to support themselves as they continue their collegiate or vocational studies, and try to secure employment that pays a living wage. Some jurisdictions in the region offer youth who opt to stay in the system pass their 18th birthday a small stipend to cover their living expenses, but the source of this funding is uncertain in the future and ends when they turn 21.

The 2015 COG report on Homelessness in Metropolitan Washington reported that 1,539 youth between the ages of 18 and 24 were counted as being homeless during the Federal Point in Time Count commissioned by the Housing and Urban Development Agency (HUD) on January 28, 2015⁶. Of this count, 94 youth reported aging out of foster care as the impetus for why they are homeless⁷.

Jurisdiction	Single Adults (TAY)	Persons in Families (TAY)	Total (TAY)
City of Alexandria	6	27	33
Arlington County	5	18	23
District of Columbia	193	910	1,103
Fairfax County	52	67	119
Frederick County	18	4	22
Loudoun County	7	9	16
Montgomery County	27	87	114
Prince George's County	15	45	60
Prince William County	20	29	49
TOTAL	343	1,196	1,539

⁵ The State of Virginia does not subsidize guardianship; instead custody is transferred without financial support.

⁶ Homelessness in Metropolitan Washington: The http://www.mwcog.org/store/item.asp?PUBLICATION_ID=189

⁷ Although Charles County is a COG member, the County's homeless enumeration figures are not tracked as part of COG's Homelessness report. Charles County submits its enumeration results to the Baltimore HUD office, not the Washington, DC HUD office like the other COG member jurisdictions. Data was provided separately by the Charles County Department of Social Services to COG documenting the total number of unaccompanied young adults (Transition Age Youth) ages 18 – 24 in Charles County on the day of the enumeration as 82 (34 were in emergency shelter and 48 were in transitional housing.)

Jurisdictions around the region are focused on reversing the aging-out trend. COG is focused on this population as well, and is working with private partners to create opportunities for this vulnerable population of youth.

Youth Emerging Successfully (Y.E.S.) and Trailblazer Fund are programs established by Metropolitan Washington Council of Governments Child Welfare Department. The Y.E.S. event provides critically important networking and soft-skills training for youth who are aging-out of the foster care system in the metropolitan Washington region, and entering their first year of college. The Trailblazer Fund, in its inaugural year of 2015, plans to provide year-around financial support to these students.

Foster Parents of the Year, Rachel and Michael Hunsberger, said it best during their Families Like Yours video feature when they noted, "We are not only raising children, we are raising the adults of the future. There is nothing more important to invest in than people."⁸ Each child in foster care deserves a family to grow up in, and a fair chance to thrive in the future.

⁸ Families Like Yours Foster Parents of the Year Video Features: www.facebook.com/kidsneedfamilies
Direct Link: <https://www.facebook.com/kidsneedfamilies/videos/vb.107242808373/10153276431073374/?type=1&theater>

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