

# ANNUAL REPORT ON FOSTER CARE

An Update on the Status of Vulnerable Children and Families in Metropolitan Washington

2016 Edition



Metropolitan Washington  
Council of Governments

## **ANNUAL REPORT ON FOSTER CARE**

Prepared by the COG Data Work Group and Child Welfare Directors Committee

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The Metropolitan Washington Council of Governments (COG) is an independent, nonprofit association that brings area leaders together to address major regional issues in the District of Columbia, suburban Maryland, and Northern Virginia. COG's membership is comprised of 300 elected officials from 24 local governments, the Maryland and Virginia state legislatures, and U.S. Congress.

### **CREDITS**

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Cover Photo Credit: Phyllis McKeiver is named District of Columbia Foster Parent of the Year (COG)

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Each year the Metropolitan Washington Council of Governments (COG) surveys child welfare systems in the region. The purpose of the annual survey and resulting report is to educate the media, the public, and other important stakeholders, about recent trends occurring in the region's foster care systems.

The data for this report is collected by the COG Child Welfare Data Workgroup, comprised of quality assurance representatives from COG's member jurisdictions.

The members of COG that participated 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, and Prince William Counties, and the City of Alexandria in Virginia. Foster care data, when available, is also 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 to serve as an educational tool for those who may be unfamiliar with the foster care system and an update for those who are. It is COG's hope that readers of this report become more involved in the foster care system as advocates for vulnerable children and families in area communities.

2016 regional survey highlights:

- The region received 68,032 calls alleging child maltreatment. Of those calls, 11,048 were investigated, and 11,799 were accepted for an alternative or differential response.
- Over 1,300 families are receiving family preservation services which aid in diverting thousands of children from entering the foster care system.
- The number of children in foster care has declined by 45 percent over the past eight years.
- 56 percent of children in foster care are 11 years old and above.
- Most children in care (67 percent) have been in the system for three years or less.
- Public agencies had 943 licensed foster homes on December 31, 2016 to care for the 2,549 children in the system overall.
- Last year, just as many youth aged-out of foster care (243), then were adopted (244).
- The 2017 COG report, *Homelessness in Metropolitan Washington*, counted 375 single Transition Age Youth and 1,064 persons in Transition Age Youth families (including children under the age of 18) on January 25, 2017. Of this total, 72 youth between the ages of 18 and 24 reported having a history of involvement with the foster care system.

# RESPONDING TO REPORTS OF CHILD ABUSE AND NEGLECT

Child abuse and neglect are defined by federal and state laws. Federal laws are outlined by the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (CAPTA) which defines child abuse and neglect as: “Any recent



(Marcel Dekker Devos/Flickr)

act or failure to act on the part of a parent or care taker, which results in death, serious physical or emotional harm, sexual abuse, or exploitation, or an act or failure to act which presents an imminent risk or serious harm.”<sup>1</sup> All states have statutory requirements that define child abuse and neglect. Virginia, Maryland, and the District of Columbia have laws that designate specific professions as Mandated Reporters who are required, by law, to report suspected child abuse and/or neglect. Mandated Reporters include but are not limited to: health care professionals, educators, human service workers and police officers.

Child Protective Services (CPS) hotline workers 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 2016 indicates that collectively, CPS hotline workers across the region received 68,032 calls alleging child maltreatment. Of those calls, 11,048 were investigated and 11,799 were accepted for an alternative or differential response.

Differential response, also known as dual tract or alternative response, allows CPS to recognize the variation in the types of child abuse and neglect allegations received and utilize more than one method to respond to those allegations. The practice of differential response is typically employed with low and moderate risk cases. 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 seek 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. Most importantly the emotional and psychological trauma of removing a child from their birth home is avoided.

<sup>1</sup> CAPTA Reauthorization Act of 2010 (P.L. 111-320), § 5101, Note (§ 3)

## PRESERVING FAMILIES WITHIN THEIR COMMUNITIES

The U.S. 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).”<sup>2</sup> Family preservation services in the region vary by county. Most agencies in the region, 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 children.”<sup>3</sup> 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 metropolitan Washington during 2016, over 1,300 families were engaged in family preservation services.

Many states across the nation, including Maryland and Virginia, are using the Center for the Study of Social Policy’s Strengthening Families – Protective Factors Framework which is based on five protective factors of 1) parental resilience 2) social connections 3) knowledge of parenting and child development 4) concrete support in times of need and 5) social and emotional competence of children. This approach is designed to “increase family strengths, enhance child development, and reduce the likelihood of child abuse and neglect.”<sup>4</sup>

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. Diversion cases typically involve a larger degree of 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. Diversion techniques often lead to referrals to in-home services to provide support to families while keeping children safe in the home. Preservation and diversion services have been critical to reducing the number of children entering the foster care system.

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<sup>2</sup> US department of Health and Human Services, Administration of Children and Families, Child Welfare Information Gateway website: <https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/supporting/preservation/>

<sup>3</sup> Child Welfare Information Gateway, <https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/famcentered/>

<sup>4</sup> Center for the Study of Social Policy, <http://www.cssp.org/reform/strengtheningfamilies/about>



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## **Diversion Success Story – District of Columbia**

The Child and Family Services Agency (CFSA) provided intensive family preservation services to a family that consisted of a mother and her two sons. The family had multiple reports of abuse and neglect over a number of years, including a past removal of the children, and had come to the attention of the Agency due to her significant mental health problems and drug use. She also faced criminal charges for prior arrests. Her children, ages 17 and 11, had significant absences from school, and were being affected by their mother's ongoing substance abuse and untreated mental health issues. Despite the ongoing neglect, they were terrified about being removed from their mother again.

By partnering with the mother around her primary goal, ensuring that her children did not enter foster care again, as well as the reengagement of estranged family supports, the mother was willing to allow her mother to temporarily care for her children so that she could turn herself in, serve her 30-day sentence, and participate in an inpatient substance abuse program. The maternal grandmother left her home in Maryland to temporarily move into her daughter's home and care for the boys, ensuring that they had proper supervision, were going to school, and that their needs were met. Though the agency considered removal at various times, the social work team understood that the trauma of entering foster care again would be detrimental to these children, and they recognized that although progress was sometimes slow, the mother was able to make progress.

Ultimately, in partnership with the agency's partners in Probation and Parole, the social work team assisted the mother in addressing her mental health and substance abuse issues. She began to better attend to her sons' needs and began to provide stability. She engaged in Project Connect, a District service that works with high-risk families who are affected by parental substance abuse and are involved in the child welfare system. The program offers home-based counseling, substance abuse monitoring, nursing, and referrals for other services. The program also offers home-based parent education, parenting groups, and an ongoing support group for mothers in recovery. The children are now attending school, are being properly supervised, and the family remains intact.



# 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. When a child is placed into foster care, it causes a significant amount of trauma and emotional distress.

Regionally, agencies have continued to focus on a trauma-informed system of care that recognizes the gravity of the loss a child endures and equips caregivers, social workers, and staff at all levels to effectively support children as they move through the system. Agencies have increased trauma-informed training for both foster parents and child welfare staff. Due to these methods, the region has seen a significant decrease in out-of-home placements. 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. This is the case in the District of Columbia where numbers have fallen below 1,000 youth in out-of-home placements.

**Table 1. Children in Foster Care on December 31, 2016\***

Jurisdictions	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2016
District of Columbia	2264	2103	2007	1744	1430	1215	1068	945
Frederick County	140	175	157	142	148	128	108	94
Montgomery County	575	546	516	498	433	385	375	395
Prince George's County	608	599	592	595	593	515	462	469
Charles County	106	113	110	105	95	105	81	78
City of Alexandria	181	167	126	126	97	85	87	86
Arlington County	147	133	115	101	87	93	82	93
Fairfax County	394	370	337	326	289	252	246	241
Loudoun County	87	97	83	64	51	59	66	51
Prince William County	99	91	110	115	126	124	103	96
<b>Total</b>	<b>4601</b>	<b>4394</b>	<b>4153</b>	<b>3816</b>	<b>3349</b>	<b>2961</b>	<b>2678</b>	<b>2549</b>

\*Data captured reflects a point-in-time, not jurisdiction's average monthly caseload.  
Source: COG

Nationally, according to the Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS), the most recent data indicates that 428,000 children are in the foster care system, which is an increase from previous years.<sup>5</sup> However, the number of children in foster care in the region has declined by forty-six percent over the past 8 years. On December 31, 2016, there were 2,549 children in foster care compared to 4,601 children in 2008. The number of children entering the system has also declined. In 2016, 1,063 children entered foster care as compared to 1,468 entries in 2008. Most children in care (67 percent) have been in the system for three years or less.

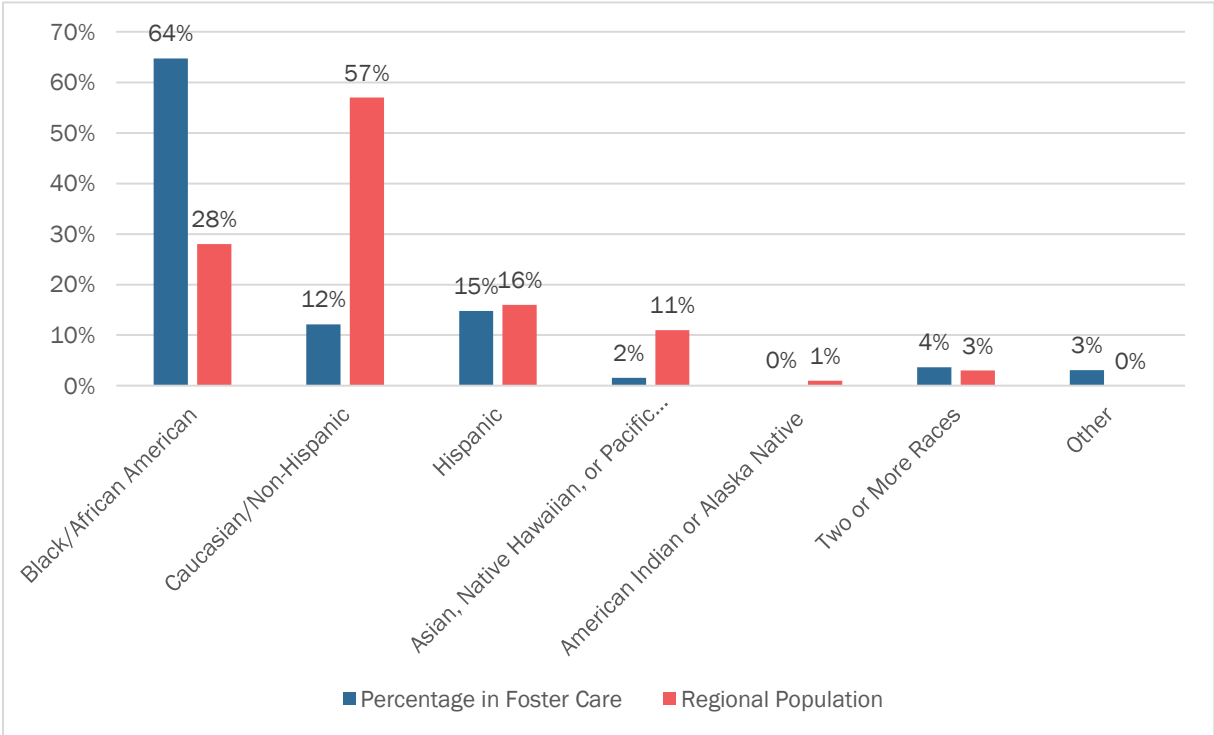
<sup>5</sup> Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS), <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/cb/research-data-technology/statistics-research/afcars>

# DEMOGRAPHICS OF CHILDREN IN FOSTER CARE

In terms of demographics, 64 percent of the population in foster care on December 31, 2016 were older African American children. In the 2017 *State of the Region: Human Capital Report* by COG, race and ethnicity was evaluated using data from the Census Bureau; it estimates that the racial distribution of metropolitan Washington’s population in 2015 was 57 percent Caucasian, 28 percent Black or African American, 11 percent Asian, Hawaiian, or Pacific Islander, 1 percent American Indian, and 16 percent Hispanic. This data reflects the disproportionate representation of African American youth in foster care across the region.

According to the Children’s Bureau, “disproportionality is the underrepresentation or overrepresentation of a racial or ethnic group compared to its percentage in the total population.”<sup>6</sup> National trends show that racial disparities occur at various decision points in the child welfare continuum. Fairfax County has been working diligently to address the issue of disproportionality within child welfare. They have implemented a two-day mandatory staff training which discusses issues around institutionalized racism, equity vs. equality, and cultural competency. Fairfax County also has a designated team—the Disproportionality and Disparity Prevention and Elimination Team (DDPET)—which focuses specifically on reducing the disproportionate presence of African American children and youth in the juvenile justice and child welfare systems, eliminating the achievement gap, and reducing health disparities for these same population subgroups.

**Figure 1: Children in Foster Care by Race**



Source: COG

<sup>6</sup> Racial Disproportionality and Disparity in Child Welfare, [https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubPDFs/racial\\_disproportionality.pdf](https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubPDFs/racial_disproportionality.pdf)

**Table 2. Children in Foster Care, by Age (December 31, 2016)\***

<b>Jurisdiction</b>	<b>&lt; 1</b>	<b>1 - 5</b>	<b>6 - 10</b>	<b>11 - 15</b>	<b>16 -21</b>	<b>Total</b>
District of Columbia	42	220	195	186	302	945
Frederick County	7	22	18	21	26	94
Montgomery County	19	104	72	59	141	395
Prince George's County	13	60	51	96	249	469
Charles County	3	23	12	20	20	78
City of Alexandria	5	24	13	24	20	86
Arlington County	5	22	16	16	34	93
Fairfax County	10	47	63	43	78	241
Loudoun County	0	9	8	11	23	51
Prince William County	5	16	12	20	44	97
<b>Total</b>	109	547	460	496	937	2549
<b>Region Percentage</b>	4%	21%	18%	19%	37%	100%

\*Data captured reflects a point-in-time.

Source: COG

Agencies in the region strive to recruit culturally competent foster parents, now commonly referred to as resource parents. Agencies are also focusing training efforts on cultural competency for resource parents and staff on transracial and transcultural placements. A larger effort is also being made across the region to recruit more Spanish speaking families to address the cultural needs of Hispanic youth in the foster care system.

Older teens continue to represent the majority population of children in the foster care system. Recruiting families for older teens continues to be a regional challenge. Agencies seek to recruit resource parents who are willing to accept older children. 56 percent of 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 “hard-to-place” children that are prevalent in the foster care system, such as large sibling groups, children with behavioral challenges, children with emotional needs and children with special medical needs. Typically, children who enter the foster care system at an older age are at greater risk of aging out of the foster care system without any permanent connections.

## RECRUITING RESOURCE HOMES THAT MEET THE SPECIAL NEEDS OF CHILDREN IN FOSTER CARE



Adoption and Foster Care Expo (Margo Devine)

Harnessing creative recruitment strategies, collectively, agencies had 943 licensed resource homes on December 31, 2016. The number of homes has decreased 44.5 percent since 2014. Local agencies report that several homes have closed due to adoptions. Agencies have also worked to close out homes who have been inactive for extended periods of time. Additionally, agencies have implemented stringent criteria for resource families in attempts to work with families who are willing and able to meet the specific needs of children who are currently in the

foster care system. In Maryland, agencies are using the Structured Analysis Family Evaluation (SAFE) home study model to effectively and systematically evaluate prospective families for foster placements. Along with increased trauma-informed training standards, these systems help to recruit resource families that are best able to meet the needs of the youth in their care.

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 families including older children, sibling groups, children from specific ethnic backgrounds, children with behavioral and/or emotional needs, and children with medical or physical disabilities. These children are therefore eligible for federal financial assistance when they are adopted. Federal and state adoption assistance programs are designed to help adoptive parents meet the children’s needs which can be extensive and costly.

In metropolitan Washington, the vast majority of children in foster care fit the definition of having 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.

Agency resource homes are recruited through public media outreach like [Wednesday's Child](#), which is a partnership between NBC Washington and COG that features children who are waiting in foster care to be adopted, but mostly through word of mouth. Adoption match parties and exchange events also help agencies target families who are ready to adopt older children. All agencies have access to “Families Like Yours,” customized videos created by COG used to attract and retain good foster parents. These videos highlight outstanding parents identified as Foster/Resource Parents of the Year, and are shared on traditional and social media to recruit other people like them.

Other traditional methods of recruitment, such as partnerships with faith-based organizations, displays at libraries, and exhibiting at community festivals continue to aid in the recruitment of resource families. Both Frederick County and Prince George’s County have recently launched a series of recruitment videos which have significantly increased interest in their foster care programs.

Fairfax County is working engage more Spanish-speaking families and has begun offering bilingual information sessions and training opportunities.

The internet has also become a widely-used tool for recruiting families for waiting children. Resources like [AdoptUsKids](#) which is a free national photo listing to match children in need of permanent homes with families who are approved to adopt from foster care are being used by agencies like Child and Family Services (CFSA). AdoptUsKids also sponsors the National Resource Center for Diligent Recruitment (NRCDR) which provides free recruitment resources for child welfare agencies with the goal of achieving improved outcomes, including permanency and placement stability for children and youth in foster care.

All of these recruitment strategies have helped area agencies sustain children in families during their time in foster care rather than congregate care homes. On December 31, 2016, 2549 children were in foster care and on average 78 percent of these children were placed in families<sup>7</sup> while 13 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. Most agencies attempt to reduce congregate care with a focus on reunification and/or a focus on permanency.

Agencies in the 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 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. Agencies are also utilizing more oversight and levels of review prior to authorizing congregate care placements.

**Table 3. Placement Type on December 31, 2016\***

Jurisdiction	Agency Foster Home	Therapeutic Foster Care (TFC)	Relative/Kinship	Congregate Care	Pre-Adoptive Home	Trial Home Visit	Independent Living	Run Away	Other*
District of Columbia	16%	44%	20%	7%	4%	0%	3%	2%	4%
Frederick County	17%	16%	15%	23%	23%	5%	1%	0%	0%
Montgomery County	22%	17%	28%	17%	1%	4%	4%	1%	7%
Prince George's County	13%	46%	11%	15%	0%	2%	4%	2%	7%
Charles County	33%	18%	10%	16%	10%	4%	7%	1%	1%
City of Alexandria	35%	26%	9%	10%	5%	6%	8%	0%	1%
Arlington County	33%	29%	16%	12%	6%	3%	1%	0%	0%
Fairfax County	17%	31%	6%	5%	18%	9%	9%	2%	3%
Loudoun County	20%	15%	8%	15%	18%	2%	20%	0%	2%
Prince William County	70%	0%	10%	5%	5%	4%	5%	1%	0%
Regional Average	28%	24%	13%	13%	9%	4%	6%	1%	3%

\*Data captured reflects a point in time.  
Source: COG

<sup>7</sup> The sum of Agency Foster Home, Therapeutic Foster Care, Relative/Kinship, Pre-adoptive, and trial home visit were used to calculate the number of youth placed in families.



Lani Pinkney is named Foster/Resource Parent of the Year for Prince George's County (COG)

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."

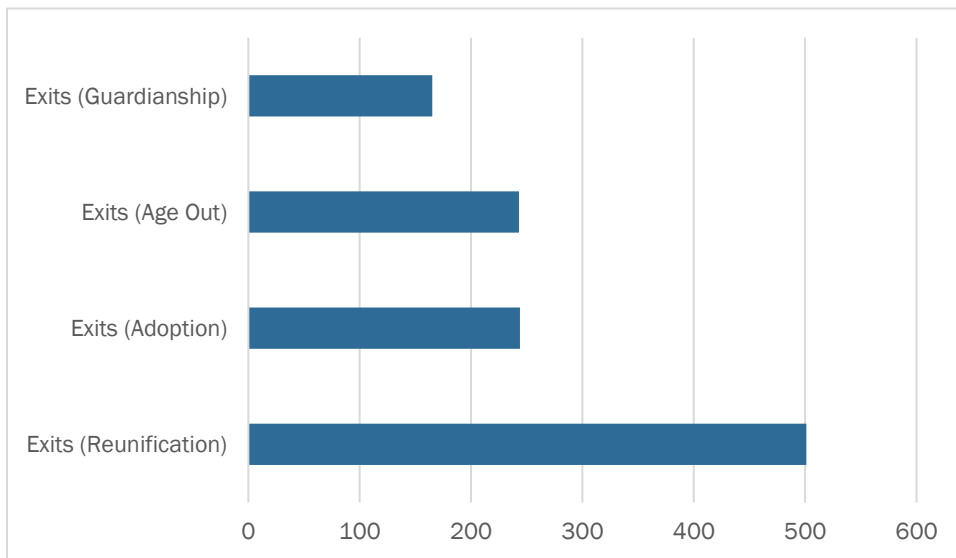
It is important to note that in all instances, retention of foster or adoptive parents is extremely important. All states across the country sponsor Foster Parent Month ceremonies in May, and Adoption Month ceremonies in November. However, year-round retention programs are critical to ensure the longevity of placements.

# TRANSITIONING YOUTH OUT OF FOSTER CARE

Just as many children aged-out of foster care (243) in metropolitan Washington than were adopted (244) in 2016. It is important to note that the vast majority of adoptions occurred by foster parents or people who had a former relationship with the youth. Identifying excellent foster/resource 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 of foster care without a permanent home.

Charles County utilizes Family Finder services to reach out to relatives to assess if they are potential lifelong supportive resources for foster care youth. Blended Perspective Meetings are held with the resources to facilitate a discussion about their considerations, options, and realistic roles. These types of programs are critical in identifying and securing lifelong supportive resources for youth who enter the foster care system.

**Figure 2. Exits from Foster Care, 2016**



Source: COG



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## Permanency Success Story – Frederick County, MD

Joe (10)\* and Sam (12)\* had experienced years of instability prior to their entry into foster care. Their most constant relationships were with each other, their grandparents, and their mother.

Upon entering foster care, their grandparents came forward to keep the children together and with family. Their grandparents worked hard to provide as normal a life as possible for the children and worked with the Department to facilitate the children's continued relationship with their mother while she was in a rehabilitation program. When their mother transitioned to a halfway house, the grandparents continued to provide support for the children as visitation expanded and plans were made for reunification. As the steps to reunification progressed, the children expressed regret at leaving the stability and nurturing they were receiving with their grandparents. When reunification plans came to an abrupt halt, the grandparents made an immediate decision to become permanent caregivers.

Joe and Sam were able to exit foster care together to continue their lives with their grandparents in the permanency and stability of relative guardianship. Their connection with their grandparents, extended family, and mother remained intact throughout their status as foster children, and after the Department left their lives.

\*Names have been changed to maintain confidentiality

## PREPARING YOUTH WHO WILL EXIT OUT OF FOSTER CARE



Yes Conference (COG)

Children exit foster care when they are reunified with their birth family, secure guardianship with a foster parent or relative<sup>8</sup>, 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 2016, 243 children aged out of the system. On December 31, 2016, 364 children had a non-permanency goal, another planned permanency living arrangement, or long-term foster care, meaning 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 metropolitan Washington comes 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 past 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 2017 COG report, *Homelessness in Metropolitan Washington*, counted 375 single Transition Age Youth and 1,064 persons in Transition Age Youth families (including children under the age of 18) on January 25, 2017. Of this total, 72 youth between the ages of 18 and 24 reported having a history of involvement with the foster care system.

Charles County has recently introduced an initiative called Launching Families, which is designed to support youth in out-of-home care, typically ages 18 to 21, in preparing for self-sufficiency by identifying a local resource to work with them. An individual or family may provide a living space, as well as participate in any life skill development needs of the youth.

Virginia has recently passed a policy called Fostering Futures, which is a program that maximizes the support to youth aging out of foster care to receive supports that include housing, monthly casework support and access to counsel. Additionally, it expands services to youth who are working, attending education programs, or who are medically unable to do either. This policy allows for re-entry for participants who have exited the program and wish to re-enter prior to their 21st birthday. It also expands services to cross-over youth who were in the custody of Department of Juvenile Justice.

<sup>8</sup> The State of Virginia does not subsidize guardianship; instead custody is transferred without financial support.

Jurisdictions around the region are focused on reversing the aging-out trend. COG is also focused on this challenge, 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 COG. The Y.E.S. program 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 has provided over \$10,000 dollars in scholarship funds to youth since its inception in 2015.

## CONCLUSION

Over the past eight years, the region has seen a 45 percent decline in the number of children entering the foster care system with a total of 2,549 children in the system on December 31, 2016. Local jurisdictions continue to focus significant efforts on prevention, which have been strengthened by community-based intervention services and increasing integrative services across agencies. These prevention services are responsible for diverting thousands of children from entering foster care and reducing the length of time spent in foster care for those children who are unable to remain in their homes.

One of the prominent challenges noted in this report is the overrepresentation of African American youth in the region's foster care system. The child welfare community has acknowledged the problem and is focusing on formulating and implementing solutions by evaluating systems and identifying where and how disproportionality is occurring. Older teens continue to be the largest population of youth in the foster care system. Recruiting families for teens, medically fragile youth, and youth with more intensive behavioral/emotional needs continues to be a challenge across the region. Increased opportunities, including increased funding, partnerships with television stations, radio opportunities, social media, corporations, and faith based organizations for recruitment provide a platform for agencies to reach a wider audience and to better educate the public about the realistic needs of children in the foster care system.

While reunification is the goal for all children who enter the foster care system, the reality is that many children are unable to reunite with birth family and additional permanency options must be explored. For many "hard-to-place" youth, exiting out of foster care without a permanent home is a reality that must be prepared for. While the vast majority of youth in care in 2016 exited out of the system through reunification, adoption or guardianship, 243 youth "aged-out." Maximizing support for this population of youth is critical to preventing negative outcomes such as homelessness, incarceration, and early pregnancy. Youth who remain connected to services and positive support systems are more likely to pursue higher education, obtain a college diploma, and enter the workforce with successful trajectories.

The safety and well-being of the region's children continues to remain a top priority for COG and its members. The COG child welfare committees are focusing on the following areas to address the following current critical needs:

- Child abuse/neglect prevention
- Improved integrative services
- Addressing disproportionality
- Increased recruitment and public awareness
- Permanency for "hard-to-place" youth
- Improving outcomes for youth exiting foster care



Evan and Bethany Raulerson are named Prince William County Foster/Resource Parents of the Year (COG)

This project is possible through the support of COG and its Child Welfare Data Group, including:

- Arlington County Department of Social Services - Tiffany Lee
- Charles County Department of Social Services - Kimberly Biss, Missy Mohler, Donna Staff, Dave Ward
- City of Alexandria Department of Community and Human Services, Center for Children and Families - Kristen Russo
- District of Columbia Child and Family Services - Gavin Kirkpatrick
- Fairfax County Department of Family Services - Emily Albert & Twana Johnson
- Frederick County Department of Social Services - Kim Smith
- Loudoun County Department of Family Services - Sheri Ball
- Montgomery County Department of Social Services - Michelle Forney
- Prince George's County Department of Social Services - Kai Boggess-de Bruin
- Prince William County Department of Social Services - Phyllis Jennings





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