

USING A STAGE-BASED APPROACH TO IMPLEMENT THE SOUL FAMILY FRAMEWORK

AUGUST 2026



THE ANNIE E. CASEY FOUNDATION

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This guide was developed for the Annie E. Casey Foundation by the Collaborative for Implementation Practice at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill's School of Social Work. The Foundation and the Collaborative thank the partners supporting implementation of the SOUL Family framework in Kansas and the District of Columbia who provided insights into their experiences and valuable feedback.

ABOUT THE ANNIE E. CASEY FOUNDATION

The Annie E. Casey Foundation is a private philanthropy that creates a brighter future for the nation's children and youth by developing solutions to strengthen families, build paths to economic opportunity and transform struggling communities into safer and healthier places to live, work and grow. For more information, visit the Foundation's website at www.aecf.org.

©2026 The Annie E. Casey Foundation, Baltimore, Maryland

Permission to copy, disseminate or otherwise use information from this report is granted with appropriate acknowledgment. For more information, visit www.aecf.org/copyright.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

OVERVIEW	1
What is the SOUL Family framework?.....	1
What are implementation stages?.....	2
Who are the audiences for this stage-based approach?.....	3
How can this stage-based approach be used to guide implementation?.....	3
 EXPLORATION	 4
About this stage.....	4
Milestones and outcomes.....	4
Key considerations.....	4
Activities.....	5
 PREPARATION	 10
About this stage.....	10
Milestones and outcomes.....	10
Key considerations.....	11
Activities.....	11
 INITIAL IMPLEMENTATION	 19
About this stage.....	19
Milestones and outcomes.....	19
Key considerations.....	19
Activities.....	20
 SUSTAINMENT	 24
About this stage.....	24
Milestones and outcomes.....	24
Key considerations.....	24
Activities.....	25
 ENDNOTES	 27

OVERVIEW

The SOUL Family framework is an innovative approach and new permanency pathway intended to help young people establish a primary legal relationship with one or more caregivers, maintain their legal relationship with family and kin connections, and prioritize access to critical benefits and services to ensure that they will thrive into adulthood and beyond. In jurisdictions currently implementing SOUL Family, local child welfare agencies are partnering with young people and community organizations to integrate the SOUL Family framework into their continuum of permanency options and to improve overall permanency practice.

This guide is designed to help states and jurisdictions implement the SOUL Family framework. It includes resources, key considerations, recommended activities and examples of materials and processes from current SOUL Family demonstration sites.

What is the SOUL Family framework?

Although the current legal permanency options of reunification, guardianship and adoption benefit many young people in foster care systems, more than 15,000 young people age out of foster care annually without the anchor of family relationships, resources and opportunities necessary to ensure that they thrive. Young people who age out of foster care too often [experience poor outcomes](#), national data show.

[The SOUL Family framework](#) expands permanency options that support connections for young people without severing legal ties with birth parents and siblings. The framework enables young people ages 16 and older to establish a new legal relationship with one or more primary adult caregivers, while maintaining existing family connections and accessing critical benefits and services to support them along the path to adulthood and throughout their lives. [Young people who experienced foster care developed the framework's guiding principles](#) with technical support from the Annie E. Casey Foundation's Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative®.

The SOUL Family framework is designed to:¹

- **Establish lifelong primary relationships** between a young person and one or more adults that carry the legal status of family relationships. Creating these relationships would not require the termination of legal relationships with a young person's biological family. Siblings could be included in a SOUL Family framework arrangement.
- **Maintain young people's eligibility to receive benefits and services that prepare them for adulthood** and ensure their stability, including financial benefits that support them as they attain education, employment and housing. In some states, young people in foster care lose access to some forms of assistance if they gain a permanent family. The SOUL Family framework ensures that these young people do not have to choose between permanent, caring, long-term relationships and the support needed to help them transition into adulthood.

- **Create a youth- and family-focused support system through the court and the local child welfare agency.** The SOUL Family framework provides young people and the caring adults in their lives with access to support they need to keep their relationships strong, work through problems as they arise, and obtain and manage resources and other benefits.
- **Include a youth- and family-centered permanency planning process** to ensure that young people understand the short- and long-term implications of all legal permanency options and get the emotional support they need to choose the permanency plan that is right for them.

More information about the SOUL Family framework is available on the [Casey Foundation's website](#).

What are implementation stages?

Implementation is not an event but a process that takes time even when systems are under pressure to demonstrate rapid change and improved outcomes for children and families. Complete implementation of any new initiative often takes three to five years. States and jurisdictions interested in the SOUL Family framework should anticipate needing two or more years to fully explore, prepare for and begin implementation. This process can be predicted and shaped using a stage-based approach. Implementation stages describe how work unfolds, provide a road map to help jurisdictions better understand implementation progress, and increase the likelihood of sustaining the SOUL Family framework and its related practices over time.

All implementation efforts proceed through discernable phases, starting with understanding needs and assets, exploring potential solutions and continuing through adoption and long-term use.^{2,3,4} Although implementation stages can be labeled differently, the concept is found across implementation frameworks and models.

The Annie E. Casey Foundation's approach to implementing the SOUL Family framework has four stages:⁵

- **Exploration:** assessing the needs and strengths of older youth in foster care; the fit of the framework with those needs; and the readiness for and feasibility of implementing the framework within the organizational, system and community contexts.
- **Preparation:** planning and organizing to establish local policies, processes, practices, resources, services and cross-system collaboration needed to begin implementing the SOUL Family framework.
- **Initial implementation:** delivering the new legal permanency option with young people in foster care, monitoring of early progress and adjusting when and where needed to improve implementation and ensure that delivery is happening as intended.
- **Sustainment:** integrating fully and maintaining the new legal permanency option in the local jurisdiction's practices and processes.



This stage-based approach draws upon best practices for equitable implementation and systems change efforts^{6,7} and integrates the SOUL Family framework's guiding principles, including its commitment at every stage to authentic youth engagement and shared decision-making with young leaders who have experienced foster care; its desired result of increasing the

number of older youth gaining families instead of aging out; and its goal that all populations, including any that are disproportionately represented in foster care, have access to the new permanency option.

For each of the four stages described above, this guide provides:

- an overview about the stage;
- expected milestones and outcomes to demonstrate progress;
- key considerations for including community, youth and system perspectives; and
- detailed descriptions of activities to complete.

Who are the audiences for this stage-based approach?

The public child welfare agency plays a critical role in implementation of the SOUL Family framework. As one of the first steps, it is important for state or local child welfare leaders with decision-making authority over child welfare practice, policy and legal strategy to understand what the SOUL Family framework is and what implementation entails. In addition, it is critical for young people who have experienced foster care to understand the framework and to decide collectively their interest in pursuing the framework for the jurisdiction.

Once child welfare leaders and young people decide to explore the possibility of implementing the SOUL Family framework in their state or jurisdiction, their next step is to form a team with diverse perspectives, roles and expertise, including young people who have experienced foster care holding meaningful leadership positions on the team. (See Page 6 for guidance on developing a team.) This team can use this stage-based approach as a road map for their work together.

Because the SOUL Family framework is a systems change effort, a jurisdiction's child welfare agency and implementation team will be the primary audiences for this guide. Many other partners who want to adapt and implement the SOUL Family framework, including youth-serving organizations and young leaders with foster care experience, will benefit from exploring the approaches described in this guide.

How can this stage-based approach be used to guide implementation of the SOUL Family framework?

The information in this guide can help child welfare leaders and other partners understand the activities and considerations involved in implementing the SOUL Family framework. It can also help the jurisdiction form its implementation team, a group focused on the SOUL Family framework, to:

- Plan for stage-based activities and assess whether current activities are appropriate for the stage;
- Identify what might help or hinder implementation of the framework; and
- Understand progress toward implementing the framework based on stage-based outcomes and milestones.

Each stage of implementation includes its own set of activities and milestones that help show progress. Progression through the implementation stages is rarely linear, with jurisdictions often moving forward and backward across stages and in more than one stage at a time. Although stages often overlap, implementation teams should make sufficient progress at each stage to be adequately prepared for the next stage. Teams can examine completed activities or products to assess progress between stages.

While improving long-term outcomes for youth in foster care is the goal, meaningful change takes time. With that in mind, the SOUL Family framework must be delivered consistently and with high quality. Identifying and focusing on successes and challenges along the way will help the jurisdiction's leaders learn what's working and where improvements may be needed.

EXPLORATION

About this stage

All implementation efforts begin with a period of exploration. It is a time of learning and the first step in deciding whether the SOUL Family framework is a good fit for the jurisdiction.

During this stage, a jurisdiction forms its implementation team to more deeply understand the needs and strengths of older youth in foster care and whether the SOUL Family framework is a fit for their current system, organization and community. This group is referred to as an “implementation team” because it is responsible for thoughtfully considering whether and how the SOUL Family framework could be implemented locally.

To do this exploration work well, it’s important to involve a wide range of voices and perspectives, including youth and young adults who have experienced foster care, families involved in the child welfare system, staff, leaders, community members and judicial and legal partners. Building strong, trusting relationships among these groups early helps set the foundation for lasting success. *Please note: In this guide, youth, young adults and families who have experienced or are involved in the child welfare system will be referred to as lived experts.*

Milestones and outcomes

- Formation of an implementation team with diverse perspectives, partners and lived experts to guide the work;
- Demonstrated mutual understanding across the implementation team of what the SOUL Family framework is, what it is not and how permanency options informed by it are distinct from other options;
- Demonstrated need for the SOUL Family framework based on multiple types and sources of data;
- Demonstrated appropriateness and relevance of the SOUL Family framework through assessment of fit, feasibility and alignment; and
- Demonstrated acceptability and buy-in from child welfare leaders, youth, young adults, families, child welfare staff and partners (e.g., providers, legal/judicial partners, community members).

Key considerations

Key considerations in every stage include the implementation team’s practices demonstrating authentic youth and community engagement and shared decision-making. In this stage, ask:

- Is the jurisdiction ready and does it have the capacity to include young people with lived experience and community members in decision-making and implementation activities?
- How will the team ensure a range of perspectives are involved in the process of determining whether or not to proceed with the SOUL Family framework?



- Are the demographics of the jurisdiction and its foster care population reflected in the implementation team's membership?
- What is the expected pace of implementation? How will it affect the team's ability to align actions and decisions with the SOUL Family framework values — authentic youth engagement, community collaboration and improving practice to achieve permanency for all young people — that may require longer timelines?
- How are the needs of older youth in and transitioning from foster care being defined? Is their knowledge or information valued in this process?
- What biases and beliefs may exist that may influence the development of the local SOUL Family framework, including beliefs about current permanency pathways, youth-driven engagement and finding a family?
- Who on the implementation team has final decision-making authority and how will disagreements be resolved?

Activities

The activities below are sequenced to help the jurisdiction's team understand how best to move through them. The initial exploration typically begins within the public child welfare agency. If agency leaders are committed to further exploration of the SOUL Family framework, they would engage local partners and young people and move through the remaining tasks in sequence to determine whether the SOUL Family framework is a good fit and feasible to implement. The number of exploration activities described below might feel overwhelming, but these are necessary before committing to proceeding with the SOUL Family framework.

What activities are needed to explore the feasibility of implementing the SOUL Family framework?

Determine public child welfare agency leaders' interest and commitment to explore the SOUL Family framework.

While the idea to explore the SOUL Family framework may come from the jurisdiction's young people, youth-serving nonprofits or others in the jurisdiction, the public child welfare agency plays a pivotal role in implementing the framework. It is an essential first step to ensure that its leaders are interested and can commit to exploring the SOUL Family framework as a new permanency approach and pathway for older youth in foster care. Agency leaders can learn more from the Casey Foundation about the SOUL Family framework and what implementing the framework requires. Leaders may consider, for example, whether the framework aligns with the needs of the jurisdiction's older youth in foster care as well as the agency's and community's values and priorities related to permanency practices for this population. Agency leaders and other partners must engage a sample of local young people who have child welfare experience to determine their interest and desire for SOUL Family, and willingness to help design a local SOUL Family framework model.

If child welfare leaders commit to exploring the SOUL Family framework, the next step is to form the implementation team to undertake the remaining exploration activities.

Develop an implementation team to explore whether the SOUL Family framework is a good fit for the jurisdiction.

Implementation teams are the backbone of the implementation process. An implementation team is a group of partners responsible for actively planning and making decisions about an implementation effort, such as whether or not to proceed with the effort. If the jurisdiction commits to developing a new permanency option informed by the SOUL Family framework, this team will continue to lead the effort from the exploration stage through delivery and evaluation.

For the SOUL Family framework, state or local child welfare leaders most often serve as the initial conveners of the implementation team. They identify roles, partners and perspectives to inform and guide the exploration process. It is possible that another partner could convene the team, with support and participation from child welfare leaders.

Identify team members: The team should include leaders and staff from the public child welfare agency, young adults with lived expertise, biological and resource families, community partners and advocates, legal and judicial partners and individuals with expertise in child welfare data and policymaking. If a group or team already exists with some of these roles, consider whether it can support implementation and whether additional members need to be added. Typically, in the exploration stage, there is one implementation team who leads exploration activities. In future stages, additional work groups or task teams may form to conduct discrete stage-based activities.

Engage individuals with lived expertise: Authentically engaging lived experts, particularly young adults who are in or who have exited from foster care, is central to the SOUL Family framework. Authentic engagement requires explicit time, intention and resources to ensure that the lived experts have meaningful leadership roles and are full participants in shared decision-making. Some best practices and considerations to include:

- Identify a local youth engagement professional to support engagement of lived experts and codesign involving lived experts and other partners.
- Prepare system and community partners/professionals serving on the implementation team with skills for collaborating with young people and families who have lived experience.
- Recognize the full spectrum of engagement and leadership opportunities available for lived experts (e.g., informing them, consulting with them, involving them, collaborating with them). Determine the appropriate level of engagement based on specific tasks or decisions and ensure transparency in how they will engage.
- Design meeting activities and dedicate time to facilitate relationship-building among team members.
- Communicate about the opportunities for lived experts to partner on the implementation in different ways that ensure authentic youth engagement (e.g., written documents, open calls, one-on-one conversations).
- Engage multiple lived experts with diverse identities and perspectives.
- Position lived experts as equal team members through shared decision-making, codesign and co-leadership, as appropriate.
- Explore and create opportunities for different modes of engagement (e.g., weekend meetings, virtual participation).
- Ensure that lived experts have opportunities to adapt their level of involvement based on their capacity, availability and well-being.

Additional guidance on engaging young people with lived expertise can be found in [A Framework for Effectively Partnering with Young People](#).

Establish and document shared values and clear expectations for ways of working together, which can be used to guide team actions and decision-making.

A [team charter](#) should be used to define and document the roles and responsibilities of the team and its members, describe how communication will happen among team members and partners and specify decision-making processes and who has final decision-making authority.

As part of early team formation and team charter development, members should co-create a set of shared values and beliefs to guide their work together. All actions taken and decisions made by the team should align with the shared values. Individual team members will need to reflect on their beliefs and whether those beliefs are aligned with the SOUL Family framework. For example, are team members willing to work alongside and be led by youth and young adults with lived expertise? Will they value and respect each other's perspectives and experiences?

Prepare team members to understand and talk about the SOUL Family framework and its guiding principles.

Team members, like child welfare leaders, need to understand what the SOUL Family framework is. Moreover, they need to be able to clearly and confidently communicate with audiences outside the team, describe the framework, say why it is needed and tell how permanency pathways created by applying the framework are distinct from other permanency pathways, such as subsidized guardianship. The SOUL Family Framework Communications Tool Kit is a helpful resource for teams and can be customized by the jurisdiction and for specific audiences; it is available in The Exchange, the online community of the Foundation's Jim Casey Initiative, and from the implementation team's Casey Foundation programmatic liaisons. Additional support is available from the Casey Foundation to help team members understand the framework and practice messaging.

The youth engagement professional's role

Youth engagement professionals are trusted liaisons and partnership builders who ensure that lived experts can participate fully and meaningfully with other implementation partners. Youth engagement professionals help to facilitate and nurture the professional relationships. They bring expertise in engagement, shared decision-making and meeting design. They would be responsible for:

- preparing lived experts before meetings and debriefing with them after, providing both technical and emotional support;
- removing barriers to participation by coordinating timely compensation and support for transportation, childcare, professional attire, internet or computer access, travel and other related expenses so lived experts can participate fully;
- helping to build the capacity of systems professionals and implementation partners to share decision-making with lived experts using codesign practices and respectful communication (e.g., by modeling authentic engagement, helping to structure codesign work and meeting agendas, promoting relationship-building, supporting use of plain language); and
- structuring collaborative opportunities that allow lived experts and implementation partners to build professional relationships and prepare for teamwork (e.g., through shared meals, events and outings).

Potential resources: The Foundation's [Elevating Youth Engagement curriculum](#) teaches fundamentals of youth-adult partnership, with learning modules for the young people, the adult partners and teams.

Communicate with and begin to build relationships throughout the jurisdiction.

Engage with additional child welfare leaders and staff, individuals with lived experience, legal and judicial partners, community providers and partners, and other systems leaders to ascertain their interest and support for the SOUL Family framework.

The team may host informational sessions and invite a range of partners and perspectives to introduce the SOUL Family framework, answer questions, gauge interest and listen to any concerns raised. It is particularly important to create opportunities to connect with young people who are currently or were formerly in foster care in the jurisdiction early in this process to understand their perception of the needs of older youth in care, introduce the SOUL Family framework and understand its alignment with perceived needs.

This activity may also include conducting an environmental scan of partners who would need to work collaboratively to implement the SOUL Family framework (e.g., youth and young adults who may potentially pursue the SOUL Family framework arrangement, child welfare staff supporting youth in establishing permanency goals, legal and judicial partners with influence over permanency planning, and community partners who might offer services and resources important to maintaining permanency through the SOUL Family framework).

The exploration stage is also an important time to pay attention to and seek to understand the values and beliefs that partners such as frontline staff, judges and families have about the system, youth and families involved in the system, race, permanency pathways and youth-driven planning.

Sample questions to define need and eligibility:

- What do the data tell the team about trends in case plan goals, exit patterns, number of placements, or lengths of stay for older youth in foster care?
- How many young people have a case plan of “Another Planned Permanent Living Arrangement (APPLA)”?
- Do young people in the jurisdiction have access to extended foster care and related support services beyond age 18?
- What do outcomes look like for older youth who have exited foster care, including those who have aged out? Do the older youth have supportive connections with adults?
- At what age would young people be eligible to create a SOUL Family arrangement?

Potential resource: Compare Existing Permanency Options to the SOUL Family Framework. This comparison chart is available in The Exchange.

Assess the need for and fit of the SOUL Family framework in the jurisdiction and the feasibility of implementing it.

The implementation team will use the tool **Assessing Readiness to Implement SOUL Family: Reflection Questions** to reflect on a set of questions about key considerations related to the jurisdiction’s need for the SOUL Family framework.

Need for the SOUL Family framework: The team will review federal and state administrative data, surveys, interviews, focus groups and other data and consider whether the jurisdiction has a population of older youth in foster care who would benefit from the SOUL Family framework as an additional permanency option, and whether that population is large enough to warrant development of the new option. Data should be disaggregated (e.g., by race, age and placement type) to understand which youth are least likely to exit to other forms of permanency and may benefit from a new legal permanency option based on the SOUL Family framework.

Fit within the context: Based on their engagement with a range of potential partners, the team needs to consider whether the SOUL Family framework aligns with the priorities, values and beliefs of those partners. The team should also consider fit with other initiatives, such as extended foster care, and current permanency practices. This exploration should include an audit or analysis of the existing permanency continuum, trainings, frameworks and policies in the jurisdiction as well as process mapping of current permanency practice. It is important to review policies and benefits for current permanency options to understand how the SOUL Family framework would fit in and whether it is needed.

Capacity to implement: The implementation team also must consider the feasibility of implementing a permanency option that is consistent with the SOUL Family framework. This consideration should include an assessment of funding, staffing, resources, partnerships and political will needed to establish a new legal permanency option and implement it with youth in foster care. Beginning to understand potential costs and available funding, the policymaking landscape, and support from key child welfare leaders and partners is critical at this stage.

The cost of implementing the SOUL Family framework

The cost of implementing the SOUL Family framework will be different in every jurisdiction, depending on the services and benefits currently funded. However, some factors to consider when estimating potential costs include:

- **Eligibility:** What population of youth will be eligible to achieve permanency through the SOUL Family framework?
- **Case management and case review services:** How will SOUL families and youth be supported? What post-permanency and aftercare support and services will be available and for how long? What case review or case oversight processes will be needed?
- **Benefits package:** What benefits will be available to SOUL families (such as subsidies, financial aid for postsecondary education, parenting support services, housing resources, healthcare and youth transition services)?
- **Administrative implementation costs:** What changes will be needed for staffing, training or data systems?

Engage with SOUL Family framework technical assistance providers to understand available external support and learn more about implementation efforts in current sites.

The team should engage in conversations with the Casey Foundation to understand what external resources and support may be available for youth engagement, permanency practices, fiscal analysis and planning, implementation and evaluation. It may also be helpful to meet with peers in other jurisdictions that are implementing the SOUL Family framework to learn more about their experience.

Decide whether to proceed with implementation of the SOUL Family framework.

After assessing the jurisdiction's need, fit and capacity, the team should summarize their findings and recommendations, including a recommendation of whether to proceed with implementation of the SOUL Family framework.

The team may consider whether there is demonstrated commitment from senior child welfare agency leaders; interest and demonstrated need among older youth in foster care; and support from legal, court and community partners.

Share a summary of findings and recommendations with child welfare agency leaders, lived experts and other partners to ensure transparency in decision-making. Ultimately, child welfare agency leaders will decide whether to proceed with implementation.

PREPARATION

About this stage

During the preparation stage, the implementation team and partners plan and develop statutory, regulatory and policy recommendations and the administrative resources, processes and supportive services needed to implement the SOUL Family framework.



The implementation team may form time-limited, task-specific workgroups to manage discrete activities. For example, the Kansas demonstration site formed a workgroup to study state laws governing permanency and propose amendments needed to establish a legal permanency option from the SOUL Family framework. Also, in the District of Columbia and in Kansas, a communications workgroup formed to produce public education materials and to manage media relations related to local SOUL Family efforts. Another common activity is assessing and developing the agency's operational infrastructure and interagency relationships needed to deliver the framework. This includes building staff and partners' skills to carry out new practices and processes as well as developing organizational data systems, policies and processes that enable new practices.

During this stage, the team fosters strong communication and feedback loops so that information and input flows to and from partners. These loops include team members, leaders and staff, community and legal partners, and youth and families. The team meets regularly and uses data (e.g., administrative child welfare data and qualitative input gathered through focus groups with staff and partners) to guide planning. This stage is also when the team decides what information to collect and how it will be used to guide ongoing learning and improvement.

Jurisdictions will prepare for a multiyear process to ensure that all needed infrastructure, policies and resources are in place. The length of the preparation stage will depend on variables that include the jurisdiction's operational readiness, budget approvals and the timing and outcome of any policy change decisions deemed necessary to establish a new legal permanency option.

Milestones and outcomes

- Frequent and consistent two-way communication is taking place among implementation team members and partners.
- Implementation team maintains momentum to complete statutory, policymaking and organizational tasks.
- The jurisdiction's new legal permanency option is established.
- Resources are in place to build the capacity of staff and partners to use new SOUL Family framework practices (e.g., training, coaching, supervision).
- Resources, support and processes are in place to enable staff to use new SOUL Family framework practices (e.g., data systems, communication resources, templates).

- Policies, procedures and budgets are in place to support implementation of the new permanency option.
- Staff have access to data and opportunities to use them to support planning and improvement.

Key considerations

Key considerations during the preparation stage include the implementation team's practices demonstrating authentic youth and community engagement and shared decision-making. In this stage, ask:

- Are lived experts positioned at the center of decision making?
- What influence do various partners have on implementation?
- What knowledge — and whose knowledge — may be needed to effectively design a local version of the SOUL Family framework to meet the unique needs of the state's or jurisdiction's young people?
- How will the jurisdiction identify, monitor and address any barriers to access to a permanency pathway that is consistent with the SOUL Family framework, especially for those least likely to achieve permanency?
- How will legislative and budgetary timelines affect the team's ability to gather, share and use input from a diverse range of partners?
- How will the team identify and address any existing biases and beliefs that could affect implementation of the SOUL Family framework, including views about permanency pathways, youth-driven engagement and race? What is needed to establish a shared set of values and beliefs?

Activities

During this stage, the implementation team will focus on planning and preparation. It's important to revisit membership and strengthen feedback loops and data collection processes that are critical to the planning process.

Convene implementation teams and workgroups regularly to plan and prepare for implementation.

Refine teaming structures: Once a decision is made to proceed with implementation of the SOUL Family framework, it's important to:

1. develop an implementation teaming structure to reflect the priorities that emerged during the exploration stage; and
2. revisit membership to maintain a diversity of perspectives and ensure team members have influence over needed actions.

During the preparation stage, a more robust teaming structure may be needed to accomplish all of the relevant tasks. New team members or partners will be enlisted, and task-specific subgroups or secondary teams (which report back to the primary implementation team) can be formed to focus on specific aspects of infrastructure necessary to put in place a local version of the SOUL Family framework. For example, Kansas and the District of Columbia formed workgroups or subcommittees that were responsible for specific aspects of preparation and planning, such as policy planning, data assessment and design of local processes and practices.

Ideally, implementation teams and subgroups are no larger than six to 10 members, which allows them to be effective and nimble. Co-leads should be designated for each secondary team or subgroup, and leads should have authority or clear, direct access to decision makers to ensure timely decision making and an ability to move their particular tasks forward. Lived experts may be invited to serve as co-leads, if appropriate and with adequate support. Leaders and staff working within agencies and systems may benefit from intentional capacity development on how best to engage lived experts, focused on shared decision-making and practices that support meaningful engagement of lived experts.

As the teaming structure grows, not everyone serving on a subgroup can feasibly participate as a member of the primary implementation team. Including subgroup leads as core implementation team members can allow them to serve as a natural connection point between the team and subgroup.

Engage lived experts in leadership and codesign: As the teaming structure grows, additional lived experts should be included in leadership and membership roles. Considerations for engaging lived experts during the exploration stage remain true during the preparation stage: They should reflect a diversity of identities and experiences (e.g., experience in the system as youth or parent, varying experience exiting foster care to permanency outcomes). They should be compensated equitably for their contributions and understand the range of ways in which they can and may be engaged. Lived experts should also continue to have access to a dedicated youth engagement professional to offer support, help prepare for meetings and debrief with them after meetings. The youth engagement professional can continue to help lived experts and team partners foster relationships and build trust. The youth engagement professional can also continue to play an important role in preparing new agency and system professionals who enter the work to engage authentically with lived experts.

Dedicated staffing to support the preparation stage

Implementation of the SOUL Family framework requires significant preparation and planning. Therefore, it is important to identify a local **project lead** to help advance implementation. The lead should have dedicated time, direct or delegated authority, and skills to coordinate and advance the implementation effort. Ideally, this individual would work with the child welfare agency, as much of the preparation must occur within the agency, and in their role would have purview over the local development of the SOUL Family framework. The lead could, for example, be a senior-level leader or director. The lead would be supported by the implementation team as described above and may either serve as a co-lead of the team or designate separate co-leads to facilitate the team. The project lead and team will also benefit from the support of a day-to-day **project manager** (who sits on the team) with dedicated time and effort. The lead, with support from a project manager and the team, will:

- attend team and subgroup meetings and support facilitation, as needed;
- synthesize and document questions, decisions and action items identified in meetings;
- support planning and document key tasks or action items in an implementation plan;
- track progress, ensure tasks are completed on time and promote alignment;
- monitor resources allocated to implementation and secure additional resources as needed;
- communicate with and across team and subgroup leads, team members and partners; and
- problem-solve and identify and remove barriers at an organizational level.

When filling project lead and project manager roles, consider individuals who:

- have deep knowledge of the organizational context and key partners;
- can build strong relationships with and among partners;
- support authentic youth engagement;
- communicate clearly and effectively;
- remain organized with attention to detail;
- can adapt as needed; and
- motivate team members.

Additionally, as lived experts step into leadership roles and preparation efforts, they should receive support to strengthen their skills in areas such as:

- meeting facilitation and support (developing agendas, taking notes);
- strategic sharing, if they will be discussing their personal foster care experiences in public forums;
- youth advocacy (how to educate the public and policymakers, public speaking skills, understanding how child welfare policies are changed);
- engaging with news media; and
- consulting practices (setting billable rates, submitting invoices, managing tax implications).

Revisit team charters: Team charters remain an important resource for providing clarity on roles and responsibilities; creating shared expectations about collaboration, youth engagement practices and team communication; and ensuring transparency on how decisions will be made and who maintains final decision-making authority. Team charters, and other documents or summaries developed by teams, can be helpful resources for onboarding new team members and expanding subgroups during the preparation stage. It's critical for team members to be able to show up consistently to advance the work, and team charters can describe resources and support available to help them do so.

To be successful throughout the preparation stage, the implementation team and subgroups need to:

Develop strong feedback loops to strengthen relationships and ensure ongoing two-way communication.

Strong communication and feedback loops are necessary for building relationships and supporting ongoing collaboration and codesign among implementation team members, across subgroups and among the team and additional partners who will be involved in implementing the SOUL Family framework. The team:

- can continue to explore and understand the values and beliefs held by those connected to implementation and to promote shared values and understanding of the benefits of the SOUL Family framework as an additional permanency option;
- will need to allow time to repair trust — acknowledging the trauma and impact systems can cause, providing space for lived expert members to share their experiences openly, and allowing time for agency leaders to build trust with youth in foster care, families, caregivers and community members;
- should consider who is best positioned to lead the team's communication and feedback loops. For legal or judicial partners, this may be a team member who is their trusted peer or colleague. Non-traditional community partners, faith communities and lived experts who have been well prepared to talk about the SOUL Family framework may be helpful messengers for youth, families and community members who may never fully trust the child welfare agency or system;
- must engage skeptics of the SOUL Family framework with respect and curiosity and educate internal and external audiences with reliable information and data; and
- should prepare to continually monitor external partner awareness, understanding and connection to the framework through feedback loops to continue to create a shared understanding and use of the framework.

Potential resources: The SOUL Family Framework Communications Tool Kit contains tips and resources for site team messengers who will be educating internal and external audiences about the guiding principles of the SOUL Family framework. It is available in The Exchange. The Foundation's [Elevating Youth Engagement](#) curriculum contains step-by-step training for effective youth-adult partnership.

Gather information, data and feedback to inform design of and planning for the SOUL Family framework.

Teams should regularly obtain and use data, information and input from partners to guide implementation planning. For example, this can include administrative data to define eligibility criteria or engage in fiscal analysis. It should also include qualitative information and input obtained through feedback loops and focus groups with youth, biological parents, foster parents, caregivers, lawyers, judges, guardians ad litem and other partners. The team will need to decide how to document, store and share this information with members and partners.

Identify and secure any needed technical assistance, consultation or external support.

The team may want or need to secure external consultants or experts to effectively carry out the activities of the preparation stage. For example, the team may need to collaborate with local organizations with policy expertise to develop an implementation strategy; with youth engagement specialists to support lived experts; with legal experts to guide development of policy recommendations and draft legislation, and serve as liaisons to legal and judicial partners; consultants versed in fiscal analysis to develop cost estimates; and experts who can identify and address barriers to access to ensure that youth least likely to achieve permanency can choose and benefit from the new permanency option. Some external expert assistance may be time-limited, and some may be needed throughout the planning. Determine a clear approach to engaging external support within the implementation team.

Strong feedback loops and regular use of data by teams are critical to guiding two key aspects of preparation needed to implement the jurisdiction's version of the SOUL Family framework:

1. recommending changes to statutes, administrative regulations and policies; and
2. planning for new agency and system-level infrastructure.

Implementing the SOUL Family framework may require statutory, regulatory and policy changes to establish the new legal permanency option and provide specific benefits to the young people. Also, shifts in permanency practice will be needed to ensure that the youth in foster care who are least likely to achieve permanency by other methods are able to do so through a SOUL family.

Although planning for these shifts should happen simultaneously, it may help jurisdictions to sequence the related planning and activities, which are described in the next section.

Establish a new legal permanency option consistent with the SOUL Family framework.

Policymakers may need to revise or create statutes to authorize and establish a new legal permanency option that is consistent with the framework. Educating the various partners involved in policy change takes time and requires codesign and engagement. The team's legal and policy partners can provide valuable perspective on the policy landscape and help identify policymakers who may serve as champions along the way. Lived experts will have critical roles in designing the jurisdiction's policy proposals and recommendations.

Turning policy recommendations into draft legislation requires specific legal expertise. It is critical to include individuals with policymaking expertise on the implementation team and as co-leaders of the subgroup codesigning the jurisdiction's policy proposals and recommendations.

An expert can:

- provide education and orientation to staff, lived experts and partners on the differences between legislation, regulation, policy and guidance; and the legislative process (e.g., how bills are introduced, which state committees and departments must review them, what budgetary details must be collected and how statutes are enacted in the jurisdiction);
- explain relevant considerations and issues related to the SOUL Family framework in plain language (e.g., through visuals or questionnaires by key topic areas) to ensure that all partners can contribute specific and meaningful input;
- help team members and partners understand risks and trade-offs when determining what to recommend for a jurisdiction's policy (e.g., pertaining to benefits that eligible youth may receive, such as tuition waivers and Medicaid eligibility);
- translate the vision for the jurisdiction's permanency option proposal into appropriate legal language;
- manage expectations about legislative processes and realities in the jurisdiction's policymaking environment that may affect the proposal's progress; and
- provide updates and previews throughout the process.

Based on the experiences of the Kansas and District of Columbia demonstration sites, a local organization with policymaking experience and the child welfare agency's policy director may be needed to help lead this work, and to advise the site team on how they can educate the public and policymakers while complying with any federal and state lobbying restrictions for their organizations.

Define core practices and related roles for the agency staff and other key people who will deliver the jurisdiction's new legal permanency option.

Implementation teams will need to codesign specific local practices associated with the SOUL Family framework's guiding principles for eligible youth in foster care. Through an exercise called process mapping, teams can map a young person's experience from the time they come to the attention of the child welfare system to case closure and approval by the family court, and determine what practice changes are needed to ensure that the legal permanency option is accessible as a permanency pathway for all eligible youth. Young people currently in foster care and those who have left the system provide crucial voices in this design work.

The teams will also need to plan for agency staff needed to carry out new practices associated with the permanency option. New roles may include peer coaches or agency liaisons. It will be important to create educational resources and designate a team or individual who can answer questions that may arise among staff, partners and families.

Estimate costs, identify funding sources and ensure that adequate funding will be allocated to implement the new permanency option.

A fiscal analysis helps jurisdictions understand potential costs, savings and revenue sources. Fiscal analysis is necessary for budget planning and will be submitted with policy recommendations reviewed by policymakers and key partners. A fiscal analysis requires identification of basic assumptions and agreement regarding the design of the SOUL Family framework in the jurisdiction. Engaging an external consultant to lead the fiscal analysis allows an individual or organization with relevant expertise to raise key considerations while remaining neutral as a facilitator.

Develop or update existing administrative policies, operations, procedures and systems to put the SOUL Family framework into practice.

Jurisdictions will need to create clear, detailed policies and procedures for their SOUL Family framework practices. The team should review existing policies and identify needed revisions, as well as procedural steps, forms, templates and systems, such as benefit payment systems. For example, this work could focus on:

- procedures for youth-led permanency planning;
- amendments to benefits-related policies and systems for SOUL families;
- development of SOUL Family agreement requirements and templates;
- policies or procedures related to screening potential caregivers to meet child safety standards, home assessment and/or licensure for SOUL families;
- defining conditions for and an approach to case closure following a SOUL Family permanency court order; and
- providing mediation for a young person if issues arise with their SOUL family.

Also, forms and templates may need to be created or revised within the family court system.

Considerations for teams engaged in fiscal analysis

- Population and number of youth in foster care who would be eligible for the SOUL Family legal permanency option
- Assumptions about how many eligible young people would choose to create a SOUL family
- Staffing needs based on the proposed case management and oversight approach
- Support services and benefits available to young people and their SOUL families
- Additional costs associated with implementation, such as SOUL Family framework-specific staff positions, training and updates to data or payment systems
- What existing funding is currently being used to support older youth who age out of care
- Whether the benefits structures of other permanency pathways (adoption and guardianship, for example) need to be equalized with those proposed for the SOUL Family option, to avoid creating competition or over-incentivizing the SOUL Family framework
- How the agency will ensure access to healthcare for youth who exit foster care to a SOUL family (e.g., are changes to Medicaid code needed and will there be reciprocity with other states)

Build staff and partner capacity to deliver the new permanency option with youth in foster care.

The child welfare workforce, providers and community partners will need training and ongoing support to understand the SOUL Family framework's guiding principles, new processes and practices, and their roles in implementing them.

Training, supervision and coaching for staff and partners should be codesigned by the team, including child welfare leaders and staff, lived experts and a range of partners. These capacity-building efforts should be tailored for specific audiences, and may use techniques including role-playing, mock cases and scenario walk-throughs. All capacity-building efforts should be refined to reflect the specific needs, challenges and questions of staff and partners (e.g., lawyers, judges, guardians ad litem).

Child welfare workforce: Child welfare staff (e.g., permanency teams, independent living support teams, resource family or kinship teams, family-finding teams) will need access to continuing training on the SOUL Family framework's guiding principles and core practices as they implement the new legal permanency option.

Some aspects of training related to processes and protocols (e.g., benefits structures, administrative policies, forms) will depend on details addressed in the jurisdiction's statutes and regulations, when enacted. However, training related to shifts in permanency practice more broadly can be designed and delivered earlier. These training courses should include clear case examples and opportunities to try out new skills and strengthen existing skills, such as prioritizing youth voice in permanency planning; maintaining ongoing connections to family, friends and other individuals with whom the youth has supportive relationships; and conducting family-finding efforts.

Training and capacity building are necessary to build the confidence and competence of staff to carry out the new practices and to ensure that they can accurately and effectively communicate with youth and the families and individuals who may become caregivers. Site team leaders should identify a clear point of contact who can answer SOUL Family framework questions that staff cannot answer. This could occur through a centralized email with staff assigned to monitor and field questions or a dedicated staff position. Supervisors or dedicated SOUL Family framework liaisons can also provide critical on-the-job training and work alongside case managers and other workers as they begin to introduce and explore the jurisdiction's potential new permanency pathway.

External partners: Several external partners, including lawyers, judges, guardians ad litem and service providers, play key roles in supporting the delivery of a new legal permanency option. They also will require education, training and ongoing support. Training for legal and judicial partners must be developed and delivered to promote a shared understanding of the local SOUL Family framework's legal provisions and guiding principles. Legal and judicial partners will also benefit from having a trusted liaison with legal expertise to provide ongoing support, answer questions and offer guidance if barriers to implementing a local SOUL Family framework arise.

Supplemental resources: To support shared understanding and capacity-building efforts, jurisdictions can develop tailored informational resources for the child welfare workforce and additional partners. The materials should introduce the SOUL Family framework and provide clear guidance on roles, regulations, policies and procedures. These resources might also include targeted messaging for older youth in foster care, describing the new permanency option and its benefits, the pathway to create a SOUL family and specific roles for SOUL family members, eligibility for support services or financial assistance, and who to contact for additional support.

Potential resources: Site teams may request examples of resources created by other jurisdictions in the SOUL Family Network.

Develop or update child welfare agency and court data systems and processes to collect and manage useful and timely SOUL Family data that can be used to guide improvements as the permanency option is implemented.

As part of the preparation stage, the team will need to identify what data will be used to measure implementation progress and outcomes.

The team will also need to establish infrastructures and processes necessary for data collection, making sense of data, continuous quality improvement and evaluation. For state and local data collection, this might include updating existing data systems used to manage foster care processes, such as the Statewide Automated Child Welfare Information System (SACWIS) or court data systems, with new data entry fields or data entry options. Some updates may require consultation with the Administration for Children and Families, to ensure alignment with federal reporting requirements. New tracking tools or methods may be developed to document specific cases where SOUL Family has been identified as an older youth's permanency goal. The team should ensure that collected data can be disaggregated to monitor access to and outcomes of the new legal permanency option for specific subpopulations of youth in care. (For example, are the youth least likely to achieve permanency by other pathways able to access SOUL Family as a goal? Are there disparities in who exits foster care to a SOUL family and the outcomes for these youth?)

In addition to determining what information to collect, jurisdictions and teams must decide how and when the information will be used by establishing data review and improvement planning routines. The team should consider how information will become part of existing communication loops and whether they will need new feedback loops.

Jurisdictions should collect the following quantitative and qualitative data:

- family-finding efforts, and the number of contacts with a young person's preferred and potential caregivers, family members and trusted adults;
- length of time it takes to identify a potential SOUL family with a young person;
- demographics of young people with a SOUL Family permanency goal;
- number and geographic distribution (such as rural versus urban) of young people who receive court approval to have a SOUL family;
- engagement of young people in their permanency planning;
- experiences of young people and their potential caregivers with the permanency planning process; and
- outcomes for youth approved to have a SOUL family (including connection to supportive adults, stable housing, education and employment).

INITIAL IMPLEMENTATION

About this stage

The initial implementation stage includes the delivery of the jurisdiction's new legal permanency option for youth in foster care. During this stage, the implementation team will monitor early progress and make adjustments to improve practice and ensure that young people know about, are able to choose and are receiving court approvals for the new legal permanency option.



For the implementation team, the initial implementation stage is a time of learning, with attention to using data and information for continuous improvement. The initial implementation stage can be a challenge, as staff and others try new ways of working while still building skills and knowledge about the guiding principles of the SOUL Family framework and the jurisdiction's new legal permanency option. There will likely be variability in the quality of how the legal permanency option is being delivered. Case managers, attorneys, judges, guardians ad litem and other partners supporting delivery should work closely with the implementation team to engage in continuous learning, and identify additional support and resources that may be needed and plan for improvements. To increase the likelihood of sustaining the legal permanency option produced by implementing the SOUL Family framework, support will be needed at the practice, organization and system levels.

Although a jurisdiction ideally moves through all preparation stage activities before making the new legal permanency option available to young people, it is not uncommon for the preparation and initial implementation stages to overlap. During initial implementation, the team may still be developing resources and support that staff will need or may be using data to refine the resources and support that were originally created. Team members may feel like they are “building the plane while flying it.” This is completely normal.

Milestones and outcomes

- Staff and partners are able to explain and deliver the new legal permanency option.
- Youth in foster care achieve permanency through the new legal permanency option.
- The new legal permanency option reaches the intended population of older youth in foster care.
- Data are used regularly to identify and understand barriers and successes, inform decision-making and improve implementation.
- The team has evidence that some short-term and intermediate outcomes are being achieved.

Key considerations

Key considerations in this stage relate to young people's access to the new permanency option and the team's strategies to reach all eligible young people. In this stage, ask:

- Who is receiving court approvals and benefitting from the new legal permanency option, and who is not?

- What outreach and youth engagement strategies may be needed to ensure that all eligible youth in care, especially those least likely to achieve permanency through adoption, guardianship or other options, have access to the new legal permanency option as a potential permanency pathway? What data are the implementation team collecting and using to improve implementation and understand outcomes? Whose goals do the data serve?

Activities

Child welfare staff begin to implement the SOUL Family framework as a permanency goal for eligible and interested youth in foster care.

Child welfare staff engage eligible youth in foster care in conversations about and plan for SOUL families as a permanency goal. The specific practices that child welfare staff and partners engage in will be influenced by the site team's design of the new legal permanency option and will be grounded in the SOUL Family framework's guiding principles.

The implementation team will need to develop a plan to launch its new legal permanency option. When possible, start small, with a limited population, geographic area or segment of the jurisdiction's young people and their permanency staff. This would allow the jurisdiction to learn quickly, test assumptions and refine processes and staff support in real time. These early learning cycles can inform rapid improvements before offering the permanency option to all eligible youth in care. Some jurisdictions may not be able to phase in the new legal permanency option: Policymakers may have dictated a start date.

Convene regular implementation team meetings to facilitate continuous learning and improvement.

A dedicated implementation team should continue to meet regularly (e.g., monthly) to promote learning and to guide improvements.

Revisit teaming structures and membership:

As staff and partners begin to deliver the new legal permanency option, revisit the site's teaming structures and membership. The team should continue to reflect a diversity of perspectives and partners, but membership may shift as the team's work changes. A different mix of experts may be needed. For example, as delivery begins, the team

Examples of practices that child welfare staff and partners may engage in:

- authentically engaging and centering young people during their permanency planning;
- advising young people about all permanency options and the implications for each, in age-appropriate ways;
- actively engaging young people's biological family and potential caregivers — the trusted adults they identify as their close network of support — during the permanency planning process;
- engaging in a family-finding approach that is intentional and continuous, to actively locate and engage relatives and trusted adults identified by the young person as possible caregivers;
- supporting young people to maintain relationships with biological family and other trusted adults throughout their time in foster care;
- assessing the safety and appropriateness of potential primary caregivers who may become a young person's SOUL family, including relatives and trusted adults who previously may have been ruled ineligible;
- connecting young people and their caring adults to available services, as needed;
- ensuring that adults approved to be caregivers and family members understand their roles, responsibilities and rights; and
- collaborating with the court to evaluate and approve permanency agreements and ensure that benefits and resources are continued or provided.

may want to include more direct practice staff to evaluate progress and to support improvement planning. The team may want to cycle in new members who are lived experts with recent experience in the system. As before, a team charter can be a helpful resource for onboarding new members and should also be revisited as the work of the team shifts.

Continue to engage lived experts in leadership roles: Jurisdictions should continue to ensure that lived experts are leading and actively participating in the learning and improvement efforts during the initial implementation stage. For example, lived experts might serve as ambassadors for the legal permanency option, to educate partners and youth in foster care. Also, they may provide expertise and essential input to help support staff carry out and improve new practices. Lived experts may identify effective strategies for engaging youth in foster care in permanency planning and teaching them about the new legal permanency option. Together, the implementation team and its lived expert members will need to identify and agree upon their specific roles and contributions during this stage. Dedicated funding is required to sustain compensation for their roles.

Celebrate successes: The team will likely spend much of its time focused on problem-solving as delivery begins for the jurisdiction's new legal permanency option. However, it is equally important for the team to identify a set of quick wins or early measures of success and to celebrate those small successes together. Intentionally planning for and celebrating early successes are critical to building trust among team members and, in turn, motivating future performance.

Gather information, data and feedback from multiple sources regarding delivery of the new legal permanency option.

During this stage, the team will use data systems and data collection methods put in place during the preparation stage. The team's planning and decisions will be guided by qualitative, quantitative and anecdotal data and feedback on how implementation is progressing.

Quantitative or administrative data: The team may be receiving summaries of youth who are pursuing or have achieved permanency through the new legal permanency option. These may include case details (e.g., length of time in care, placement stability) and youth demographics (e.g., age, race, location) to help the team understand which youth have been approved for the option.

Qualitative or anecdotal data: The team will also benefit from understanding what young people or families are saying about the new legal permanency option, how they learned

How might the team gather non-administrative data?

Examples from the field:

- The child welfare agency can create a unique email address or inbox to receive comments and questions about the new legal permanency option. Leaders could use this email address to respond to the staff and partners' feedback and inquiries. Leaders may observe patterns in the types of questions and challenges raised.
- The implementation team can provide a technical assistance center for legal and judicial partners such as attorneys, judges and guardians ad litem, who may reach out with questions and requests for training, education and guidance on specific cases. Through these requests, the team can assess the level of understanding, engagement and acceptance across judicial districts.
- Team members of other relevant committees, task forces and councils can listen for feedback and share it with the implementation team.

about it and what they experienced during permanency planning leading to approval. Also, the team will want to know what staff and partners are saying about implementation, expectations for their roles and what questions are being asked about this new route to permanency. Case notes or tracking procedures established during the preparation stage may yield additional qualitative information. The team may also gather systematic qualitative information through surveys, interviews and focus groups, while maintaining confidentiality and protecting the privacy of any participants. Anecdotal insights and personal experiences from those connected to the work are also valuable. If processes were not put in place to gather this information during preparation, they could be created now to best fit the needs of the team. During this early period of implementation, it is critical to monitor youth, family and staff experiences to learn whether the new legal permanency option is clear, whether there is trust in the process, and whether all eligible young people find it accessible.

Use data to monitor implementation of the new legal permanency option, identify challenges, make improvements and test those improvements over time.

The team should be using data and information regularly to understand how things are going and what challenges staff, partners, young people and families may be facing. Data reviews should be a standing agenda item for the team meetings, with clear processes for how members will review and make sense of the data and develop action plans. During this stage of initial implementation, the team will use data to quickly test and refine processes and practices.

The team may be particularly focused on whether young people in foster care who are least likely to achieve permanency through other pathways are able to choose the new permanency goal and form a SOUL family. They will want to know whether staff and partners are able to share this option with eligible youth as intended.

Improvements may be needed in how the agency builds the capacity of child welfare staff and partners. The team may need to refine training content and approaches, ensure that additional supervision and coaching are available and develop additional resources to ensure understanding of the new legal permanency option. Training and coaching need to be provided regularly for existing staff and new staff who join as a result of turnover. Similarly, the team may also need to evaluate how funding, policy, protocols and procedures are facilitating or hindering the ability of staff and partners to successfully implement this new pathway to legal permanency. The team should continue to integrate the new legal permanency option into the agency's standard operations and adjust as needed.

How might the team use data to plan for improvements?

- After reviewing questions in the established email inbox, child welfare leaders may observe a pattern. For example, if many questions relate to young people's access to benefits, the team may respond by developing new charts tailored for specific audiences that clearly describe benefits and resources that would be available to SOUL families. The charts could compare these benefits to those available with other permanency options.
- If the implementation team observes that eligible young people in certain geographic regions are not achieving permanency through this new pathway, they can investigate to determine the reasons and develop solutions. They may learn, for example, that judges in those geographic areas have not engaged in opportunities to learn more about the new legal permanency option. The team's legal and judicial technical assistance center may then invite legal and judicial partners in those districts to meet to discuss what the SOUL Family framework is and how it benefits older youth.

Communicate with partners about implementation progress, including barriers and successes, and gather feedback.

The implementation team should maintain communication and feedback loops with a range of partners after delivery of the new legal permanency option begins. These feedback loops serve as important sources of data and information. For example, the team can receive information and learn more about how partners are experiencing or hearing about the SOUL Family framework, challenges they are facing, and emerging narratives.

Feedback loops are also an important mechanism for team members to share what's going well, what challenges have been identified, what strategies are being used or tested to overcome those challenges and how feedback the team received informed strategies or changes. Transparency and clear, consistent communication are essential to maintaining relationships, and awareness and acceptance of the new legal permanency option, especially with partners who may not be closely connected.

These feedback loops help existing and new staff, partners, community members and families understand what the new legal permanency option is, address misconceptions, reduce uncertainty and promote shared values.

The team will need to intentionally plan communication strategies to keep partners involved and informed, and consider who are the audiences and best messengers, what to communicate, how to communicate and with what frequency. In addition to the team charter, a [communication protocol template](#) can be a helpful resource for the team.

Evaluating SOUL Family framework implementation with process and formative evaluations

The implementation team will focus on using data to guide rapid improvements to implementation of the new legal permanency option. The team may also decide to use an external evaluator to conduct a process evaluation or formative evaluation.

A **process evaluation** can be used to assess whether the new legal permanency option is being implemented as intended.

A **formative evaluation** provides feedback that is used to inform and improve SOUL Family framework implementation.

Learning questions that might be used to guide a process evaluation include:

- How are child welfare staff and partners delivering the new permanency option to eligible youth? What are strengths and gaps in this process?
- How are child welfare staff and partners engaging in initial conversations with youth, family members and potential caregivers about the elements of the SOUL Family framework? What are the strengths and gaps in this process?
- How are child welfare staff and partners identifying potential SOUL families and young people's possible caregivers through family-finding and family-building efforts? What are the strengths and gaps in these processes?
- How are court and legal partners affecting family finalizations?
- What facilitates or challenges the ability of child welfare staff and partners to finalize family arrangements and ensure family stability after finalization?

Learning questions that might be used to guide a formative evaluation include:

- How is the new legal permanency option resonating with youth and families? What feels most meaningful and what feels misaligned?
- What challenges are emerging that require changes in training, coaching or organizational infrastructure?
- How effectively are implementation teams collaborating and learning together, and what would strengthen their functioning?
- How are sites using feedback from youth, families and staff to inform continuous improvements, and what support do they need?

SUSTAINMENT

About this stage

Sustainment, the final stage of implementation, is when the SOUL Family framework's guiding principles and practices are fully integrated into the jurisdiction's ways of work and can be maintained long-term as a permanency pathway for youth in foster care.



By this stage, staff and partners feel well supported in their delivery of the legal permanency option they have created. High-quality data are readily available to guide improvements and assess outcomes. Staff and partners are delivering the new legal permanency option as intended and reaching all eligible youth in foster care. Youth and their SOUL families are experiencing positive outcomes.

How long will it take to progress from the initial implementation stage to sustainment? This will vary for each jurisdiction and depend on the development of infrastructure and the availability of resources at the agency or organization delivering the permanency option. Sustainment can be challenging to achieve without the necessary support and resources. During this phase, staff and partners involved in implementation continue to work with the implementation team to help them use data to improve and maintain high-quality practice. Sustainability requires capacity, trusted relationships, committed leadership and persistence.

Milestones and outcomes

- Data are used regularly to inform decision-making and improve implementation.
- Staff and partners demonstrate sustained high-quality delivery of the legal permanency option.
- Short-term and intermediate outcomes are being achieved and documented (e.g., the legal permanency option is introduced in permanency planning). Young people and the team's partners have increased awareness of the SOUL Family framework and the new permanency pathway.
- Emerging evidence of population-level outcomes for the SOUL Family framework appear in data.

Key considerations

Key considerations during the sustainment stage include continuing practices that demonstrate authentic youth and community engagement and ensure that all eligible and interested young people are achieving permanency using the SOUL Family framework. In this stage, ask:

- How can lessons and insights about equity from implementation of the new legal permanency option strengthen broader organizational policies, practices and the jurisdiction's other permanency outcomes?
- What will it take to sustain structures that protect youth leadership and shared decision-making in individual permanency planning and the implementation of the permanency option developed from the SOUL Family framework?

Activities

Regularly consider and pursue the new legal permanency option for eligible youth in foster care.

Child welfare staff and partners deliver the new legal permanency option with high quality and consistency. For example, child welfare staff members are authentically centering young people in permanency planning and effectively and consistently pursuing the goals of the SOUL Family framework as a permanency goal for eligible and interested youth. Lawyers, judges and guardians are reliable partners in pursuing and achieving permanency through the new option. Youth and families have stable access to the benefits of this option.

Facilitate implementation team meetings to use data for ongoing improvement.

As implementation of this legal permanency option progresses, becomes more consistent and is integrated into routine processes, the implementation team can reassess its membership and how frequently they convene to review data, understand implementation progress and plan for any needed improvements (e.g., quarterly).

The site team should retain diverse perspectives and continue to sustain lived experts in leadership and membership roles. It is expected that some team members, including young leaders with foster care experience, might cycle on and off the team, perhaps through term limits. This may ensure that new generations of lived experts with more recent child welfare system experience can support implementation and continuous improvement.

Continue to use communication and feedback loops.

The team should continue to ensure strong communication and feedback loops with a range of partners. Feedback loops remain an important method for engaging staff, partners, youth and families, especially as professional workforces experience turnover and new generations of young people and their families come into contact with the system. Youth-led and youth-focused storytelling can become an important part of ongoing communication that centers lived experiences and expertise and highlights the value of the SOUL Family framework and the new legal permanency option for young people who have exited care.

The team may adjust the frequency of its communication along with its meeting cadence, based on the needs and interests of those connected to implementation.

Collect and analyze implementation quality and outcome data.

During the sustainment stage, the implementation team is gathering data and reviewing analyses of data (e.g., qualitative feedback, practice indicators in administrative data) to understand whether delivery is occurring as intended, assess whether expected permanency outcomes are being achieved and plan for improvements as needed. Continue disaggregating data (by race, age, placement history and geography) to monitor for disparities in access and young adult and family

outcomes, so the implementation team can develop an action plan for any improvements needed to achieve the jurisdiction's goals for the SOUL Family framework.

When the legal permanency option is being delivered with high quality and consistency, the team can begin to focus on longer-term outcomes for young adults and families, such as:

- employment and education outcomes for young people who exited through the new permanency option;
- young people's perceptions of permanency and the success of caring relationships in a SOUL family arrangement;
- how outcomes for young people who exited through the new option compare with those of young people who exited foster care through other permanency pathways; and
- how the arrangements have affected biological families and caregivers, siblings and supportive adults.

Plan for and secure any additional resources or support needed to sustain implementation.

The team continues to ensure that SOUL Family framework's guiding principles and practices are integrated into everyday work routines for child welfare staff and partners through coaching, dedicated support, partnerships and aligned policies and protocols. The team plans for needed improvements as additional challenges or barriers to delivery and practice arise. These improvements may include securing additional resources, developing efficiencies in processes or forming new partnerships. The team should attend to any major shifts in context, policy, funding, or leadership transitions that could affect implementation.

At this stage, the team may also revisit earlier fiscal assumptions to understand which benefits families are receiving, whether delivery has led to cost savings and opportunities for reinvestment for the jurisdiction, and whether additional funding sources may be needed to sustain the new legal permanency option in the future.

Cultivate additional leaders and champions.

While implementation leaders and champions often emerge in earlier stages of implementation, this is also a time for cultivating them. Technical assistance from external sources tends to diminish by the sustainment stage of implementation. Intentionally cultivating new leaders and champions at all levels helps to build the internal leadership capacity needed to sustain and improve implementation of the SOUL Family framework and the jurisdiction's new legal permanency option to meet the needs of future young people and respond to any changes in context. Strengthening internal skills and leadership also helps to preserve institutional memory and organizational knowledge and sustain delivery through child welfare leadership transitions, staff turnover and judicial changes.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Annie E. Casey Foundation. (2024, November 18). *SOUL Family Framework for older youth in foster care*. Blog post retrieved July 31, 2026, from <https://www.aecf.org/blog/soul-family-permanency-option-for-older-youth-in-foster-care>
- 2 Metz, A., Naoom, S. F., Halle, T., & Bartley L. (2015). An integrated stage-based framework for implementation of early childhood programs and systems. OPRE Research Brief OPRE 2015 48. Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Retrieved from <https://acf.gov/opre/report/integrated-stage-based-framework-implementation-early-childhood-programs-and-systems>
- 3 Meyers, D., Durlak, J., & Wandersman, A. (2012). The quality implementation framework: A synthesis of critical steps in the implementation process. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 50, 462–480. doi: 10.1007/s10464-012-9522-x
- 4 Aarons, G.A., Hurlburt, M., & Horwitz, S.M. (2011). Advancing a conceptual model of evidence-based practice implementation in public service sectors. *Administration and Policy in Mental Health Services Research*, 38(1), 4–23. doi: 10.1007/s10488-010-0327-7
- 5 Metz, A., & Bartley, L. (2012). Active Implementation Frameworks for program success: How to use implementation science to improve outcomes for children. *Zero to Three Journal*, 32, 11–18.
- 6 Stanton, M., Ali, S., & SUSTAIN Center Team. (2022). A typology of power in implementation: Building on the exploration, preparation, implementation, sustainment (EPIS) framework to advance mental health and HIV health equity. *Implementation Research and Practice*, 3, 1-16.
- 7 Kania J., Kramer M., Senge P. (2018). The water of systems change. FSG Reimagining Social Change. Retrieved from https://www.fsg.org/resource/water_of_systems_change/



THE ANNIE E. CASEY FOUNDATION

701 ST. PAUL STREET BALTIMORE, MD 21202 410.547.6600 WWW.AECF.ORG