

# SOUL FAMILY

## The Origin Story

The proposed SOUL Family legal permanency option has been designed by and for young people who have foster care experience.

The original architects of SOUL Family are Jim Casey Fellows. These are young adults with foster care experience who participate in the Annie E. Casey Foundation's Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative® programs to learn and practice advocacy skills. They are working to improve outcomes for their peers who are in and transitioning from child welfare systems around the country.

In conjunction with a strategic planning process conducted by the Jim Casey Initiative in 2017-2018, a group of the Jim Casey Fellows examined data and analyzed the root causes of trends and outcomes for older youth experiencing foster care. Issues rising to the surface during their discussions included: the importance of permanence as the cornerstone of a successful transition to adulthood; and the many barriers to achieving legal permanency.

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**Permanence** is a child's relationship with a parenting or caregiving adult, recognized by law. Legal permanence confers emotional, social, financial and other status. Relational permanence refers to important, long-term relationships that help young people feel loved and connected. All of these relationships are vital as older youth transition out of foster care on the path to becoming successful adults.

Further discussions and solution-planning work by these Jim Casey Fellows led to a conclusion: The existing legal permanency options — adoption, legal guardianship and reunification — worked for many young people, but failed to address the complexities, needs and breadth of experiences of many older youth.

This also was clear from data showing that 50% of young people in foster care nationwide age out without achieving legal permanency. Personal experiences supported their conclusion, as well: Many of the Fellows had aged out of foster care and entered adulthood without a supportive family and critical adult connections as anchors. Others had experienced adoptions that did not work out. For some, legal guardianships expired when they turned 18 and did not lead to rock-solid lifelong connections.

The group agreed that they needed and wanted what all young people deserve to have — stable, healthy, caring and permanent relationships with adults who cheer their achievements, help them navigate life lessons and mentor them on the path to college and careers. They also yearned for bonds with their siblings. Some had cultivated connections with adults in their communities —

including birth and former foster parents, kin, family friends, teachers and others — to build a chosen family. In some cases, they created or restored family ties with little or no help from the child welfare system to heal bonds interrupted or severed during foster care.

Wishing they had more support in finding, making and maintaining lasting, healthy and stable relationships, these young leaders recognized the necessity of exploring new ways to achieve permanence. A group of them took on the challenge to innovate. This was the genesis of SOUL Family.

A group of Jim Casey Fellows, in partnership with allies from the Casey Foundation and its grantee organizations, began developing the foundation of a new legal permanency option. The group collaborated with and obtained feedback from leaders and additional Fellows in the Jim Casey Initiative's national network of sites. They also conducted focus groups of young people in Jim Casey Initiative sites in Arizona, Nebraska and Georgia. They provided feedback on the overall concept and discussed issues related to legal permanency.

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**The Jim Casey Fellows** who participated in the original strategic planning were Samantha Marlatt, Carleigh Boston, Sixto Cancel, Domonique Carter, Jervey Clark, Octavia Fugerson, Akeeme Halliburton, Brittany Hunter, Lorena Dominy, Patricia Chin, Sonia Emerson, Malik Jones, Justin Kidder, Maegan Soll, Durwin Hanlon, Blanca Goetz, Krystal Goolsby and Eddy Vanderkwaak. The Jim Casey Fellows who refined the SOUL Family proposal were Sixto Cancel, Patricia Chin, Sonia Emerson, Durwin Hanlon and Eddy Vanderkwaak.

Next, the Jim Casey Fellows partnered with a senior attorney at the Juvenile Law Center, to further develop and refine the concept for a legal pathway supporting young people in defining their own families. They collaborated with other young people around the country to create the legal permanency proposal that they later named SOUL Family.

SOUL is an acronym for support, opportunity, unity and legal relationships, which all young people need. In a SOUL Family, young people would establish a primary legal relationship with one or more caregivers (who do not have to be related), maintain their legal relationships with their birth families and siblings, recognize as legal family a broader circle of caring adults, and receive financial, educational and well-being support to ensure they and their new family can thrive. And unlike legal custody or guardianship, which ends when a young person reaches the age of majority, the SOUL Family relationship would last throughout a young person's lifetime, recognized as a legal family by the court and the community.

In early 2020, the Annie E. Casey Foundation, with Jim Casey Fellows and Casey partners at Child Focus, presented the SOUL Family concept to a group of system leaders, private providers, policy analysts, nonprofit advocacy organizations, lawyers, judges and others with professional expertise to get feedback and further refine the model. The next year, Patricia Chin, Sonia Emerson and Andrew Salazar — three Jim Casey Fellows who went on to serve as SOUL Family permanency consultants — conducted a 50-state analysis of permanency and other child welfare data.

The Foundation then brought together teams from eight states to learn about SOUL Family. That led to deeper conversations with state leaders, young people and other stakeholders in Kansas, which was selected as the first SOUL Family demonstration site in May 2022. In November 2022, the District of Columbia became the second demonstration site.

Today, at the national and local level, young people with foster care experience are still leading the way. With child welfare system leaders and practitioners, foster care advocates, youth councils and local partners, young leaders are designing the practices, policies and implementation strategies needed to establish SOUL Family as a legal permanency option in their jurisdictions.